

The JFK-Obama-Messiah factor

In Berlin, both presidents had watershed moments, and both are revered

“Ich bein ein Berliner.”

— John F. Kennedy, June 26, 1963,
to almost 500,000 West Berliners.

BY THOMAS FROESE

BERLIN ♦ I'm in this hip and legendary city to find out why folks around here see John F. Kennedy as God and Barack Obama his only begotten son.

It's a six-hour train trip through snow-covered Europe, from Amsterdam where I've had other business: an unplanned visit to explore the Kennedy-Obama-Messiah factor.

It was the respected German weekly *Der Spiegel* that put Obama on its cover with the headline, *The Messiah Factor*. The paper labelled Obama — as so many have — as the Black Kennedy. Of course, there's a German best-seller of that name.

And, on the culture scene, if Berliners aren't visiting the Obama mosh pit, I'm told some might play Kennedy speeches for their children ... in utero.

I'm hoping to find one telling line, one fresh truth. It's an ongoing quest. Last summer, I started in Obama's hometown, Chicago, that burly city as big as any of the American Dream.

“What do you think of Obama?” I asked then. There was the Italian taxi driver, the theatre student at Grant Park, the crazy bag lady near the Chicago Board of Trade, the angry Republican waitress at the Chicago Hilton pub, and the bluesy sax player at the Sears Tower where they sell Obama candy bars, bobbleheads and life-

size cut-outs.

Like a kid collecting more marbles, I now continue, first on the train nearing Berlin. The travellers tell me about the usual: the intelligence, charm and good looks of both Kennedy and Obama; the starlet wives and beautiful kids; the polished words.

At Berlin's train station bookstore, the clerks tell me the *Yes We Can!* 2010 Obama Calendar is a huge seller. An Obama photo biography is easy to spot. So is a German-language political affairs journal with JFK on its front.

Later, at the Kennedy Museum, near Berlin's historic Brandenburg Gate, I'm told they've just had a show on the similarities between Obama's and Kennedy's election campaigns. And a family friend, a museum curator who's passionate on politics and culture, talks to me over goose and red wine about the

protocol of Obama's 2008 visit, which attracted 200,000 Berliners.

I find only what is already known. Germans, like many Europeans, have a love-hate relationship with America.

They chafe at U.S. imperialism. Now, in a post-Bush era, they project onto Obama the same hope they felt a generation ago with Kennedy.

So I discover no new truth, no fresh line on either man. But as a native Berliner with my own feelings, I find something else. This city, after all, is not only my hometown but the longtime resting place of my late mother and the focal point of my family's own difficult history. So I find more about who I am and, in a sense,

Four short words. In a language not his own. A last-minute script change. With botched grammar. It's a line that has become a touch-point of western culture.



THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

A pictorial biography of U.S. President Barack Obama and a political journal showing John F. Kennedy on a rack at the Virgin bookstore at Berlin's central train station, the Hauptbahnhof.

who we all are. Because when one reflects on what Kennedy said that summer day so long ago — that he was “a Berliner” — one realizes that he wasn't talking only about this city or its people in crisis. He was talking about something larger. And simpler.

Taking the 2,000-year-old Roman adage “*civis Romanus sum*,” Kennedy said he was, in fact, anything but some Messiah, but rather just a man. A common man. But a free man.

Four short words. In a language not his own. A last-minute script

change. With botched grammar. It's a lasting line that has become a touch-point of western culture not because of JFK's perfections or divinity, but, in fact, because of his flaws and mortality. We only distort our history and our leaders and ourselves when we think otherwise.

I'm with my Tante Eva, my only remaining relative in Berlin. We're looking at family photos, some a century old, sepia-toned survivors of bombs and time. There's my Tante with my mother: two innocent little girls on the

beach, so full of laughter and life. I collect the moment like picking up shells at the seaside.

“What do you think of Obama?” I ask my Tante.

“Yah,” she pauses, thinks, and, in broken English, says, “He's a good man.”

Hmm. Four more words. And, when it comes to it, a fine epitaph.

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