



Tucson woman recalls candy drops in postwar Berlin

By C.T. REVERE

737 words

16 June 2004

03:02

Associated Press Newswires

APRS

English

(c) 2004. The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) - Ursula Yunger has known **Gail Halvorsen** less than a year, but his profound impact on her life reaches back more than a half century.

As a beleaguered child living in postwar Berlin under the specter of communist oppression, Yunger found reason for hope in the simplest of gifts from the U.S. airman known as "The Candy Bomber."

"**Gail Halvorsen** enchanted the children of Berlin," said Yunger, now a 63-year-old U.S. citizen living in Tucson. "It wasn't the candy. It was his profound gesture, showing us that somebody cared. He is an icon of humanity, and the world must remember him because he didn't forget the children."

Halvorsen, 83 and living in the southern Arizona community of Elephant Head, is a retired Air Force colonel who is credited with invigorating one of the greatest humanitarian efforts in history -- the Berlin Airlift -- by dropping tiny parachutes carrying gum and candy from his C-54 cargo plane while on missions to deliver food, flour and coal to the German city.

Shortly after Josef Stalin blockaded Berlin, hoping to put the entire divided city under communist rule, Halvorsen, then a second lieutenant, arrived to fly missions from Rhein-Main Air Base.

On July 17, 1948, one week after joining the effort, Halvorsen decided to see what Berlin looked like on the ground. He hitched a flight aboard another pilot's plane and set out to see the Templehof area.

"I ran about two miles inside the barbed wire (dividing the city), and all of a sudden, through the fence, about 30 kids aged 8 to 14 were looking at me," he said.

In broken English, the children encouraged him to keep fighting for their freedom, he said.

"They said, 'Don't worry about us. Just give us a little bit to eat now, and we'll get more to eat later. If we lose our freedom, we'll never get it back,'" Halvorsen recalled.

Halvorsen took his last two sticks of chewing gum from a pocket and handed them to the children, who did their best to share the modest bounty.

Halvorsen told the children he'd fly over the following day with enough candy to share. He told them he'd wiggle the airplane's wings so they'd know it was him.

He collected candy rations from fellow Americans and fashioned tiny parachutes out of handkerchiefs to carry the candy.

"The next day I wiggled the wings, and they just went crazy," he said. "I saw the handkerchiefs waving and all the mouths going up and down."

The kind gesture was repeated by other pilots in the airlift and ultimately became known as Operation Little Vittles.

Bringing joy to children brought new energy to the airlift. Over the next 14 months, 23 tons of candy were dropped inside Berlin.

Yunger and her five siblings, Christian-reared children of a Jewish mother, had survived the horrors of Nazi Germany, relying on the shelter of strangers in Germany and Poland after her father was drafted into the German army.

After the war, her father returned wounded and the family returned to its shelled-out city.

"Berlin was totally wiped out, flattened from the war," Yunger said. "Anybody with Jewish blood in them was still rejected after the war."

Yunger, who lived with her family in the Berlin district of Tiergarten, still chokes with emotion over the day she and her classmates received candy bars dropped by U.S. fliers.

The overall effort delivered more than 3 million tons of supplies to the residents of Berlin, showing Stalin that the embargo could not succeed. In September 1949, he lifted the blockade and gave up on designs to seize control of the whole city.

Yunger came to the United States in 1963 and seven years later became an American citizen. She has dedicated her life, through writing and teaching, to keeping the memory of the airlift alive.

In September, she was invited to attend the annual reunion of airlift veterans in Tucson, where she met Halvorsen for the first time.

"I saw him come toward me, and my whole childhood flashed before me," she said. "I was so shaken that I would have the privilege of meeting this incredible human being. I had to turn away because I was just shaking."

7

Document APRS000020040616e06g0073r

Search Summary

Text	"Gail Halvorsen"
Date	All Dates
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English