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Out in the Cold: Berlin Airport Stirs Turbulence --- City Wants to Close Historic Tempelhof; U.S. Liberators Return

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BERLIN -- In most cities, local residents campaign against noisy, polluting airports. In Berlin, Cold War nostalgia has them fighting to keep one open.

That's because the airport in question is Tempelhof, the centerpiece of a U.S.-led airlift that kept West Berlin alive during the Soviet blockade of 1948-49. The airlift signaled America's determination to resist Stalin's encroachment.

Memories of that dramatic episode are dear to the hundreds of Berliners who held a party at Tempelhof's gargantuan, Nazi-built terminal building last weekend, to protest city authorities' plan to shut the airport this year.

"The mayor should be flown to the desert and made to jump without a parachute," said Manfred Sturzenbecher, an 82-year-old former Luftwaffe fighter pilot, gazing out over Tempelhof's airfield as a band warbled 1940s swing melodies.

Mr. Sturzenbecher joined a British aircrew that flew food and coal to West Berlin during the airlift, siding with the Allies who had shot him down four times in the last months of World War II. "If it wasn't for the airlift, Western Europe would have been Russian," he says.

But to cash-strapped city officials, Tempelhof is an obsolete hulk that loses \$15 million a year. They want to close it and expand a new airport on the outskirts of town.

The citizens' campaign to save Tempelhof is set to force a referendum on the issue. It has mobilized 190,000 voters to petition city hall, mostly from districts around the airport. A referendum wouldn't bind the city, but could damage Berlin's charismatic mayor, Klaus Wowereit: He wants to shut the inner-city airport whatever the voters say. Even an offer by U.S. billionaire philanthropist Ronald Lauder to invest \$500 million in the airport hasn't swayed the mayor.

Taking a flight to Tempelhof brings home why city hall views it as a mausoleum. Your plane is likely to be the only one in sight as it draws up to one of the world's biggest buildings: A limestone arc three-quarters of a mile long that swallows airliners easily under its overhanging roof. The cavernous arrivals hall, still sporting a 1950s-style neon advertisement for its long-closed restaurant, echoes with the footsteps of only 800 passengers a day.

Tempelhof's square stone columns 50 feet high stand guard along the walls -- an architectural style known as "Luftwaffe modern." Most airlines have long since moved to Berlin's two more practical but prosaic airports on

the edges of town. Fans of Tempelhof say more airlines would use the place if Berlin didn't keep promising to shut it down.

Tempelhof opened in 1923 as one of the world's first commercial airports, using a former Prussian-army marching ground for its landing field. In the 1930s, Nazi architect Ernst Sagebiel designed the terminal as the gateway to "World Capital Germania," Adolf Hitler's vision of Berlin rebuilt on a monumental scale. The airport's roof, planners thought, could double as standing room for 100,000 people at Nazi victory parades.

Instead, the airport later helped save democratic West Berlin during the airlift, when U.S. Air Force planes landed and took off every two minutes for nearly a year, supplying 2.5 million residents besieged by the Soviet blockade.

The party at Tempelhof last weekend brought together old friends from the airport's finest hour, including former U.S. Air Force officer **Gail Halvorsen**.

"You can't evaluate Tempelhof only in monetary terms," says Mr. Halvorsen, 87. "This place is the Statue of Liberty of German freedom," he says.

During the airlift, Mr. Halvorsen -- known back then as "Uncle Wiggly Wings" -- used to wiggle his plane's wings in a salute to children waiting below in the rubble of Berlin. He'd then drop Hershey bars, chewing gum and other goodies with parachutes made of handkerchiefs. His superiors nearly court-martialed him, until they realized he provided great publicity. Soon, U.S. pilots were dropping candy all over West Berlin.

Mercedes Wild was seven at the time, and lived so close to the airfield that she could see the pilots' faces. "I never caught a parachute, because the boys and bigger kids were faster than me," she says. So she wrote a letter to Mr. Halvorsen at the Air Force -- and got an apologetic reply with a lollipop. Nowadays Ms. Wild, 66, helps organize the campaign to save Tempelhof.

"The Americans were our liberators, and they were very kind to children -- we loved them," says Kirsten Pophal, who was 5 during the airlift. "They had a very different standing than they do today," she says. Ms. Pophal became a stewardess on Pan Am flights during Tempelhof's commercial heyday in the 1960s. She recalls flying with international stars including Sophia Loren, Cary Grant and Gary Cooper to the airport, where they would disembark to a blitz of local paparazzi's flashbulbs under Tempelhof's long canopy.

Germany's answer to Johnny Cash, veteran country & western singer Gunter Gabriel, has released a new single called "Hands Off Tempelhof" in aid of the pro-airport campaign. "Nobody in Germany stands up for the past because they're scared, scared, scared. So I have to do it," he says in his baritone drawl while lounging at his favorite Berlin bar. "I love American patriotism."

In a modest living room a block from the airport, a rival campaign to shut Tempelhof to air traffic feels overwhelmed by the nostalgia and stars like Mr. Gabriel. The small group of ecologists brewed yogi tea and bemoaned their opponents' growing support. "It's a mystery for us," says an exasperated Manfred Herrmann, who's been fighting to shut the airport for over 15 years. A nearby plane takes off and shakes the windows.

Tempelhof's fans insist they're not just living in the past. They point to London, Paris and other cities where small inner-city airports complement the big ones outside town. Small airliners and business jets should keep on landing at Tempelhof, they say.

But the state-owned company that operates all Berlin airports says that doesn't make business sense. Only 25 million people fly to and from Berlin a year, versus 140 million in London, says Rainer Schwarz, chief executive of Berlin Airports. "Commercially, you have to bundle it in one airport," he says.

Over local protests, German courts approved [Berlin Brandenburg International](#), a new airport that will be built on the site of an existing, smaller airport on the edge of Berlin. The plan was approved on the condition that other

Berlin airports close, offsetting the expansion.

"It took over 10 years to pick a site and get planning permission," says Mr. Schwarz. "We don't want to take any risks by keeping Tempelhof open."

That fear is driving the Berlin authorities' hard line on Tempelhof. In 2006, when U.S. cosmetics mogul Mr. Lauder and his business partner Fred Langhammer proposed to preserve Tempelhof by taking it over and turning it into an international fly-in medical center, they got short shrift. Berlin doesn't need a "rich uncle from America," said Mayor Wowereit. "That was a bit of an insult," says Mr. Langhammer, the former CEO of Estee Lauder Cos. "Normally, people kiss your feet if you say you're bringing in 350 million euros."

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