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Children of 'The Cloud' and Major Tom: Growing Up in the '80s Under the German Sky



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In the sky you could watch history happen as though on the world's most massive TV, and history's wreckage could rain down on you at the park with your friends.

My grandparents' house lies on the Betzenberg in Kaiserslautern, in a quiet section of town. The Betzenberg consisted of suburban 1960s constructions—heavy, dark buildings among towering trees. And above it, the rumbles of another world entirely.

If you are American and you've heard of either Kaiserslautern or the Betzenberg, you are most likely a member of the Armed Forces or related to one. What significance "K-Town" has today is owed to the massive US military installations around Ramstein and the nearby Vogelweh. Since 1945, provincial places like Landstuhl, Kindsbach, and Sembach have taken their place on the global map of American military might. The GIs'

presence in Kaiserslautern was dominant and transformative. My father still tells me how he managed to sneak into a show Miles Davis did for the US military. My uncle's first two cars were totaled in collisions with inebriated American soldiers. Here, blue jeans and T-shirts proliferated earlier than elsewhere in stolid postwar Germany. During the Vietnam War, when terrified GIs arrived with every drug known to man in their knapsacks, the town was awash in recreations worthy of a major city.

By the time I was old enough to drive, all that had changed. Today, K-Town's relaxation borders on final stillness. Part of that is due to the emigration of wealth and of young people—K-Town has an acute undersupply of both. My parents also swear that the brief and near-accidental dabs of coolness washed from the town the moment the US abolished the draft. Instead of desperate eighteen-year-old smack hounds, today's Army and Air Force presence in town largely consists of friendly professionals in their late twenties or thirties who live near Vogelweh with their families.

Since the 1980s, the US presence in K-Town has been an aerial one. When I went to Kaiserslautern in the '80s, Americans were no longer seen; they were heard. The flight path into Ramstein runs straight above my grandparents' house on the Betzenberg, and from them I learned to distinguish the dark grumble of a Hercules from the stealthier whoosh of the AWACS. We listened for differences, distance, altitude. It only occurred to me later how perverse it was that my grandparents, who lived through the bombings that had laid Germany's cities to waste, had placed themselves (by choice or by chance) into the flight path of planes that had to trigger their fight-or-flight response with each flyover. Something about their mode of acute listening had transmitted itself to my parents, born during the air raids, and then to my own generation.

The novelist W. G. Sebald once claimed that Germany had repressed the air war. The immense anguish that the constant bombardment inflicted—and was *designed* to inflict—left no trace in postwar German culture. Indeed, after the war, foreign observers were horrified by the stoicism with which German civilians moved through the rubble of their cities. After he made these claims, Sebald found himself inundated by mail from everyday Germans who sought to prove him wrong, but actually wound up confirming his suspicion. Each person who tried to relay their own story of the air war turned to the same well-worn tropes, repetitive phrases, and impersonal detachment. It was a kind of verbose muteness.

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Tail unit of a U.S. Navy Lockheed P-3C-120-LO Orion at Ramstein Air Base, 1984/photo by Cobatfor via wikimedia

But living in East Anglia, Sebald may have missed another historic record. Those Germans writing letters to him might not have considered it, either. Children growing up under the rumble of the Galaxies and Hercules approaching Ramstein AFB might have sensed all too clearly the record encoded in flinches and hushes, in averted gazes. In 1988, an A-10 went down over the little town of Remscheid, setting fire to several buildings and killing five people on the ground. I remember an evening news comment that the “images remind you of a bombing raid.” There were rumors that the A-10 had carried uranium-coated ammunition. On the internet, you can still find some Remscheid truthers convinced that it was so.

As an eight-year-old, you accept the world as given. You assume that the things you see on the news have always and will always be on the news. You assume that the way adults talk about these events has preexisted, and that one day you will join in talking about them this way. As a child, I probably didn't understand why it mattered that the images of Remscheid were compared to a bombing raid. I doubt I sensed why rumors about uranium sprang up immediately. Did the adults realize? Sebald might have been right: by the 1980s, Germans didn't talk much about the air war. But in another sense, when they looked up, they seemed incapable of seeing anything else.

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The German sky in the '80s sounded different in different areas. In K-Town, we heard the low shudder of sheer power: massive personnel and equipment carriers that hovered low in the sky like UFOs. The Gulf War shook my grandparents' house for the better part of two months as General Schwarzkopf's army shipped out, with a Hercules taking off every thirty seconds. I remember watching German Unification on my grandfather's television, and suddenly the TV shook from a Galaxy overhead. And I remember not caring very much about the new foreign country that was to join mine. In the country in which I'd grown up, all you had to do to see a foreign country was to look up.

By the 1980s, that look up was at once terrifying and seductive, because there wasn't much excitement on the ground. In 1982, Peter Schilling released his song "Major Tom (Coming Home)": a tribute to David Bowie's astronaut; perhaps a kind of nostalgia piece for a time when divided Germany was a place to drop out, shoot up, and make dark records; a kind of crooked ode to the sky above, and a kiss-off to the earth below. I don't remember how old I was when I first encountered Schilling's song, but I was young. And I know I understood immediately what the song was talking about when it talked about space.

In Bowie's song, Major Tom's real home lies in outer space—he cuts off communication to ground control, ignores their messages, then drifts into the nothingness where he belongs: *Earth below us, / drifting, falling, / floating weightless, / calling home*. The song was about how music, drugs, and dancing could take you out of a country that seemed overwhelmingly terrestrial, whose sky belonged to others. That seemed so solid and weighty that to take off, even if only for four minutes with Major Tom, felt like a temporary victory over ground control.

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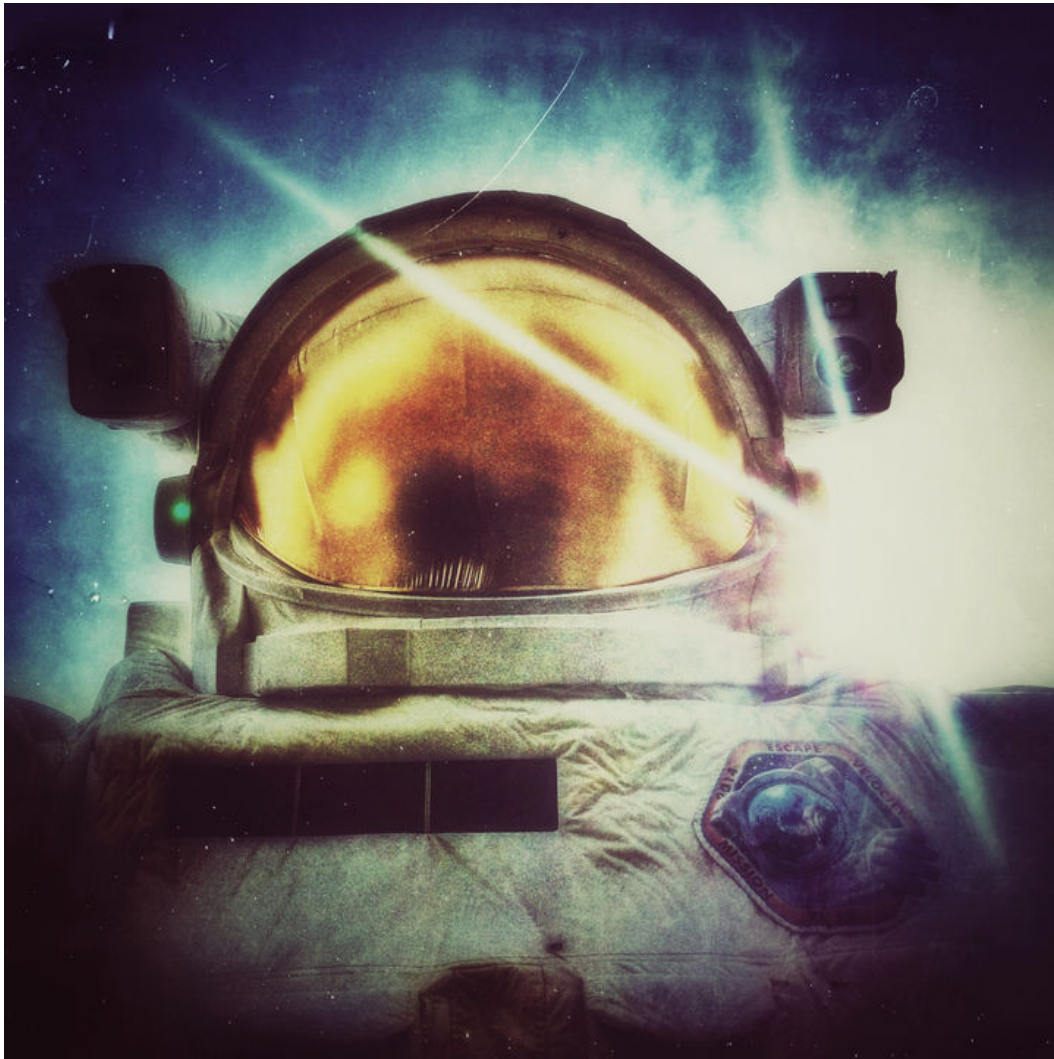


photo by Thomas Hawk/flickr

I was too young to be aware of it, but Germany's children were looking up. In East Germany they wanted to go west across the Iron Curtain—by boat, by tunnel, by balloon, or in the trunk of a car. And in the west, where all the world was accessible, there was nowhere to go but up. In the 1982 film *Christiane F*, the young junkies from Berlin's zoo station climb what was then the tallest building in West Berlin (all of 103 meters tall), break onto the roof, and watch the airplanes and a massive Mercedes Benz star rotating above them. In May 1987, a real-life Major Tom named Mathias Rust chartered a Cessna in Hamburg and, after flying to Keflavik, Bergen, and Helsinki, penetrated Soviet airspace and, five hours later, landed on a bridge near Red Square. Rust claimed to have taken his flight to “promote peace,” but it felt like an escape attempt, akin to the desperate crossings by East Germans—only Rust didn't have anything earthly to escape from or to.

In the Upper Rhine Valley, where I grew up, the sky was just as noisy as it was above Kaiserslautern, but in a different way. Here it was the screaming of the F-18s, as they made their low-altitude training flights above my city. Low-altitude flyovers were legal pretty much everywhere in Germany until 1990; the sole exceptions were military and commercial airports and the borders to the Eastern bloc itself. Both German and the Allied Air Forces conducted tens of thousands of practice flights at low altitude per year—the sonic booms would habitually rattle china and set windows ringing. Thanks to Ramstein, Vogelweh, and the Landstuhl military hospital, Kaiserslautern was spared all of this.

In April 1990, two Canadian jets collided over a park in which my friends and I were playing. The wreckage missed us, but we watched the unfortunate pilot of one of the planes as he fell like a sack behind a multipurpose hall. His fall took seconds. His chute didn't open. He was the first person I saw die.

This was the country in which I grew up: Not much happened on the ground. The country felt as if it had at last been granted a reprieve from history—which, given its own past, felt like a blessing. But the sky above it was a bewildering place where you could watch history happen as though on the world's most massive TV, from which history's wreckage could rain down while you were at the park with your friends.



photo by Cobatfor/wikimedia

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Beside the River Alsenz between the towns of Alsenborn and Sembach, maybe ten miles east of Kaiserslautern, lies the Hetschmühle. Today, it seems to have been condo-ized. But back in the early 1940s, it was a working mill, the lake behind it encircled by concrete. My grandmother evacuated to the Hetschmühle in 1944 after an Allied bomb destroyed her apartment on what is today called Eisenbahnstraße (“Railroad Street”) but which, like most ostentatiously innocuous street names in Germany, conceals a former Adolf-Hitler-Straße. Her husband was at war in the east, and so it was she, her five-year-old son, and her newborn twins—my father and my aunt—who moved to an idyllic building in the middle of a forest in the shadow of the mill.

On one cloudless morning in 1944, the limitations of aeronautic technology caught up with the mill. Kaiserslautern, situated near Germany's western border, had seen aerial attacks starting in 1940, and by 1944 the town was largely destroyed. Allied air raids now concentrated on targets further inside Germany. But the

bombers still launched from airstrips in Southern England, and to maximize payload and conserve fuel, it was imperative that the bombers drop all of their bombs before flying back. My grandmother assumed that this is what felled the *Hetschmühle*. It was probably mercy on the explosive-wracked city that moved the pilot to drop his bombs over an obviously uninhabited piece of woodland nearby—uninhabited except for the mill. The bombs missed the building, but pulverized the concrete embankments, and it was their sharp fragments that tore apart the mill and the small houses clustered around it. No one was hurt, but my grandmother and her children had to relocate again.

I was told the story of the *Hetschmühle* many times growing up. The story has that curious detachment with which the war generation and the generation born during the bombardments spoke of the destruction, the detachment that so chilled Sebald. My grandmother, my father, my aunt almost never told that story without including the point about the act of mercy, the seeming pilot error, which destroyed the mill. They were speculating, but it seemed important to them to speculate on this point each time. They never failed to mention the first ruined apartment, and the Adolf-Hitler-Straße it had been on. They seemed to want to acknowledge that they deserved the bombs, the ruins. But if the planes of 1944 made moral sense to them, the planes of 1984 were a far more confusing matter.



EC-130H Hercules over Sembach Air Base, 1987/photo via wikimedia

Hiking from the *Hetschmühle* towards the city of Kaiserslautern, you pass the former US Air Force base at Sembach, now a US military prison. Eventually, you come to a piece of land that today functions as an athletic center for the local soccer club. I remember making the hike with my grandmother shortly before her death.

She was surprised to see the new building there—the area had been fenced in and off-limits for as long as she could remember. It had been, she told me, a missile battery. Alsenborn lies to the east of K-Town; Ramstein AFB lies to the west. In the case of a Soviet attack on Ramstein, these missiles were meant to bring down the planes.

The battery had survived for many decades; it was replaced only after the Soviet Union collapsed. Young people in Germany had mobilized against the US stationing missiles since the 1960s. Designations that in the US serve as arcana for military geeks (Pershing II, Tomahawk) were household names in Germany. But the protests had never come for this battery. My grandmother had huddled under the protection of the flak during the war, and then she had huddled under the protection of this battery of rockets during what followed. It occurred to me that she seemed to assume the missiles were there to protect her. More likely they were there to protect Ramstein, with the town a possible battlefield strewn with wreckage, the Hetschmühle raised to apocalyptic proportions.

Despite being collateralized in such a way, I don't think the people of K-Town took much note of Ramstein one way or the other. In 1988, during an air show intended to celebrate German-American friendship, three stunt planes collided and crashed into the crowd, killing seventy people. I was in Kaiserslautern that day, visiting my grandparents. We had hiked to a ruined castle, then had cake and coffee at a café near the medieval church in town. We only learned of the disaster from the evening news. When I explained to my grandfather years later why the band Rammstein was named after a hamlet in his neighborhood, he seemed surprised that it was a reference to the air disaster. "I just figured they were from here," he shrugged.

Ramstein was US soil. This made the aftermath of the air disaster utterly chaotic, as emergency responders from two countries had to figure out how to help civilians and military personnel. But it also meant that apocalyptic scenes played out somewhere among the dark forests, and so the little towns around it hardly took notice. On the news that evening, it was pointed out that the Protestant Church, the Social Democratic Party, the Greens had all urged people to stay away from the airshow; as people pulled onto the airbase, they were greeted by picketers with signs declaring: "We are afraid! Stop all low-altitude flights." Significantly, it seems both those picketing and those attending the air show weren't locals. The locals did what my grandmother had always done: They listened and they ducked.

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In late April 1986, I, too, was ducking. I remember peering into the sky wondering if The Cloud would look different from all the other low-hanging April clouds.

Chernobyl had exploded on April 26, and by the 28th its radiation was setting off alarms in Sweden. I was a serious and somewhat anxious kid about to turn six, glued to the evening news. It would still be a few days before the famous footage of the smoldering ruin made its way onto our TV screens, but in its stead we got all the beautiful, abstract maps of the pre-digital era: By the 29th, the evening news showed us a sickle-shaped cloud reaching from Ukraine across southern Scandinavia. A meteorologist used a paper map to explain wind patterns.

In Berlin, the easternmost outpost of the Federal Republic, several weather stations measured a rise in Iodine-131. By early May, it was clear that none of the radioactive elements in the air were dangerous. So thoughts turned to the rain, which placed six-year-old me in an unfortunate position. Rain was a daily occurrence, and it didn't faze us much: We'd venture out into the apple orchards, the hedgerows, the cow pastures all the way to the old manor house up the hill, in our ponchos and our yellow wellies. But now no one was sure what we could eat, what we could touch. We stayed at home and looked over the rain-beaded hedgerows and playgrounds that had suddenly turned sinister. It was scary precisely because it didn't look different, didn't smell different. Because it was no one's fault. Because it had simply fallen out of the sky.

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It was this experience that drew me to the children's book author Gudrun Pausewang, who dominated our bookshelves and our minds in those years with a grimness and joylessness that today strikes me as particularly German. In 1982 Pausewang published *The Last Children of Schevenborn* (published as *Fallout* in English), a young adult book about a group of friends separated from their families during a nuclear attack, who end up dying one after the other. In 1987 she published *The Cloud*, which repeated the hijinks of *Schevenborn* with a nuclear power plant filling in for ICBMs.

The books were gripping, moralistic, and deeply disturbing. I hated the way they robbed me of sleep, but to not read them felt like closing my eyes to something important. I think my parents gave them to me in the same spirit. Pausewang wrote one more dystopian novel in which the Nazis had come back to power, and that in some way made explicit what these books had been about all along. Never again were young Germans to close their eyes before some change in the macroclimate. Pausewang was turning the children of the 1980s into little Geiger counters ready to register the faintest contaminants. And so I lay awake each night, eyes wide open, letting the potential horrors of this world stream through me.

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During those years, even the cheeriest pop songs were about potential horrors. One result of the English version of Nena's "99 Luftballons" becoming a hit is that few Americans realize the song is actually about a scenario not unlike one of Pausewang's cautionary tales. The titular balloons drift across the sky, are mistaken for a Soviet incursion, and trigger "99 years of war." And in the end, the singer, surveying a world of rubble, lets fly another balloon—and this time, because the world has ended, because there are no more fighter wings, no more Pershing missiles, no more generals, she can let it go without anyone mistaking its meaning. It's a wild song precisely because it seems to be about so little and is about so much.

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The German sky I knew was a shared sky—shared with the Communist East and the Western Allies, with radioactive clouds and acid rain, with Major Tom and Mathias Rust. It was also somewhere we encountered, right above our homes, something far less certain and far more exciting than the heavy exposed-concrete buildings on the ground. Even in K-Town, where only America loomed overhead, the sky contained multitudes: twinkling distant AWACS, protective Pershings, A-10s with their uranium-covered payload, rumbling Galaxies, Miles Davis flying in for his concerts, wounded soldiers airlifting in, burn victims airlifting out. Was it crazy to imagine Major Tom somewhere in between them?

It was impossible to look up and feel one way about all these things, something the band name that came out of the wreckage of August 28, 1988 makes abundantly clear. In interviews, the band members claimed it was just a joke name that sort of stuck. But of course, there was something deliberately offensive in it. The band actually has a song about the air disaster, which juxtaposes graphic descriptions ("the smell of meat is in the air") with ironically idyllic nature scenes. I have to admit that I have never listened to it—not because it makes me think of the air disaster (of which video exists, but which I've likewise never seen), but because I worry I'd see Colonel Timothy Kirk-Leuthy of the Canadian Airforce on his awful sack-like drop behind the multipurpose hall. That was sort of the band's point: The name stuck around because it served as a kind of trigger.

The name also has a frisson of instinctive, disarticulated anti-Americanism. I doubt that many of the locals in Kaiserslautern actively disliked the US presence. While there were left-wing terrorist attacks on US barracks, and cars belonging to US servicemen were a common target of early-'80s urban guerillas, attacks on Americans were generally regarded by the wider populace as fringe-y, destabilizing, and ultimately incomprehensible. And yet, as with any cohabitation of seventy years, feelings about the Americans were complex. The historical situation really didn't allow for much complexity, and so local anxieties found their own outlets.

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photo at Ramstein Air Base by Master Sgt. Keith Reed/wikimedia

It's easy to talk about antagonism, projection, fetishism, but I find that those narratives tend to underplay just how close, how wondrously, uncomfortably entangled German lives were with American ones in those years. Sure, America functioned as a kind of "Other" in Germany, but I'm not sure how "Other" someone can be when they're screeching daily 250 feet above your house.

Maybe in the days of Miles Davis and terrified GIs, terms like that might have made sense. But I use the image of the TV screen for a reason. We're familiar with the idea of whole generations raised and formed by what they see on the TV screen. My own generation, squatting before the bewildering, booming screen of German airspace, felt much the same mix of proximity and distance, floating weightless between obsessive desire and genuine nonchalance, at once accustomed to and utterly transfixed by what we saw.

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