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TV: Lives Transformed

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This week, ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC might just as well put up a sign saying "Gone fishin'! Figure you are fishin' too." And it might not be such a bad idea to turn off the television once in a while and get out in the fresh (if hot and humid) air. But there are still ways in the next seven days to journey far -- in time and space -- without leaving your armchair. These programs are just the ticket for virtual travel:

Tonight, from 9-10 p.m. EDT on PBS (check local listings), Paul Duke hosts "The Berlin Airlift," a documentary produced and directed by Robert E. Frye that takes viewers back half a century, to June 24, 1948, when Stalin, with the help of 300,000 Soviet troops, choked off all land, water and rail supply routes to Berlin. Stalin was gambling that in response to this pressure the Western Allies would withdraw from their toehold, 120 miles inside East Germany, and surrender control to the Communists. But he underestimated the resolve of Gen. Lucius Clay, President Truman and their British allies to airlift food, medicine and other essentials to the beleaguered Berliners.

Historians and eyewitnesses -- pilots, interpreters, the Berliners themselves -- fill in the details of Operation Vittles with the help of rich archival footage. We learn how Gen. William Tunner -- the mission's largely unsung hero -- turned an amateurish, seat-of-the-pants affair into a system so smooth that one former British navigator likened his job then to that of a bus driver or conductor. By the time Stalin conceded defeat and the blockade was lifted on May 12, 1949 -- 277,000 flights later -- the Allies were airlifting not only milk (powdered), meat and vegetables (both dried), but ping pong balls, doorknobs and Clarence the Camel (no need to add water), who was sent to entertain Berlin's children.

As far as the kinder were concerned, the airlift's greatest hero was Lt. **Gail Halvorsen**, the Candy Bomber. On his own initiative, he began dropping gum and chocolate, wrapped in handkerchief "parachutes," to

crowds of appreciative young Germans. Soon other pilots joined him in Operation Little Vittles. Lt. Halvorsen even strayed into Berlin's Soviet sector, reasoning that its youngsters deserved the fruits of capitalism too.

The pilot, a true postwar American, had set off for Berlin with his color home-movie camera, so his vivid memories and those of the now-grown children are supplemented with moving motion pictures. (Also worth a thousand words are the black-and-white photographs of Henry Ries.) Another pilot, Arlie Nixon, recalls that until the Berlin airlift, when Americans would enter a German bar all the locals would get up and leave. But only a day after the operation began, he says, his voice choked with tears, "you couldn't drink all the beer they'd set on the table."

Germans and Americans had forged an alliance, Berlin was saved and communism's advance was stopped. Seventy-eight Americans, Britons and Germans gave their lives to make this possible, but not a single shot was fired by the Western Allies. "Those were really good bad times," Lt. Halvorsen recalls.

A few years ago, one of the works in a flat Mattel-authorized show on "Art, Design and Barbie" featured the buxom doll as a figure atop Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. You won't see this homage to one of America's most successful exports in tomorrow's Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour (10-11 p.m. EDT on PBS), which focuses on the manifold American manifestations of Barbiana. But this "P.O.V." entry, produced, directed, written and narrated by Susan Stern, does trace Barbie's origins to a German doppelganger, Lilli, marketed to adults and based on a louche newspaper cartoon.

Here at home, Ms. Stern ranges widely. Among the stops is an interview with Barbie's "mother," Mattel co-founder Ruth Handler. We also visit the home of a woman who sees her demurely dressed early Barbies as a symbol of traditional family values; fans at a gathering in Birmingham, Ala., who don replicas of their favorite Barbie outfits (one man is fully decked out as Sailor Ken); some lesbians who place their anatomically correct(ed) dolls in sado-masochistic tableaux; and a gay man in San Francisco who shows off his dead lover's collection of Barbies and Kens, a happy grouping he named "Heavenly Valley" that recalls Armistead Maupin's "Tales of the City." When the collector died of AIDS, his friends scattered his ashes in Golden Gate Park while the dolls, eternally young, looked on.

In Ira Wohl's unforgettable film "Best Boy," winner of the 1979 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, we got to meet Ira's mentally retarded cousin, Philly, who, at about age 50, began to take his first steps to greater independence in Queens, N.Y. Cinemax is running that touching but never mawkish film Tuesday (6-8 p.m. EDT) and following it up Wednesday (6:30-8 p.m.) with "Best Man: 'Best Boy' and All of Us 20 Years Later," the flashback-filled sequel that shares the original's no-frills style. Philly's father died during the filming of "Best Boy," and his mother less than a year after Philly moved into a group home. In the ensuing decades, Ira has moved to Los Angeles and become a psychotherapist; Ira is an only child with no children of his own, and Philly and his other cousins are his only living connections to

his family's past and future. Philly's beloved sister, Frances, is now a widow who deeply misses her husband.

But the love that links the family is still very much intact. Fran clearly enjoys the time she spends with her brother. And Philly's life is happy and active at his group home, constrained only by arthritis. His enthusiasm for coffee and a good diner meal is as strong as ever. We're on hand when Philly visits his parents' graves; takes his first plane trip, to Ira's home; and gets bar mitzvahed just in time for his 70th birthday, thanks to Ira and a rabbi from Argentina who, at the reception, proves he still knows how to tango.

On Sunday, July 19 (9-10 p.m. EDT on Bravo), Anthony Hopkins explains the Method behind Hannibal Lecter's madness in "Inside the Actors Studio: Anthony Hopkins," in which the always prepared James Lipton, trademark blue cards in hand, gets the Welsh actor to open up about his craft and just what attracted him to American acting techniques.

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