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Travel: Fifty years later, Kennedy's visit still remembered in Berlin

Published: June 22, 2013 6:00 AM

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BERLIN—It was 50 years ago, an old man's memory.

But Berliners haven't forgotten the American president's visit in 1963, nor the speech that offered so much hope.

It provided a promise of support for West Germans living in Berlin's free but beleaguered American sector after they were heard around the world.

"Ich bin ein Berliner," said President John F. Kennedy, addressing 10,000 cheering West Berliners jammed into the square not far from the Berlin Wall.

Those broad Bostonian vowels gave the words an extra zing. But the crowd, intent on the message, knew what it meant. It meant that America was one of them, and that they were true allies who wouldn't forget their plight.

This summer, Berlin remembers the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's visit with a half a dozen special exhibits exploring Germany's unique relationship with the United States and the Cold War politics that pitted Soviet-run East Germany—also known as the German Democratic Republic—against West Germany.

And nothing tells the story better than the Mauer (Wall) Museum, a few steps away from the Checkpoint Charlie border gate that once stood between the East and West.

This gate was important because Berlin wasn't on the border between the GDR and West Germany—the two countries that were a result of the country's division.

The city was an island encircled by Soviet-controlled East Germany, making it an easy target for a hostile takeover. And the East Berliners who fled "west" weren't home free; they were still in Berlin, but in the free American sector.

Thus, before the Wall was built in 1961, crossing over was a risky walk.

Afterwards, the Checkpoint Charlie border crossing remained one of the few places where a fleeing East German didn't have to scale the wall or the "death zone" beside it.

If you were clever enough, you might have been able to drive across.

"Communism in East Germany was worse than anywhere else," said Yaro Turek, who escaped from behind the Iron Curtain by hiking with his family over the mountains into Austria.

"We didn't have it so bad in Czechoslovakia. If you said you were a member of the party you'd have a job and enough food. But communism in East Germany was much harsher, more repressive. When there were food shortages, it was the East Germans who starved. If you tried to leave, you'd be shot."

Touring the Mauer Museum recently, I remembered my parents' experience in 1970, when they applied for a permit to enter East Germany to visit cousins in Leipzig.

They waited at the border crossing, being eyed by suspicious guards. They were detained at the guard shack while armed soldiers searched their car, a routine that anyone trying to cross over could expect.

Pulling out the luggage, the guards checked under the spare tire, knocked on the side panels and removed the rear seat cushions. Inside the shack, a stony-faced officer spent long minutes examining their entry permit and passports and confiscating newspapers, magazines and books.

"He found the gift box of chocolates we'd bought for Gert and Johanna and opened it," said my mother, still

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incensed after 45 years.

"He took off the wrapping and lifted the tissue paper, and he even had the nerve to eat a couple of them. As if I'd hide something in a bonbon."

The questions were predictable, the rules inflexible.

Why did the Americans want to enter the GDR? Who were they visiting? Had anyone asked them to deliver packages? Were they aware that spying was a capital crime? Did they know that they had to change American dollars for East German marks, register at the police station upon arrival, and stay in a government-approved motel?

This is where my parents—brave, or more likely, innocent—balked.

"Henry put his foot down," said my mother. "Johanna had a bedroom waiting for us and he wasn't going to disappoint them. So we went straight to their house and never heard another word about it."

Today, Berlin is new, alive and moving forward, but remembering the country's rough past isn't easy.

Even the Checkpoint Charlie guard shack—still in the middle of the street—has been reduced to a tourist attraction.

A nearby photo exhibit, with grainy black-and-white photos, shows some of Germany's worst moments in history, including when Soviet tanks faced off with American soldiers, and the instances when the Cold War threatened to become more than lukewarm.

At the shack itself—the spot where German escapees were shot and left to bleed to death — two men in phony guard uniforms charge tourists \$10 for a photo.

Behind them, under familiar golden arches, a McDonalds serves hamburgers and fries.

To experience the country's darker, divided years, snap a photo with the guards, and move on to the Mauer Museum — more popularly called the Checkpoint Charlie Museum. Privately-owned and operated, the museum houses a huge collection of artifacts and photos recording not just the city's most awful days, but man's unquenchable desire for freedom.

The exhibits, documenting the years between 1961 and 1989, are located in two old buildings.

We spent the morning roaming inside, but it was not enough to take it all in.

The museum space itself is epitome of the era and sets the disheartening, suffocating tone through the small rooms, narrow hallways and winding staircases.

In each little room, the walls are covered with black-and-white photos of wounded men crawling toward freedom, jubilant couples being reunited, yellowing letters between families separated by the wall, false birth certificates used to escape and real documents detailing persecution by the Stasi, the GDR's secret police.

Other compelling things to see are the dozens of ingenious solutions that East Germans dreamed up to escape.

They folded themselves into minuscule spaces in cars and cement trucks, boxed and loaded themselves onto delivery vans and lay under hay bales.

They forged passports and produced false identification papers. One bold man walked across the border, past armed East German guards, wearing the look-alike American military uniform that his fiancée, waiting in the Western sector, had sewn for him.

The Mauer Museum's small theater space shows a variety of films and newsreels, including one of President Kennedy's West Berlin speech.

When you arrive, check the day's schedule.

For more about this year's 50th anniversary celebrations, check out other exhibits, readings and special city tours planned in Berlin.

If you go

From now through August, the "Kennedy In Berlin—Germany Trip 1963," exhibit will be at the Willy-Brandt-Haus, Berlin, which includes many never-before-seen photographs of the president by photographer Ulrich Mack, who accompanied Kennedy during his historic visit.

Through June and beyond, the Kennedy Museum in Berlin remembers the President's visit with an exhibit that explores its purpose and political goals beyond the purely historical significance.

On June 23, a public picnic sponsored by the Militarhistorisches Museum in Berlin (Museum of Military History) invites guests to experience the past by learning about the history of Berlin during the allied occupation and viewing the classic cars of the era.

There is also a chance to meet and speak with eyewitnesses and veterans.

The guest of honor will be Gail S. Halvorsen, Berlin airlift pilot who earned the nickname "the Chocolate Pilot."

From June 24-26, eyewitnesses of Kennedy's visit and speech are invited to join the celebration at the Schoneberg City Hall (Rathaus Schoneberg).

More than 10,000 Berliners still remember his speech, preserved by the Memory of the Nation Association (Das Gedachtnis der Nation).

If you're were present at the speech or remember seeing Kennedy on a broadcast, you're invited to record your memory of the event in a video interview.

All interviews will be made available in an online archive.

For additional and future events scheduled throughout 2013 and into 2014 (the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall), go to www.visitberlin.com or www.berlin.de/kennedy.

