['Uncle Wiggly Wings' and Berlin's Candy Bombers](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91906449)

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ARI SHAPIRO, host:

Sixty years ago today, the United States began the operation that came to be known as the Berlin Airlift. World War II had ended. Berlin was divided, and Russia blockaded West Berliners in hopes of taking over the city. Andrei Cherny is the author of a new history of the operation called "The Candy Bombers: The Untold Story of the Berlin Airlift and America's Finest Hour."

Mr. ANDREI CHERNY (Author, "The Candy Bombers: The Untold Story of the Berlin Airlift and America's Finest Hour"): West Berlin after World War II was a destroyed, destitute city. Three-quarters of the housing was uninhabitable. Packs of wolves roamed the streets. People had been surviving on rations that were below starvation levels for about four years.

SHAPIRO: The U.S. decided it would not let the Russians crush West Berlin. They started to launch planes carrying food. Here's a report from the era by Edward R. Murrow.

Mr. EDWARD R. MURROW (Journalist): A city the size of Philadelphia was supplied for a year completely by air. Cargo planes - usually C54s - touched down at Tempelhof Airdrome every three minutes.

SHAPIRO: The planes brought staples, like coal and flour.

Mr. HAL HALVORSEN (Former Army Pilot): They looked at that flour and back at you like you were angels from heaven. We had freedom, and we had flour. They needed both.

SHAPIRO: This is Hal Halvorsen. He's now 87 years old. Sixty years ago, as a young Army pilot, Halvorsen decided to break the rules of the airlift. While he was on the ground in West Berlin, he gave some German kids two sticks of gum.

Mr. HALVORSEN: Broke in half, four pieces. And the kids with half a stick carefully tore off the outer wrapper in strips and passed it around. And the kids with the piece of paper put it up to their nose, and just the aroma, they smelled it.

SHAPIRO: Halvorsen decided he had to do more, so he promised the kids he'd drop candy from his airplane the next day.

Mr. HALVORSEN: The children at the fence in Berlin, when I told them that I would make a drop to them, they said, well, how are we going to know your airplane? And I said, well, I'll wiggle the wings. I will make the wings go back and forth. and you'll know that that is the signal that I've got the stuff, and just watch that airplane.

SHAPIRO: German kids came to know Halvorsen as Uncle Wiggly Wings, the anonymous pilot whose plane dropped candy. Author Andrei Cherny.

Mr. CHERNY: It was just a few handkerchief parachutes of chocolate and gum, candy. And he did it once, and about 20 kids got some candy. And the next day, about 100 kids were there, and then a thousand.

Mr. HALVORSEN: Of course, I kept this thing a secret as long as I could. And then a German newspaper guy got wind of it in Berlin and got a picture of my airplane with the tail number on it and parachutes, and...

Mr. CHERNY: His secret was out, and he was revealed as the person who was doing this.

Mr. HALVORSEN: That blew my cover, and I got chewed out and almost court-martialed.

SHAPIRO: But instead of a court martial, other pilots started following Halvorsen's lead. Eventually, U.S. candy companies donated tons of chocolate.

Mr. CHERNY: You have to remember, these were kids five, six, seven, eight years old who had never tasted a piece of candy before, never tasted a piece of chocolate. And their only experience with America at this age was the country that had bombed them during World War II, in many cases killed many of their relatives, and then occupied them in a rather harsh occupation in the years afterwards. And suddenly, here was falling from the heavens, literally, this Hershey bar or this Wrigley gum.

SHAPIRO: You interviewed some Germans who received candy as children. Sixty years later, how did they describe those moments?

Mr. CHERNY: It was, for me, in the entire research of this book, which took many years, one of the most moving parts to walk down the street of Berlin with Colonel Halvorsen. And to have people come up to him with tears in their eyes -people in their 60s and 70s, some of whom are still carrying around that handkerchief that they caught 60 years ago, and talk to him about how that transformed their lives.

SHAPIRO: Cherny calls the Berlin airlift America's finest hour.

Mr. CHERNY: What the people involved in the Berlin airlift - from the president of the United States and his generals down to the lowliest pilot and operator -came to understand was how America should operate at the summit of world power. We discovered that America had a special role the play, one that combines our military force as well as our moral power.

SHAPIRO: The pilot, Hal Halvorsen, is still flying. This week, he's in Berlin, marking the 60th anniversary of the airlift with a flight along his old route. His celebrity has faded in the U.S., but author Andrei Cherny says in Germany, Halvorsen is still treated like a national hero.

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