

Jack Paar at the Berlin Wall

Veteran director's account of landmark program spotlighting historic event. | **By Hal Gurnee**

In the summer of 1961, the Soviet Union stepped up pressure on the West to recognize the communist puppet state of East Germany. Rebuffed, the Soviets announced that they would sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany which would shut off access to West Berlin. East Berliners escaped by the thousands into West Berlin and the communist regime countered with barbed-wire fences. Then in August the East German regime constructed a ten-foot-high concrete wall stretching more than 20 miles. Buildings along the divide were toppled to prevent their use by refugees to tunnel under, or, far more risky, to jump over the wall. On the Eastern side extra forces, East German police, were moved in for additional security. In the West more U.S. troops were assigned to the border crossings.

Jack Paar, who hosted his own highly popular late-night show on NBC, decided that he wanted to film one program at the Berlin Wall. I was the NBC staff Associate Director on the show. The following account was gathered from my written observations, kept mostly on show rundowns and rehearsal schedules.

- H.G.

28 August

10 A.M. After show meeting, Producer Paul Orr tells me Jack wants to meet with us when he gets in. Now what?

1 P.M. Jack's office, windowless, low ceiling, dim lights, and always the smell of Jack's after-shave lotion and cigar smoke. A cartload of flats and props for that night's commercials (with boxes of RealLemon, Arpège Perfume bottles, and Alpo dog food display) rumble by the open door to the adjacent scene shop and storeroom. Jack: "We're going to Berlin next week. I talked to [NBC President Robert] Kintner this morning and he says OK." (Just like Jack to go directly to the top.) The plan is to do the twelve-to-one portion of the show there and fly the tapes back to New York for the next night's airing. Director Kirk Alexander will do New York and I will do Berlin. Jack: "I really want to see that wall."

29 August

11 A.M. Sit down with Paul and Unit Manager Bert Fainberg. NBC programming coordinator has

joined us. We have a studio in Berlin available next week only and, great news, an independent TV contractor with a mobile unit and crew. Bert arranges a phone conference with Berlin so I can talk to their studio and technical heads. I describe show to them, what we will need: cameras, sound, lighting, crew, and production staff (Assistant Director, Production Assistants, English speaking, of course). Immediate misunderstandings give inkling of the good times to come.

4:30 P.M. Rehearse singers Phil Ford and Mimi Hines on song to be sung at home base, a very sentimental version of "Till There Was You." Jack once asked Oscar Levant what he thought of Ford and Hines - Oscar: "I can't watch them, I'm a diabetic, you know." Talk to Kirk about Berlin...says he is happy not to be going...visited Berlin in the 30s while still at Princeton and hated it. Of course a lot of people hated being in Berlin in the 30's.

30 August

Talk to NBC Press Representative Gary Stindt in Berlin. They are trying hard to provide an English-speaking crew, at least department heads, and most important of all, the Technical Director and audio operators. Bert tells me that NBC will not send any of the New York crew to Berlin...not in the budget. Why am I worried? Console myself with a double order of cheese toast at Schraffts, across from 30 Rock on Sixth Avenue.



Jack Paar (upper right), Peggy Cass (to his right) and the NBC crew at Tempelhof Airport, Berlin. The author, Hal Gurnee, is at bottom left.

1 September

Alitalia to Berlin (don't ask). Most of tiny staff aboard, Paul Orr, Jack's secretary Mitzi Matravers, writers Bob Howard, Paul Keyes, Associate Producer Tommy Cochran and, of course, our cast members, Jack Paar and Peggy Cass. Bert went out day before to set up our production office. Stindt greets us at Tempelhof Airport. All pose on plane's steps for group picture. We look more like tourists on a pleasure jaunt than a TV team ready to work in a truly hot spot in the Cold War. West Berlin very appealing, busy streets, attractive shop windows, and many new buildings. Looks more

like American Midwest than Europe. Kurfürstendamm reminds me of Fifth Avenue. We are staying at the Berlin Hilton. This may be fun after all.

2 September

Studio brings me back to reality...small, awkward floor plan...best they have available. Long side of studio has steep, uncomfortable bleacher seating. Not good...Start by setting marks on floor for home-base platform. Look through scene dock and storage for desk and seating for interview area. There is a fly loft that holds a few nondescript curtains and flats to choose from. Studio dark today, will meet crew tomorrow. (What's the German word for "nervous"?)

3 September

Jack's wife Miriam and daughter Randy arrive. Meet them in lobby on way out to studio. Jack has talked to Paul and Tommy and is concerned about guest list...just found out that Arlene Francis will not be available. Billy Wilder, shooting "One, Two, Three" with Cagney in Germany will not let her off. We knew that Jack was counting on her, especially with such a thin guest list, to appear more than once during the week.

Meet crew: friendly but guarded reception...lots of handshaking. German custom insists on a daily firm handshake, and often another on leaving. Many smiles, but not much English spoken. Will meet camera switcher tomorrow on first tape day. She, I am assured, speaks English. Get busy in the studio positioning home base furniture for lighting director, and sit in for Jack so that lighting crew, on

ladders, can focus lamps. In production area, place tape marks on floor for still undetermined performers. In the control room play back videotape of a recent show, to give the crew an idea of what it looks like. Jack's monologue and chat with Hugh Downs at home base gets no response, but in the "New Products" bit that follows, a big laugh from the crew, when the wind-up savings bank opens slowly and a tiny hand emerges, snatches the coin, and quickly closes. I point out on the monitor where we usually use follow spots and mike placements for stand-ups and musical acts. I have no idea if they understand me, but they smile and nod their heads. So far, so good.

Dinner with Jack, Tommy and Paul at the hotel. Jack is glum. Only solid booking is German actor Kurt Jurgens, and of course Peggy Cass, who will be Jack's sidekick for all the shows. Tommy thinks that with the newspapers full of stories about the Berlin Wall crisis, potential guests from the U.S. or Britain may not be thrilled to be in Germany at this time. Jack asks about music guests and Paul assures him that we do have Crazy Otto (Fritz Schulz-Reichel), the hottest music and comedy act in Germany at the moment. Fitful night's sleep.

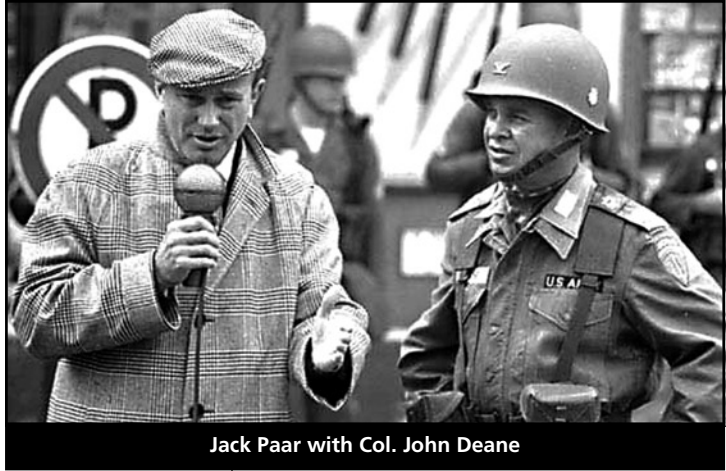
4 September

First show day. Handshakes all around, including all the crew and stagehands. Cameramen frisky and proudly show me their new camera pedestals and perform very smooth trucks and dollies for me. Control room at farthest end of studio from home base, approached from a steep set of stairs at the end of the bleachers. Inside, view of studio

floor obstructed by a forest of hanging lamps and video monitors. More handshakes, video operators, projectionists, audiomen, and then Marianne Aiken, a pretty girl in her mid-twenties. She explains that she, not the technical director, works

the switching console. She doesn't have headset communications with the crew, but I do, and when I say "Take Camera One," she punches the Camera One button...and that's it. Like dictating to a typist. Marianne speaks some English, but not any of the floor crew except the floor manager, who will relay my cues to Jack.

6 P.M. Showtime. Enthusiastic audience, mostly G.I.s and U.S. Government workers. Jack's monologue goes well, but Bob Howard's joke, which he tried out on me on the plane coming over, — "We have nothing to fear, but fumph itself" — puzzles the audience. I love that joke. At home base, Peggy and Jack's quips about touring Berlin get a good reception from an audience of mostly temporary Berliners. Notice that slowly but surely the three cameras drift off the marks I had set for them in camera rehearsal. Camera Three glides first left, then right to a position in back of home base, with a downward shot over the back of Jack's head to the notes on his desk. Camera Two is making a very slow but discernible sweep to his left and Camera One has pushed in and pedestaled down,



Jack Paar with Col. John Deane

providing a close-up of Peggy right out of the German expressionist film, "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari". I see on the monitor Jack's puzzled look as his eyes follow the brand-new camera moves, and after cueing the stage manager for a commercial break, quick dash down the steps and across the studio's floor, and with the help of the stage manager and interpreter, get the cameramen to return to their marks... "No more 'Immelman'" I call over my shoulder, as I hurry back to the control room. (WWI air ace Mark Immelman, famous for his original aerial maneuvers). After commercial break, the show continues with Jack introducing film clips shot the day before: Ka De We department store and U.S. Army Drill Team. Last two segments devoted to interview with Kurt Jurgens. Mild.

5 September

Noon Back at studio for notes to crew on last night's show. Camera guys not as frisky as yesterday. Feel a bit guilty about "nailing" them to marks on studio floor. I congratulate them on last night's work and promise them that their wonderful camera moves will be very welcome with our music and



Jack Paar and Peggy Cass at Checkpoint Charlie.

variety acts. Marianne tells me that the follow spot operators waited, but did not get a chance for a handshake when I came in. Up to the follow spot platforms high up in back of the audience section. Pretending to check out lines of sight for audience monitors, sidle over, greet and shake hands with the lamp men. Now on with the day.

Earlier that day took advantage of NBC's offer to provide a personal tour of East Berlin for anyone on the staff...Randy and I only ones to show up and we had the van all to ourselves. Randy at 12 is good company and smart enough to help me load film into my new Leica. East Berlin, what a sad place, street after street of rubble filled lots. Long lines waiting at a bakery shop, old women sweeping roadway with straw brooms right out of the Middle Ages. Recently constructed buildings along Stalinallee, East Berlin's major throughfare, with wooden canopies at the first floor level to protect pedestrians from falling masonry. Brecht's Berlin Ensemble Theater dark and gloomy, waiting for

a new production, past the grass mound that covers Hitler's bunker and an astounding war memorial, where thousands of Russian soldiers, who died taking Berlin, are buried. Back to West Berlin and the glitter of the Kurfürstendamm.

6 P.M. Showtime. Run NBC news footage of refugees escaping through tunnels under the wall.

Jack narrates over remarkable story of a whole family being rescued by relatives in the West...as film ends, Jack introduces the escapees...very moving. Jack is obviously very touched by their bravery. After a commercial break, Jack continues with more refugees, this time a husband and wife joining their children in West Berlin. Interviews run long, keep feeding Jack windup cues. Paul anxious to get music act into the show...the only variety act available so far. (We must finish on time, no time to edit after show, must make the night flight to New York). After break, Jack quickly introduces the closing act, one he has never seen before, and reputed to be the hottest thing in Germany...Crazy Otto. Crazy Otto's act is loud and fast, a man in a garish plaid suit and an even louder voice. He sings and plays at an old-fashioned upright piano with great energy...I think I recognized "Paddlin' Madelin' Home" in the middle of his medley of old-time hits. The audience loves him and we fade to black over very enthusiastic applause. We're on time.

Jack in his dressing room after the show: "We didn't come all the way to Berlin to see Crazy Otto...we came to see the Wall. What are we going to do?"

Quick meeting with our hired TV contractor Abe Askanowsie, and Herr Healzauber who owns the remote truck. Tommy, Bert, and I will meet with the Army P.R. Officer in the morning. Phone call to Herr Healzauber; he assures me that his mobile unit is ready to go. Ask for a crane to get high shots over the wall. He doesn't have one but will ask around and try to rent one.

6 September

9 A.M. Tommy and Bert introduce me to Col. John Deane, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battle Group, 6th Infantry in Germany, and Lt. Col. Dallas Hoadley, Information officer of the Berlin Command. Col. Deane will be on hand for the remote and arrange for some soldiers for Jack to talk to. Nice guys to work with. We agree on Checkpoint Charlie at the Friedrichstrasse crossing for our remote. I ask for a Jeep for background for Jack and the G.I.s. No problem. Settle on 1 P.M. for taping. Herr Healzauber arrives and assures me that his crew is first rate and almost all English speakers. I ask again about a crane, hoping he has located a Chapman. He doesn't have one but can rent an industrial crane ("cherry picker") to get high shots over the wall, used by the power company. It has a bucket to hold a camera and operator...and will go higher than a television crane... Checkpoint Charlie and the Wall. Great.

6 P.M. Studio show goes well. We run scenes we filmed earlier in the week

of Berlin landmarks, some shot from a helicopter, and looking gloomy, because of the weather. I can sense that Jack is thinking of tomorrow's remote from the Friedrichstrasse crossing.

7 September

8:30 A.M. Rain. Gloomy breakfast at hotel. Weather forecast not good... a very slight chance of clearing in the afternoon.

Checkpoint Charlie like a set for a World War II movie. Handful of G.I.s hunkered down out of the rain in bombed-out five-story buildings that line the Friedrichstrasse. Show our passes and check out positions for Jack and Peggy. Mark spot on white striped borderline for jeep to sit on while Jack interviews G.I.s. Sure enough remote truck is already in place across the street from the checkpoint. Herr Healzauber greets us and looks up at the sky. I assure him it will clear up for the taping but to be on the safe side have storm covers for the cameras...we may have to shoot in the rain. He looks up again. Inside the truck I meet the crew, pleasant young fellows but only one speaks English. I arrange to replace the camera switcher. I will work the board and use the engineering headset to talk to Wilhelm, the English speaker, who will man Camera Two on the crane and will relay my directions to the rest of the crew. Ask him to explain that we do this show as if it were "Live." No tape stops; one take. Good Luck.

Crane a problem, or should I say cherry picker or industrial crane (a literal translation of cherry picker leaves them bewildered and we agree on crane). The vertical lift is very jerky and makes

the bucket holding Camera Two lurch and tremble to a stop. There goes my effortless crane-up shot to reveal East Berlin over the world-famous wall. We will have to wait until bucket finishes it's move and is steady to use camera. Leni Riefenstahl, where are you? Remote crew runs cables to cameras that will cover Jack, Peggy, and G.I.s to be interviewed. NBC's "Here and Now" crew working nearby check our schedule, tell them we should be out of here by 3 p.m.

Jack and Peggy arrive. Show them their marks alongside large sign that reads "YOU ARE LEAVING THE AMERICAN SECTOR" in English, Russian, and French. Jack is free to roam around with his handheld mike. I tell him to be sure and start at the border sign and get to the Jeep for the soldiers' interviews. Quick talk with Col. Deane tells me he added machine gun to jeep at last minute. Ten minutes to tape time and the sky opens up. Storm covers protect the cameras but the lenses are beaded with raindrops....decide to hold off taping. Jack, Peggy, and the staff take cover. Herr Healzauber hurries over, "We must move, we must move...water cannons!!" Sure enough through the mist and rain I can make out trucks with large nozzle - like snouts moving in the East. It is hard to make out where they are heading. Herr Healzauber orders the remote truck to be moved. It backs up several yards and turns into a space between two ruined buildings...safe from the VoPo (East German armed militia). Quickly the camera and audio cables are extended and redressed. Heavy rain again. Wait out downpour and at approximately 2 P.M., in light drizzle we decide to start.

On street for last-minute conference with staff and Bert, who volunteers to stage-manage on the street. As I hurry back to the truck, look up the street and see 40 or 50 G.I.s in full battle dress moving towards us and taking up positions along the checkpoint. I yell to Bert to move them back and he shouts back that they are part of the afternoon personnel change and got here early to watch the show.

2:10 P.M. Tapes roll. Jack masterfully ad-libs introduction...Peggy tags along and points out landmarks. Jack points out water cannon across the border: Peggy; "I hope they don't use it, I just had my hair done." Cameras and soundmen do their best as I struggle with an unfamiliar switching console. Added problem...no one to time out commercial breaks and keep an overall running time, luckily we were able to set the truck clock to New York show time. Jack for once takes his time cues. Wilhelm on Two is very sharp and passes on my instructions to the other three cameras. During commercial break a busload of American G.I.s cross over to East Berlin on a sightseeing tour. Jack talks to the G.I.s and Peggy joins in with her trademark quips... she points out young girls leaning out of a high window on the Eastern side watching the show. She is a great help. Rain has stopped but the sky remains dark. Gloomy pictures of a gloomy place. Wilhelm has wonderful views over the wall into East Berlin. By panning from West to East the contrast of the divided city is unavoidable. Most telling of all is the view down the length of wall looking endless as it disappears into the mist.

3:05 P.M. Final segment. Rain starts again as we fade up after commercial break. Jack and Peggy wrap it up sitting close together on the narrow traffic island that divides Friedrichstrasse as it crosses over the border, a scene right out of Chaplin's "City Lights."

8 September

9 A.M. Hotel breakfast: ham, cheese, fruit, and dark bread as usual. Tommy and Bert join me. "Jack has New York papers and we're in them!" In Jack's suite a storm is raging as Jack reacts to the newspaper reports of yesterday's taping. Stindt from NBC Press sits meekly on the couch surrounded by newspapers and teletype copy. Jack: "They are attacking me again...look at this!"

Here are the quotes from the American Press: United Press Berlin Bureau: JACK PAAR IN BERLIN. "It was the biggest turnout the Americans had yet made along the wall that divides Communists from Free Berlin---and it was all for Jack Paar."

New York Times (front page): 50 US SOLDIERS IN ACTION FOR TV. "Fifty armed U.S. soldiers moved rapidly down a rain-splattered street, then smartly took possession of buildings overlooking the East-West border. A Jeep with a machine gun had a front wheel planted on the white stripe that indicates the border between East and West. And it was all for Jack Paar the television star."

Journal-American (front page): PENTAGON TO PROBE TROOP DEPLOYMENT FOR PAAR IN BERLIN. "The Pentagon with the

approval of the White House launched an investigation...If the newspaper reports are accurate it was a disgraceful episode said Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester...Pierre Salinger, White House Press Secretary, agreed."

N.Y. Herald Tribune (front page): ARMY AND PAAR PUT CAPITAL IN A DITHER. "A miniature Berlin Crises mushroomed here following report of the United States extraordinary turnout on the explosive Berlin border for the filming (sic) of Jack Paar television show. The White House was disturbed. The State Department was troubled. The Defense Department immediately began to investigate."

New York Times: Senator Hubert Humphrey: "This is the very thing that Khrushchev seizes upon"...Senator Leverett Saltonstall: "Disgraceful"... Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield "I hope Berlin will not become the new Mecca for the jaded of the Entertainment World."

Mid-afternoon at hotel, run into Jack, Miriam and free-lance journalist Eleanor Harris, who is doing a story about Jack for *Look* magazine and now will do an exclusive interview with Jack about Jacks' very own "Berlin Crisis" for Sunday's *Herald Tribune*. What a great scoop for Eleanor and a chance for Jack to tell his side of the story. Jack, Miriam, and Randy off to Moscow tomorrow. Jack tells me that he has heard from New York that the Army is going to discipline Cols. Deane and Hoadley for helping us. "They are not going to get away with that...see you in New York, kid."

9 September

Front page *N.Y. Herald Tribune*: “That ‘Little Berlin Crisis,’ over a Jack Paar TV show, came to a boil yesterday. The Army removed one officer – Lt. Col. Dallas Hoadley of Baltimore from his post for ‘Improper performance of duty’ and admonished another – Col. Deane Jr. of San Francisco – for ‘exercising poor judgment’ in providing troops filmed by the TV star on the border between East and West Berlin.”

10 September

Jack gets to tell his side of the story in Eleanor Harris’ feature story for the Sunday *Herald Tribune*. Jack starts by saying “The fact is, if there’s no news, reporters will make up news. And we happen to be the only show going on here that interested them... I’m not surprised that they make up news, but I am surprised to hear that the U.S. Senate spent a whole morning discussing this matter.” Jack goes on to point out that “the U.S. Army has been working in co-operation with many other TV shows in the past month and even this week has spent many hours with the CBS show *Eyewitness to History*. Not one thing we or the Army did was improper. No pull was used, political or any other kind to get Army cooperation. All that my traveling staff of seven people (not 100 as has been reported) did was ask, in my name, if we could tape at the Friedrichstrasse border crossing. We asked for one Jeep, something to sit on. Incidentally, Col. Deane who has a chest full of ribbons that 20 Congressmen could well envy, thanked me after taping, for mentioning those kids names on my show...my television show was to begin at 1 p.m. but was postponed for an hour in hopes

that the steady rain would stop. By that time the army guard that changes every afternoon arrived, and out of curiosity they were early... also, the West German press, contrary to my own country’s press, has been very complimentary of our reporting of the Berlin situation. Highly respected journalists like Peter Herz of the *Berliner Zeitung* said that no one else has studied it with the humanity of our Berlin programs.”

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After the one-hour show from the Berlin Wall played back on Tuesday’s Jack Paar Tonight Show, people wondered what all the fuss was about. David Lawrence in the Washington Post put it succinctly...”Anyone who saw the program must have wondered why members of Congress who hadn’t seen it went off the deep end in their criticism. In presenting worthwhile information The Jack Paar Show was an effective piece of work. He deserves not brickbats but applause for his revelation of the human story behind the Berlin Crisis.”

Two weeks later General Bruce C. Clark, Commander U.S. Army, European Theater, announced that after a careful investigation the Army had found that Colonels Hoadley and Deane had done nothing wrong, and that their reinstatement was being made to “right an injustice.”

The Army announcement appeared, in a single, short column in the back pages of the September 28 edition of the New York Times.

Hal Gurnee is a New York-based television director whose credits include *The Tonight Show*, *The Jack Paar Show*, *That Was the Week that Was*, *The Jimmy Dean Show*, *The Garry Moore Show*, *The Joey Bishop Show*, Jack Paar comedy specials, *The David Frost Show*, *The David Letterman Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, *Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Chris Rock Show*, and *The Jimmy Kimmel Show*.