

WHITE HOUSE NOTEBOOK: Obama beats German heat wave by going casual at the Brandenburg Gate

BY GEIR MOULSON AND JIM KUHNHENN

AP

976 words

19 June 2013

17:32

The Canadian Press

CPR

English

(c) 2013 The Canadian Press. All rights reserved.

BERLIN _ President Barack Obama invoked President John F. Kennedy's famous Cold War speech in Berlin 50 years ago in his Brandenburg Gate speech Wednesday. But he was not trying to best him. Not when his crowd of 4,500 was one one-hundredth the size of Kennedy's.

In a toast at dinner with Chancellor Angela Merkel, Obama made light of his speech earlier in the day.

``Fifty years ago, as this city prepared to welcome President Kennedy, Berliners were ecstatic. Mayor Willy Brandt tried to calm everybody down _he told them, don't be too emotional," Obama said. ``It didn't work.

``So after one speech, one newspaper wrote that it was one of the most emotional responses President Kennedy had ever received; it said that more than 1,000 people fainted.

``We did not have 1,000 people faint today," Obama said. ``The few who did, did so because of the weather and not because of my speech."

The Red Cross said 104 people were treated at the site for dehydration and sunburn, although none were ill enough to require hospital treatment.

Average highs are normally in the 70s in Germany's capital city in June, but they were in the 90s as Obama delivered his speech.

Merkel introduced Obama from a stage with no cover for the bright hot sun. ``We've chosen the best possible weather to welcome you most warmly, as it were," she said.

``It's so warm," Obama replied, ``and I feel so good, that I'm actually going to take off my jacket and anybody else who wants to, feel free to."

The crowd broke into cheers, after waiting for hours under tight security that prohibited them from bringing in water bottles.

Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit, sitting behind Obama on the stage, took the president up on the invitation.

``We can be a little more informal among friends," Obama said.

The weather wasn't all that felt familiar to the president.

As Obama and German President Joachim Gauck greeted children waving flags from their two countries at Bellevue Palace, German photographers repeatedly shouted for Obama to turn toward them so they could get a better picture.

``The press is the same everywhere," Obama quipped.

Obama told his audience that his family's absence at the speech was not a slight to Berlin, but a way to avoid sitting through another of his speeches.

"The last thing they want to do is to listen to another speech from me, so they're out experiencing the beauty and the history of Berlin," Obama said.

First lady Michelle Obama and daughters Sasha and Malia visited monuments commemorating dark eras of the country's past. They were joined by the president's half sister Auma, who went to university in Germany and flew in to meet them from her home in Kenya.

The family walked through the Holocaust memorial, a vast undulating field of more than 2,700 grey concrete slabs designed by American architect Peter Eisenman. The monument to the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis was opened in 2005 next to the U.S. Embassy and the site of the bunker where Adolf Hitler committed suicide.

Merkel's husband, chemistry professor Joachim Sauer, made a rare public appearance to show the Obamas one of the few remaining sections of the Berlin Wall, which East Germany's communist rulers built in 1961 and divided the city until 1989. Sauer, like Merkel, grew up behind the wall in the communist east.

The first lady and her daughters placed yellow roses in the gaps between the concrete slabs of the wall's main memorial.

The first family stayed at the Ritz Carlton on the glitzy Potsdamer Platz, which was largely a vacant lot throughout the Cold War with the wall running right through it, just a few feet from where the hotel now stands.

Obama paid tribute in his speech to the "airlift of hope" that kept West Berlin out of Soviet hands in the late 1940s _ and to a 92-year-old veteran of the operation once known as the Candy Bomber.

Gail Halvorsen was in the crowd that braved the heat to hear the president's speech. He got his nickname for air-dropping handkerchief-tethered chocolate and gum to the children of Berlin. "He and his comrades made it possible for the city to survive," said Mayor Wowereit.

The airlift began on June 26, 1948, in an ambitious plan to feed and supply West Berlin after the Soviets blockaded the city, attempting to squeeze the U.S., Britain and France out of the enclave within Soviet-occupied eastern Germany. American and allied pilots flew 278,000 flights to Berlin over 15 months, bringing in food, coal, medicine and other supplies. The Soviets realized in 1949 that the blockade was futile and lifted their barricades.

Obama said the United States couldn't be prouder of Air Force veteran Halvorsen. "I hope I look that good, by the way, when I'm 92," the president said.

Germany and the United States both could claim some credit for a spectacular warm-up act by violinist David Garrett before Obama's speech.

Garrett, the son of a German father and an American mother, was born and raised in Aachen on Germany's western border and studied at Julliard in New York under famed Israeli-American violinist Itzhak Perlman.

Garrett performed songs by Obama favourite Bruce Springsteen and German composer Ludwig van Beethoven.

He also performed his version of "Smooth Criminal" by Michael Jackson, who infamously dangled his baby outside a hotel window just up the street.

Associated Press writers Robert H. Reid and Frank Jordans contributed to this report.

20130619CPCPW1510

Document CPR0000020130620e96j0008b

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