

Travel and Adventure: Airport that lifted Berlin faces its dying day

by Peter Kuhrt

BERLIN - British star architect Sir Norman Foster once described Berlin's Flughafen Tempelhof as "the mother of all airports." Perhaps grandmother would be more fitting by now. But still - what a lady!

EMPTY AIRPORT - This aerial view shows the characteristic sweep of the Tempelhof Airport terminal building, one of the world's largest structures. CNS Photo courtesy of Tempelhof International Airport.
ANOTHER AIRLIFT - Passengers board DC-3 'candy bomber' at Tempelhof Airport for a spin above Berlin. CNS Photo by Guenter Wicker. LAST CALL? - A small jetliner being refueled in front of Berlin's historic Tempelhof Airport terminal, which is likely to be shut down in late 2008. CNS Photo courtesy of Tempelhof International Airport. So, yes, the tooth of time undeniably has left its traces inside the imposing terminal. The subdued atmosphere reminds more of a museum than a bustling metropolitan airport. Sightseeing groups wandering through the cavernous departure hall often outnumber waiting passengers. You can't even buy a newspaper in the place.

Yet here and on and above the airfield outside is where for nearly a century aviation history was made, sometimes in dramatic fashion, beginning in imperial Prussia and continuing through Hitler's Third Reich, World War II, the Cold War and into recent times. And America often played a leading, often heroic role.

In 1909, Orville Wright showed off his new, hot flying machine above the army drill and parade grounds, then known as Tempelhof Fields. Lufthansa's inaugural commercial flight lumbered off here in 1926. Ten years later, the Nazis started to build the world's largest terminal complex on the site. Soviet troops captured it at the end of World War II before American forces took over command until June 1993. In 1948-49, it was the focus of the gigantic U.S.-led allied airlift and still later West Berlin's aerial gateway to the free world.

To many historians Tempelhof is a landmark that most vividly reflects the turbulences of Berlin's past. Architects and engineers to this day are impressed by the design, functionality and sheer size of the terminal complex - its fascist legacy notwithstanding. Ordinary Berliners love their "Zentralflughafen" from the days of the Airlift and for having provided a touch of international glamour during the grim post-war years.

Such nostalgic feelings are not shared by the current city government, which is eager to shut down Europe's

oldest operating airport by the fall of next year. It wants no competition for Berlin-Brandenburg International, the new airport under construction just beyond the southern city limits. After 2010, all commercial traffic of Berlin's three airports is to be concentrated there. Consequently, passenger volume at "THF" dribbled to a mere 630,000 last year, about 10 percent of Berlin's total.

So far, all legal actions against the decreed closure have failed. Various business, political and civic factions have been campaigning to keep Tempelhof permanently open, albeit on a reduced scale and chiefly for corporate and small, private aircraft. They argue that the super location - just a couple of miles from midtown with its government offices, business centers and cultural attractions - is an invaluable economic asset and a lure to potential investors.

"It's like having a small airport in Central Park," one visitor from the Big Apple commented.

Of some embarrassment to city hall is the absence of an agreed development plan for this giant chunk of prime real property. The terminal alone ranks as Europe's second-largest connected building - three quarters of a mile long, with up to seven levels under ground and a stupendous net floor space of 60 acres. Equally hazy is the future of the 950-acre airfield with its twin runways. Suggested uses include new urban quarters, parks, sports and recreation grounds, a golf course or just uncultivated pastureland.

Among the latest proposed projects for part of the terminal is a health-care complex designed for up to 100,000 patients annually. It would be combined with a luxury hotel and accommodate a wealthy clientele arriving on their own aircraft. But the potential German-American investor, ex-Este Lauder boss Fred Langhammer and his Central Europe Development Co., so far has been shown the cold shoulder.

Many older-generation Berliners would just as soon have the airport stay as it is. They remember with gratitude how vital Tempelhof was to their very survival in 1948-49. For 15 months and through a brutally cold winter, the U.S.-led Western allies had supplied the 2.2 million people of Soviet-enclosed West Berlin with nearly all food, fuel and critical supplies. Operation Vittles went into the books as a masterpiece of precision logistics: At peak times, U.S. and Royal Air Force transports touched down in 90-second intervals. In all, 2.1 million tons of goods were hauled in on more than 550,000 missions.

Among the Luftbrücke heroes was Gail Halvorsen, a young American pilot from Utah, who became a celebrity with Berlin's kids when he started dropping sweets tied to handkerchief parachutes. Fellow fliers soon joined in. Later in his career Halvorsen, who is now 86, served as the commander of Tempelhof Air Base.

The Soviets lifted the blockade on May 12, 1949. Over the next 25 years, Tempelhof's function as West Berlin's principal air link to West Germany again became crucial after the East German regime erected the Wall in 1961 and tightly controlled all road and rail accesses.

Most foreign tourists are not even aware of the old airport and the current controversy. Guidebooks generally don't bother to list Tempelhof among the must-see places, although for many visitors it holds more hands-on fascination than, say, the Brandenburg Gate or the remnants of the Wall.

The limestone-fronted building complex, registered as a protected monument, is regarded as a typical example of the Nazis' bombastic architectural visions for the capital of the Third Reich. Its construction was personally overseen by "air marshal" Hermann Goering. Originally planned were such features as rooftop bleachers seating up to 100,000 to watch spectacular air shows plus a restaurant for 2,000 guests atop the main terminal. As of 1942, however, allied bombings stopped all construction.

Joining a guided tour (provided in English as well) is probably the best way of learning more about Tempelhof's stormy history and morbid charms. You might get to meet Klaus Eisermann, a retiree who spent 37 years of his working life here. He knows every nook and cranny and has some good stories to tell.

Eisermann likes to recall the times when planes hijacked by desperate refugees in nearby Communist Poland landed in Tempelhof, and the other passengers aboard had to decide quickly whether to grab the opportunity and remain in the West. He tells about the shuttle flights from and to Frankfurt by the 7405th Operations Squadron (the "Berlin for Lunch Bunch"). They supplied the American Berlin Brigade, and the cargo often included sophisticated spyware needed for reconnaissance missions along the border.

Among the many interesting features Eisermann and his colleagues show to visitors is the 60-foot-high Hall of Honor, the terminal lobby, as it were. Or the rail tunnel linking up to underground hangars where Focke-Wulf interceptors were bolted together. Or the bunkers equipped with poison gas filters.

On some shelter walls you can see cartoons that were intended to distract the children from the miseries outside. A flight of bunkers containing merely a film depot was torched by unsuspecting Russian soldiers, and the resulting blast left a labyrinth of blackened walls and stairwells. The basketball court installed in the one-time banquet hall and a mothballed bowling alley are among the many mementos left by the U.S. Air Force after its departure in 1993.

Even more inquisitive visitors can get a bird's-eye view of the terminal, the airfield and the surrounding city by boarding a twin-engine Douglas DC-3, welcomed by soothing Glenn Miller sounds. DC-3s were once workhorses of the airlift and achieved local fame as the "candy bombers." At a cruising altitude of some 2,000 feet, passengers can relax in burgundy-red leather seats, while peering at the changing vistas below. It's from up here that the elegant curve of the huge terminal complex can be seen best.

The DC-3 was actually deployed in the airlift (then as a C-47 cargo version) - the only one still in active service in Europe. Frank Hellberg, who once worked as an aerial traffic spotter for a local radio station, discovered the 1944-vintage plane in Coventry, England, and brought it to Germany for restoration and reactivation. His company uses the veteran aircraft not only for spins above Berlin but also for excursions to Hamburg, Dresden and the Baltic port of Rostock.

"Providing proper maintenance and locating spare parts is a lot tougher than flying the old girl," said chief pilot Martin Mueller, 42. "But so far we've had no problems keeping her in top shape and getting our operating license renewed."

The "flying legend," as it is billed, seats up to 25. Before boarding, passengers are served a drink in a 1940s retro-style lounge. In the future they'll also be shown a documentary film tracing Tempelhof's history. To give the tours an added authentic feel, the company is now scouring around for original wartime pilot outfits.

Another flying antique occasionally flies in for visits. On certain dates during the season Lufthansa brings in its three-engine showpiece JU-52 for sightseeing tours over the city. Fittingly named Tempelhof, the three-engine, multipurpose Junkers with the typical corrugated-metal fuselage was built in 1936. This particular specimen saw wartime service in Norway, hauled human and animal cargo across the jungles of Ecuador and later was paraded as Iron Annie at North American air shows. Lufthansa and a sponsor club acquired it in the mid-1980s and gave it a meticulous overhaul and technical rebuild, including new engines.

Naturally, those who still celebrate the high-flying spirit of Tempelhof dread the day when the lights will go out.

"Should that happen, we will have just have to move on," Mueller said. "But it just won't be the same elsewhere."

Peter Kuhrt is a freelance travel writer.

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