One Day in Berlin (1963)

Abstract

One Day in Berlin features President John F. Kennedy's visit to West Berlin on June 26, 1963. During his visit, the U.S. president delivered his famous speech in front of West Berlin's Schöneberg City Hall, which included the line "Ich bin ein Berliner." The president's symbolic visit, which marked the fifteenth anniversary of the start of the Berlin Airlift in 1948, assured the city's residents of U.S. support in defending the city's freedom against the Communist regime in the East.

After his arrival at the city's Tegel Airport, the president proceeded through Berlin in an open motorcade. The film, produced by the U.S. Air Force's television network, shows the city's streets lined with cheering Berliners of all ages. After visiting the Berlin Wall at Brandenburg Gate and Checkpoint Charlie (not shown in these excerpts), the motorcade arrived at Schöneberg City Hall. There, an enormous crowd, estimated at between 500,000 and a million people, had gathered and awaited the president since the early morning. The film not only shows President Kennedy delivering his famous speech but also gives a vivid impression of the enthusiasm of the Berliners who had gathered to hear him. The footage also includes images of Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Willy Brandt, who was West Berlin's Governing Mayor at the time, as well as General Lucius D. Clay, among other dignitaries. The film concludes with the president's motorcade through Berlin back to Tegel Airport, once again passing crowds of cheering Berliners who had lined up on the city's streets. The film clip presented below has been excerpted from a longer version provided to us by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Source

Transcription

[. . .]

[00:00:38] It was a great day in the history of Berlin. June 26, 1963. Not only was it inscribed in the chronicles of the city, but in the hearts of Berliners as well. It was a day that will never be forgotten by those in the divided city. It was a day of hope. It was a day of reassurance. It was the day that President John Fitzgerald Kennedy visited the city; for here was a man of courage and integrity, a man who didn't promise easy solutions to the problem, but he was a man who justified the belief in a better world to come.

[. . .]

[00:06:40] Thus, the motorcade through the streets of Berlin began. The entire route was lined with people who had waited hours to see the president, the man dedicated to the defense of peace and freedom. Never before had the Berliners turned out in such large numbers. Never was a reception so rousing and so warm. This was Berlin's way of expressing their years of gratitude.

[00:07:25] Wherever the president went, he was greeted with enthusiasm that knew no bounds. A million and a half people crowded the streets of West Berlin. A million and a half Berliners. Cheerful, grateful, hopeful.

[. . .]

00:13:35] Even before he arrived, the square in front of the town hall was bursting at the seams with people all along the streets leading to it. The people wormed their way through eager to participate in the historic occasion. This square, which is the scene of so many impressive and powerful meetings, has never before known so vast a gathering. Then, shortly before 1 pm, President Kennedy arrived. His appearance before the gathering brought forth a thunderous ovation. For 18 years, Berliners had waited to say thank you to the leader of the Western world.

This was the day. [00:15:00]

[00:15:20] I am proud to come to this city as the guest of your distinguished Mayor, who has symbolized throughout the world the fighting spirit of West Berlin. And I am proud—and I am proud to visit the Federal Republic with your distinguished Chancellor who for so many years has committed Germany to democracy and freedom and progress, and to come here in the company of my fellow American, General Clay, who—who has been in this city during its great moments of crisis and will come again if ever needed.

Two thousand years—two thousand years ago the proudest boast was “civis Romanus sum.” Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is, “Ich bin ein Berliner.”

I—I—I appreciate—I appreciate my interpreter translating my German!

There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them come to Berlin. There are some who say—there are some who say, that Communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin. And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere we can work with the Communists. Let them come to Berlin. And there are even a few who say that it's true that Communism is an evil system, but it permits us to make economic progress. Laßt sie nach Berlin kommen. Let them come to Berlin.

[00:19:00] Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us.

I want to say, on behalf of my countrymen, who live many miles away on the other side of the Atlantic, who are far distant from you, that they take the greatest pride that they have been able to share with you, even from a distance, the story of the last 18 years. I know of no town, no city, that has been besieged for 18 years that still lives with the vitality and the force, and the hope and the determination of the city of West Berlin.

While the wall is the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the Communist system, for all the world to see, we take no satisfaction in it, for it is, as your Mayor has said, an offense not only against history but an offense against humanity, separating families, dividing husbands and wives and brothers and sisters, and dividing a people who wish to be joined together.

What is—what is true of this city is true of Germany—real, lasting peace in Europe can never be assured as long as one German out of four is denied the elementary right of free men, and that is to make a free choice. In 18 years of peace and good faith, this generation of Germans has earned the right to be free, including the right to unite their families and their nation in lasting peace, with good will to all people.

You live in a defended island of freedom, but your life is part of the main. So let me ask you as I close, to lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today, to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin, or your country of Germany, to the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace with justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind. Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free. When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one and this country and this great Continent of Europe in a peaceful and

hopeful globe. When that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines for almost two decades.

All—all free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words: “Ich bin ein Berliner.”

The applause seemed endless. It was Berlin’s proudest hour, the greatest of all meetings held before the town hall was solemnly concluded with President Kennedy inscribing his name in Berlin’s golden book. The ceremony was held amidst a silence, broken only by the tolling of the freedom bell in the tower above. The attention of a grateful people was fixed on a man who carried their hopes, their good wishes, and their confidence. After meeting with members of the city government and other public dignitaries, the president attended a dinner held in his honor at the town hall. Then, at 3:23 [pm], the motorcade resumed its journey. Again, the streets were jammed with thousands of confetti-throwing people. They tried to catch a glimpse of the man who represented the United States. [. . .]

[00:28:09] The return trip to Tegel Airport saw the same enthusiasm relived. Berliners crowded along the freeway to bid farewell to the president. It was a moment to cherish and remember. It was a moment still vividly remembered today. It was time to say goodbye, not just to the dignitaries and people, but to Germany, as well. As it began so it ended. Dr. Adenauer and Willy Brandt were at the airport to say “Auf Wiedersehen” on behalf of the German people. Before boarding the plane President Kennedy warmly thanked each member of his police escort for a job well done. It had been a vivid moment in Berlin’s history. It is still remembered today and will continue to be remembered in the future. The aircraft’s engines roared in the afternoon sunshine. At exactly 5:45 pm, Air Force One would lift into the air, taking President Kennedy with it and leaving behind pleasant memories, memories that provided reassurance and hope to a people divided by a wall. As the president said, Berlin is more than a showcase of liberty, a symbol, and an aisle of freedom in a communist sea. Berlin is the great testing place of Western courage and will, a focal point where our solemn commitment and Soviet ambition now meet in confrontation. This is the way it was in the divided city, June 26, 1963, from 9:30 am to 5:45 pm. It was a day that belonged to Berlin.

Transcription: GHDI staff and John F. Kennedy’s speech in front of the Schöneberg City Hall in Berlin, June 23, 1963, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. John F. Kennedy. Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President. January 1 to November 22, 1963*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964, no. 269, pp. 524-25.

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