

## Ich Bin ein Berliner: Beyond Jelly Doughnuts

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### Abstract

*Delivered in the midst of the Cold War, John F. Kennedy's brief speech in front of the Berlin Wall proclaimed solidarity with the German people. Although the final words of the speech, "Ich bin ein Berliner", could theoretically have been interpreted to mean "I am a jelly doughnut", the crowds in attendance understood precisely his meaning. This paper will examine the background of the speech, Kennedy's reaction to the Berlin wall, and the authenticity of his sentiments, while discrediting the myth of misinterpretation. The significance of this speech lies in providing credibility with Berliners that would allow Kennedy to argue for coexistence with the Communists, and defusing potentially volatile East-West animosities, rather than debate over German syntax and jelly doughnuts.*

"For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder." This line from Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth is used as a curious opening line in der *Spiegel's* June 26, 1963 article on JFK's recent visit to Germany and his impassioned speech in Berlin. Delivered by Kennedy in the midst of the Cold War as thousands of Germans thronged the streets to listen, it proclaimed solidarity with the German people as he stated, "all free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin. . ." Speaking to a divided Germany, the location in front of the recently erected concrete symbol of communism, the Berlin Wall, was a visual reinforcement of the contrast between freedom and oppression, democracy and communism. Kennedy challenged those "who really don't understand . . . what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world" to "come to Berlin." This famous speech, as well as Kennedy's trip to Europe, was extensively covered in the international press, and compared and contrasted with Soviet Premier Khrushchev's visit to East Berlin a few days later. Although the final words of Kennedy's speech, "Ich bin ein Berliner," could theoretically have been interpreted to mean "I am a jelly doughnut," the crowds in attendance understood precisely his meaning and were moved by the words Kennedy penned on note cards himself.

Andreas Daum, in his excellent study of Kennedy's time in Berlin, argues that the trip, as well as the speech at the Berlin Wall, was a carefully staged event that when televised around the world would enable politics to "become visible and strike an emotional chord in everyone involved."<sup>1</sup> While I agree that many facets of this trip were carefully crafted beforehand and that social and cultural change, especially television, played a part in increasing the impact, I believe that the Berlin Wall speech reflects Kennedy's true feelings about Communism. After viewing the wall he spoke to the people out of raw emotion, and the honesty of his words resonated with them. The Berlin Wall speech established an authentic bond between the United States and the people of West Berlin, giving Kennedy credibility with Berliners that would allow him to argue for coexistence with the Communists in the future, and defusing potentially volatile East-West animosities.

Viewed as a necessity to improve relations with West Germany, especially in light of a "friendship" treaty recently signed with France, United States officials created elaborate plans to make this trip a time of unity building with the people of Europe. Although poorly timed for diplomatic purposes, with West German Chancellor Adenauer on the verge of retirement, a newly formed government in Italy, and scandal in Britain, Kennedy was determined to

reach the European people, causing them to embrace the American conviction that Atlantic interdependence was vital to the survival of both Europe and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Germany was his first stop on a ten-day tour that would also take him to Italy, Ireland, Britain, and the Vatican. As the first American president to visit a divided Berlin, special ceremonies were arranged well in advance, with media coverage that would “keep the president on European television virtually all of every day.”<sup>3</sup> Germans were also making preparations for the visit, refurbishing the venues where the President would appear, planning a red, white, and blue light show on the Rhine, and rehearsing the drive from Tegel Airport to downtown Berlin. Chancellor Adenauer addressed his countrymen on national television, establishing the mood for the visit and declaring that President Kennedy would “leave the Federal Republic with the impression that close bonds of friendship exist between Germany and America, bonds that will withstand every threat to freedom.”<sup>4</sup>

With everything in place on both sides of the Atlantic, President Kennedy boarded a jet on the evening of June 22, 1963, bound for Cologne, Germany. Upon arrival he was greeted by a twenty-one gun salute, accompanied by throngs of Germans waving and cheering as he travelled along the autobahn to Bonn. Standing and waving most of the way, the 46 year-old President conveyed strength and youth, presenting a striking contrast to the 89 year-old Chancellor at his side.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the physical contrast, Kennedy, the first American president born in the twentieth century, symbolized hope for West Germans, a break with outdated policies and habits, and one who would lead the way towards global détente.<sup>6</sup> Enthusiasm continued to build as Kennedy travelled through Hanau, Frankfurt, and Wiesbaden, but no one expected the level of excitement Kennedy would encounter upon his arrival in Berlin. After arriving at Tegel airport, Kennedy travelled through West Berlin, accompanied by Chancellor Adenauer and the 49-year old mayor of Berlin, Willy Brandt. It is estimated that half the population of West Berlin lined the streets waving, smiling, clapping, and screaming as if, recalled Kennedy’s special assistant Arthur Schlesinger, “it were the second coming.”<sup>7</sup> Some reporters ventured so far as to compare the response to those once elicited in Berlin by Hitler.<sup>8</sup> Kennedy took it all in stride, appearing calm and relaxed, waving at the masses that turned out to see him.<sup>9</sup> But before stopping at City Hall, the caravan would make a stop that would affect Kennedy more deeply than the cheering crowds, so deeply that he could no longer deliver the speech that had been carefully prepared in advance.

The stop at the Berlin Wall was an unexpectedly emotional experience. As Schlesinger stated, “No one is ever prepared for the Wall: it shocked and appalled the President.”<sup>10</sup> To limit visibility from both sides, communist authorities had hung several large red flags at the Brandenburg Gate, one of the two locations President Kennedy was expected to stop along the Berlin Wall.<sup>11</sup> Traveling on to the second stop at Checkpoint Charlie, the President mounted a large platform for an unobstructed view into East Berlin. Although Kennedy said little, reporters at the time described Kennedy as lacking his usual smile, with mouth shut firmly and lips pressed together. According to an NBC television report, “It seemed obvious that the president had been emotionally aroused by what he had seen.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed he had, and he realized that the prepared rhetoric that he had planned to deliver at Berlin’s Rudolph-Wilde-Platz were completely inadequate. Drawing on a speech he had given the previous year in New Orleans where he had stated “Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was to say ‘I am a

2 “Is This Trip Necessary?,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1963.

3 Max Frankel, “Kennedy Leaves on European Trip in Quest of Unity,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1963.

4 “Rhineland’s Red Carpet Rolled Out for Kennedy,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1963.

5 “Germans Give Mr. Kennedy a Rousing Welcome,” *Times of London*, June 24, 1963.

6 Daum, *Kennedy*, 216.

7 Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 884.

8 “Berlin Goes Wild Over Mr. Kennedy,” *Times of London*, June 27, 1963.

9 Ibid.

10 Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 884.

11 “Berlin is Ready to Hail Kennedy,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1963.

12 JFKL, Audiovisual Archives, NBC News Special Report “The President’s Journey,” 1963, in Daum, *Kennedy*, 135.

citizen of Rome.' Today, I believe, in 1962 the proudest boast is to say, 'I am a citizen of the United States.'<sup>13</sup> Kennedy was inspired to adapt this to say he was a citizen of Berlin, "Ich bin ein Berliner."

While this sentence has become famous for its possible incorrect phrasing, this interpretation appears to be a more recent phenomenon; more of a legend than a reality, this is a myth that needs to be discredited. First, and perhaps most striking, there appears to be no record in either the American or German press at the time, or in photographs or audiovisual recordings of a grammatical error that the crowd found laughable in any of the instances Kennedy used the phrase in this short speech.<sup>14</sup> According to Jürgen Eichhoff in his linguistic clarification of this phrase, the press did not promote this aspect of Kennedy's speech until 1988 when it appeared in both *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*.<sup>15</sup> There are two points of contention in this phrase leading to the supposed misinterpretation, the word *Berliner*, and the sentence structure. Eichhoff states that the word *Berliner* is used to mean "jelly doughnut" only in a few areas of West Germany; in Berlin the word *Pfannkuchen* would be used; therefore, this would not have been misinterpreted.<sup>16</sup> The sentence structure argument has some validity in that German grammar requires no article for nouns following the verb *sein* (conjugated as *bin* in this sentence). However, there is an exception if the noun is preceded by an adjective, which is precisely what Kennedy was doing by making this statement. He was not identifying himself as someone who had been born in Berlin (Berliner), but rather as being like someone from Berlin (ein Berliner).<sup>17</sup> In using this phrase, Kennedy proclaimed solidarity with the citizens of West Berlin, reinforcing American ties and support in an emotional way. Further evidence that this phrasing was correct would be the fact that it was translated into German by Robert Lochner, who grew up in Berlin, practiced in front of Mayor Brandt.<sup>18</sup> and repeated by Kennedy to his interpreter while climbing the stairs to give the speech in Berlin.<sup>19</sup> It is hard to believe that such a major gaffe could have escaped that many native German speakers. Most importantly, it is obvious that the crowd knew and understood precisely what he meant. As Dallek and Golway aptly noted, no one laughed, no one noticed, no one cared.<sup>20</sup>

American diplomat to Germany, W.R. Smyser, who was part of Kennedy's motorcade in Berlin, believes that including the German phrase "ich bin ein Berliner," as well as "laßt sie nach Berlin kommen," were added to the speech as part of Kennedy's response to the excited crowd that surrounded him throughout his trip to Germany.<sup>21</sup> Kennedy's national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, recalls working with the president to craft a new speech that would reflect his admiration of the people of West Berlin, while expressing his outrage at the Berlin wall, writing that the wall was "an offense against humanity" and while one in four Germans was still not free, eventually they must all be free and reunited as one country.<sup>22</sup> New note cards were created for his speech, and to be certain of an accurate delivery, Kennedy handwrote the German phrases phonetically. As Bundy relates, the response to the revised speech was "overwhelming,"<sup>23</sup> with cheering growing more intense as the speech progressed. The building excitement of the crowd peaked to a crescendo with Kennedy's closing words, "All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take

13 Remarks in New Orleans at a Civic Reception May 4, 1962, in Daum, *Kennedy*, 152.

14 Daum, *Kennedy*, 148.

15 Jürgen Eichhoff, "Ich bin ein Berliner: A History and a Linguistic Clarification." *Monatshefte* 8 (Spring, 1993): 71.

16 Ibid., 77.

17 Ibid., 77.

18 Ibid., 75.

19 Daniel Schorr, *Staying Tuned: A Life in Journalism*, (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 170.

20 Robert Dallek and Terry Golway, *Let Every Nation Know: John F. Kennedy in His Own Words*, (Naperville: Source Books, 2006), 216.

21 W.R. Smyser, *Kennedy and the Berlin Wall: A Hell of a Lot Better than a War*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 221.

22 McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*, (New York, Random House, 1988), 390.

23 Ibid., 390.

pride in the words: 'Ich bin ein Berliner.'<sup>24</sup> Video coverage verifies the intensely positive reaction of Berliners to Kennedy's words.<sup>25</sup> The reaction of the Berlin people also had a profound effect on President Kennedy. As he flew out of Berlin that evening, the president told his adviser Ted Sorensen, "We'll never have another day like this one as long as we live."<sup>26</sup>

The next world leader to visit Berlin would not have a day like that either. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev arrived in East Berlin two days later, on June 28, 1963, to a much more subdued reception than Kennedy had received in West Berlin. While much of the organization of Khrushchev's trip imitated Kennedy's, the response was far different. As the *Times* reported, while "the Communist leaders could make people go out into the streets . . . they could not force them to display joy and enthusiasm."<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Kennedy's arrival in West Berlin, very few ordinary citizens turned out to meet Mr. Khrushchev, and "their half-hearted cheering sounded rather like a group of extras in an opera trying to give the impression of tremendous jubilation."<sup>28</sup> While East German officials expected to match the 2,000,000 enthusiastic citizens in attendance for President Kennedy in West Berlin, in reality approximately 200,000 East Berliners turned out to watch, a figure the East German press exaggerated, reporting a crowd of 500,000.<sup>29</sup> Although the official Soviet explanation for the trip was to celebrate the seventieth birthday of the Communist chief of Germany, Walter Ulbricht, it may have been more to "counteract the psychological impact" of Kennedy's visit to Berlin and the wall.<sup>30</sup> Khrushchev's trip was viewed as the "propaganda side of the duel" the Premier was waging against the American president, and it was predicted that the Soviet leader would contribute something of "greater significance," a "major statement" in response to Kennedy's speech at the Berlin Wall which the Communist newspaper *Neues Deutschland* compared to the "anti-communist tirades of Hitler and Goebbels."<sup>31</sup> In his speech at City Hall, Khrushchev took aim at Kennedy, questioning his actual motive in coming to Berlin, stating "some say that they come for the purpose of normalizing the situation and stopping the cold war, but their actions prove the opposite."<sup>32</sup> The Soviet premier went on to state that reunification of Germany could only occur in a socialist system.<sup>33</sup> and gave his support for the Berlin wall in a sentence "Ich liebe die Mauer," translated by the West German press as "I love the Wall."<sup>34</sup> No amount of media propaganda or television coverage could cause this phrase to elicit the same response as Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner," and as Dahm stated, it "did not remain part of the collective memory of Germans, not even of the East Germans."<sup>35</sup>

Kennedy's daring choice to express solidarity with the citizens of West Berlin through four German words would become part of the collective memory of the world. Over half a century has passed since Kennedy gave his speech to the enthused crowd gathered at Berlin's Rudolph-Wilde-Platz, but the memory of his speech remains vivid for many who were there. On the fiftieth anniversary of Kennedy's visit, native Berliner Werner Eckert, who snapped a famous photograph of Kennedy riding in a limousine through Berlin, reflected on the excitement of that day in 1963.

24 John F. Kennedy, *Remarks in the Rudolph Wilde Platz, 26 June 1963*, (White House Audio Collection), Department of Defense. Defense Communications Agency. White House Communications Agency.

25 John F. Kennedy, *One Day in Berlin, 26 June 1963*, (United States Government Agencies Collection), National Archives and Records Administration. Office of Presidential Libraries. John F. Kennedy Library.

26 Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 601.

27 *Mr. Khrushchev Loses Berlin Contest*, *Times of London*, June 29, 1963.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Arthur J. Olsen, *Khrushchev Opens East Berlin Visit; Welcome is Mild*, *New York Times*, June 29, 1963.

30 *Khrushchev Plans Trip to East Berlin to Honor Ulbricht*, *New York Times*, June 23, 1963.

31 Arthur J. Olsen, *Khrushchev to Visit East Berlin Today*, *New York Times*, June 28, 1963.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Neues Deutschland*, July 3, 1963; *Tagesspiegel*, July 3, 1963, in Daum, *Kennedy*, 186.

34 *Tagesspiegel*, June 30, 1963; *Berliner Morgenpost*, June 30, 1963, in Daum, *Kennedy*, 186.

35 Daum, *Kennedy*, 187.



"There never was anyone like Kennedy before," stated Eckert, "You had a feeling you could immediately become friends with him."<sup>36</sup> Alina Heinze, director of Berlin's Kennedy Museum, stated that many who were in the original crowd come to visit the Kennedy Museum and listen to the video of the speech with tears in their eyes.<sup>37</sup> Anita Lochner, whose father Robert served as Kennedy's translator in Berlin, remembered not only the words of the speech, but Kennedy's emotional reaction to the Berlin Wall, and the way it proved his humanity.<sup>38</sup>

Not only was Kennedy shocked by the reality of the Wall, but he was able to look beyond it with hope for the future, stating, "we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one . . . when that day comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines."<sup>39</sup> Although Kennedy himself would not live to see that day, he was correct that eventually Germany would be reunited. Kennedy had feared what might have happened if he had uttered something similar in 1963, as Schlesinger recalls, "he remarked . . . that if he had said, 'March to the wall – tear it down,' his listeners would have marched."<sup>40</sup> Ironically, on a June day twenty-four years later, President Ronald Reagan used nearly those words when he challenged the Soviet leader, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" It would still take over two more years for the wall to come down, and into the next year for reunification to occur.

Containing only approximately five hundred words, Kennedy's Berlin Wall speech was powerful, oftentimes placing it on the list of most memorable president's speeches. The bond forged with West Berlin as the United States marched in to rescue them from Soviet occupation, and reinforced by the Berlin airlift, was further strengthened through Kennedy's affirming words 'Ich bin ein Berliner.' Television and newspaper accounts spread the message at the time and provide understanding decades later, but could not have created the enthusiastic, spontaneous reaction to the American president. His youth was appealing, but his honesty when face to face with the effects of communism was what spoke to the hearts of the Berliners. Expressing himself in their native tongue made the message even more personal, although as his wife Jackie later commented, "How strange it is . . . that the words of my husband that will be remembered most were words he did not even say in his own language "*Ich bin ein Berliner*."<sup>41</sup> Most importantly, the phrase was understood by the audience, as it reinforced the connection between America and Berlin. *Der Spiegel's* speculation that upon Kennedy meeting the German people they would be mutually disappointed with each other could not have been farther from the truth, as they welcomed him enthusiastically at every stop along the way. Likewise Kennedy had great admiration for the people of Berlin, as Bundy stated, "I remember the meeting not so much for the impression that Kennedy made on Berlin, though it was great, as for the impression the people of Berlin made on Kennedy."<sup>42</sup> Sincerity, solidarity, and resoluteness are all part of the legacy of Kennedy's Berlin Wall speech; certainly, it carries more importance than debate over German syntax and jelly doughnuts.

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- 37 *Ibid*, 1.
- 38 *Ibid*, 2.
- 39 Kennedy, *Remarks in the Rudolph Wilde Platz*.
- 40 Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 885.
- 41 Jacqueline Kennedy to Brandt, December 3, 1964, AFES, WBA, Gruppe 6, Ordner 126, in Daum, *Kennedy*, 197.
- 42 Bundy, *Dangers*, 390.

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