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Clinton and Kohl celebrate airlift miracle.

By Imre Karacs in Berlin.

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GERMANY and the United States pledged to strengthen their kinship forged 50 years ago by building "bridges to the future" in a world where, in the words of President Bill Clinton, "the struggle for freedom never ends".

At an exuberant celebration of the airlift that began half a century ago, 10,000 Berliners cheered the President, swayed to the Bundeswehr Big Band's rhythm-and-blues, and echoed Chancellor Helmut Kohl's profusive thanks.

The venue was Tempelhof airport, a Nazi-era megalith that fell into American hands after the war. On its Tarmac stood yesterday the "Spirit of Freedom", a C54 converted passenger plane that took the lion's share in the relief of Berlin's hunger. Alongside this craft, the US Air Force had parked its hyper-modern C17 transporter, the newly-christened "Spirit of Berlin".

"We shall never forget the help of our American allies," Mr Kohl vowed. "Now and for ever: our heartfelt gratitude, Mr President."

The recipient of this accolade, keenly aware of hyperbolic standards set by his predecessors, rose to the occasion with a flourish. "Man's soul is like water. From heaven it descends and to heaven it rises," he said, quoting Goethe. "The airlift became a sharing of the soul."

His idol, John F Kennedy, had written his name into the annals with that unforgettable declaration in German: "Ich bin ein Berliner". President Clinton was not to be outdone. The spirit of the city and the miracle of the airlift will live on 100 years from now, he declared. "Berlin bleibt doch Berlin - Berlin will remain Berlin."

Some locals took that as a bitter aside to the developers transforming Potsdamerplatz in the heart of the city into a Manhattan, but the President was surely not troubled by such negative thoughts. The pathos flowed freely, platitudes landed, like the "raisin-bombers" of yesteryear, once every 90 seconds. "It would be difficult to imagine a better friend or ally than modern Germany," he oozed.

This was a German-American love-in, not to be tainted by any rivalry for affection. Other heroes of the airlift, notably British airmen, got only a cursory mention. School-children were handed out paper flags of the two countries; the banners fluttering in the breeze were German and American only. For one glorious day, Britain and France had been airbrushed out of history.

But even the thunderous presidential accolade was eclipsed for a moment by the ovation for Colonel **Gail Halvorsen**, aka the "Candy Bomber". Col Halvorsen had flown in from Utah, admittedly with the help of a young crew, to bask one more time in the adulation of Berliners.

Now 79, the pilot is credited with the idea of dropping Hershey bars attached to tiny parachutes. A showman to the last - he had danced in his fading ancient uniform before the crowd - Col Halvorsen kept his uplifting performance brief: "People can live without having enough to eat. But they cannot live without hope. That's what the airlift meant."

To Gerry Munn, another veteran pilot with 121 sorties out of Wiesbaden during the blockade, flying in and out of Berlin was just another job, devoid of the epoch-making significance accorded to it today. "During the airlift, I don't think any of us saw how important it was," he said. He had flown a bomber in the war, whose purpose he could never quite fathom, was demobbed and then offered his job back in 1948. "I wondered why the people in Washington favoured Uncle Joe [Stalin], instead of Adolf. To this day, I don't think we are finished with the Russians yet."

No such hint of doubt was, of course, allowed to mar the ceremony, as the official speakers turned their attention to the relentless advance of Western civilisation in the east. In the words of Chancellor Kohl: "Our goal is to complete the construction of the European house - with a permanent right of residence for our American friends - enabling the family of European nations to live together side by side in lasting peace." Both Mr Kohl and President Clinton spoke at length about the legacy of the Cold War, and the need to integrate the new democracies into Nato and the European Union. "Above all," Mr Kohl said, "we need to enhance our relationship with Russia, for only together with Russia can security and stability in Europe be assured."

Jenny, a 12-year-old Berliner, glimpsed a contemporary message in the history of the airlift. "They should feed Africa," she said.

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