

WERNHER VON BRAUN – LIFE IN GERMANY

Summertime is miserable in Alabama. From my parking spot to the entrance of the hospital where I work, it is roughly the length of a football field. I am hot and sweaty just walking these 100 yards in the stultifying heat. The high humidity has wreaked havoc on my hairdo. Why oh why did I even bother taking a shower before work?

Growing up in Wisconsin, I NEVER thought I would be a resident of Alabama. I could fault my husband, Adam, for my Summer time suffering. His employment at the NASA- Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama brought us to the Yellowhammer State. However, upon further reflection, I have decided the person who is ultimately responsible for bringing me here is **DR. WERNHER VON BRAUN**.

Today I want to review the life of Dr. von Braun - the man who spearheaded the US effort to land a man on the moon on July 20, 1969, and eventually brought me to Huntsville, Alabama. Many consider the moon landing to be the greatest scientific achievement of mankind to date. Today I will review his life in Germany.

PROFILE OF WERNHER MAGNUS MAXIMILLIAN FREIHERR VON BRAUN

Date of Birth: March 23, 1912 Wyrzysk, Poznan, Poland (Then part of the German Empire.)

Date of Death: June 16, 1977 Alexandria, VA - USA

Wife: Maria Luise von Quistorp

Children: Iris Careen von Braun, Margrit Cecile von Braun, and Peter Constantine von Braun

Father: Magnus von Braun (1877-1972)

Mother: Emmy von Quistorp (1886 -1959)

Alma Mater: Technical University of Berlin. PHD in Physics in 1934.

EARLY INFLUENCES

Dr. von Braun credits three people for inspiring his interest in rocketry. They are:

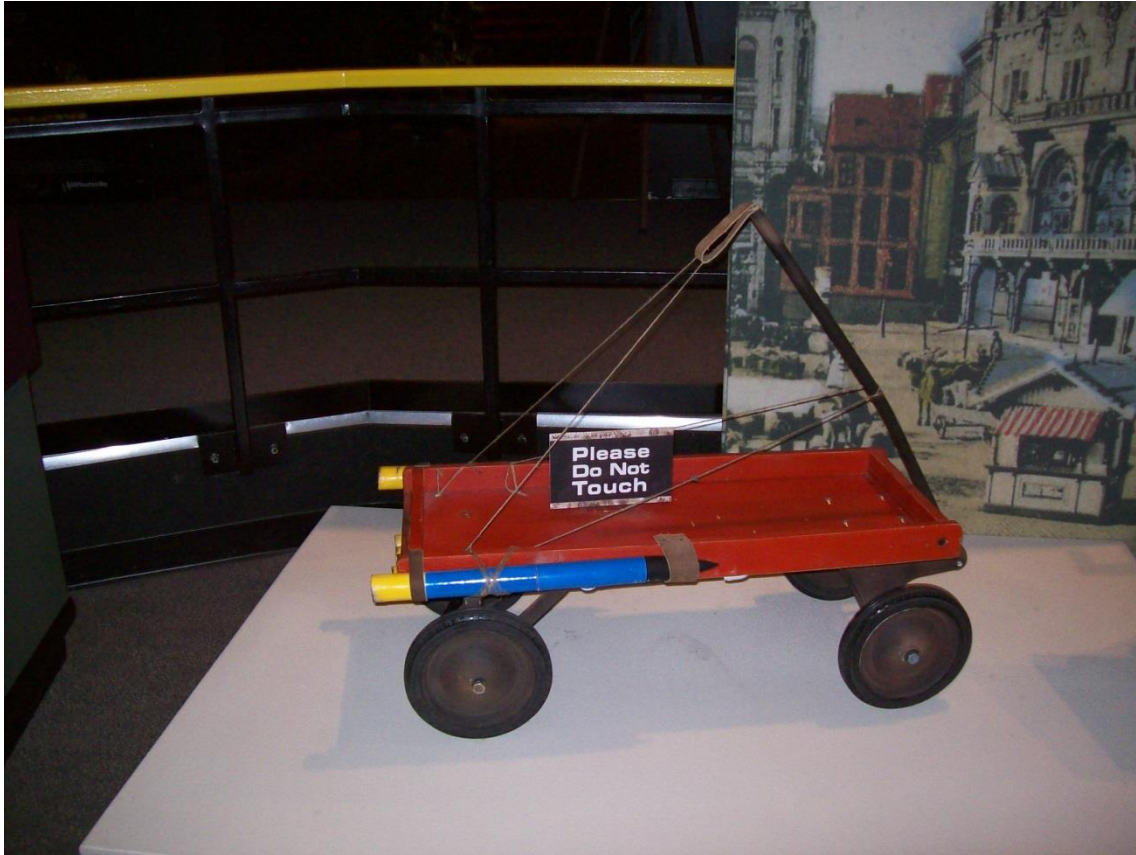
1. Robert Goddard. An American Rocket Scientist who developed the world's first liquid propellant rocket and was tested on March 16, 1926. Dr. von Braun perfected the liquid fueled rocket and went on to develop the multi-stage rocket that went to the moon.
2. Hermann Oberth. The ideas proposed by Oberth became the foundation of von Braun's work. An accomplished amateur musician, who played cello and piano, von Braun initially wanted to become a composer. That all changed

after von Braun read this book authored by fellow German, Hermann Oberth, entitled *“By Rocket Into Interplanetary Space.”* From then on, he applied himself to physics and mathematics to realize his dream of developing rockets for space travel.

3. Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. A Russian Rocket Scientist and is considered to be the “Grandfather of Rocketry.” He predicted the development of rocketry would lead to space flight. The Tsiolkovsky formula or equation is the basis of much of the spacecraft engineering done today.

“ADOLESCENT REBELLION” – VON BRAUN STYLE

Wernher got his start in rocketry at age thirteen by strapping SIX sky rockets to a toy red wagon. When ignited, the wagon raced five blocks into the center of town, with the sky rockets flaming and smoke billowing. At the end of this wild ride, the rockets exploded. The cute little red wagon was a burned wreck. A local policeman nabbed miscreant von Braun for this misdeed. His father reprimanded him and advised him to forget this fascination with rocketry. Thankfully, Wernher ignored his father’s admonition and studied rocketry for the rest of his life.



REPLICA OF THE VON BRAUN'S RED WAGON

WERNHER'S PASSION IGNITES!

Unbelievably, there was a time when Dr. von Braun did not do well in math and physics. It was when he was attending a boarding school at Ettersburg Castle in 1925. His parents then moved him to another boarding school, the Hermann-Lietz-Internat in 1928. It was there that he acquired a copy of *Die Rakete zu den Planetenraumen* (1929) (By Rocket into Interplanetary Space) by rocket pioneer, Hermann Oberth. Space travel fascinated him. From then on he applied himself

to physics and mathematics to pursue his passion of rocket engineering that would to future space travel.

In 1930, von Braun attended the Berlin Institute of Technology. It was here where he joined the *Verein fur Raumschiffahrt* (VfR, the “Spaceflight Society”) and assisted Hermann Oberth and Willy Ley in liquid-fueled rocket motor tests. In 1932, he received a bachelor’s degree in aeronautical engineering. Wanting to know more about, physics, chemistry, and astronomy, von Braun entered the University of Berlin for graduate study and received his PHD in physics in 1934.

CONTROVERSY – A MEMBER OF THE NAZI PARTY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE V2 ROCKET

Adolph Hitler ascended into power in Germany in 1933. Upon completion of his PHD in 1934, Dr. Von Braun began to pursue a career in rocketry development. His dream and deepest passion was to develop rockets that would go into space. As Adolph Hitler’s political power grew, it impacted the life and career of Dr. Von Braun. Yes, he did become a member of the Nazi Party and led the development of the Vengeance Weapon (V2 missile) that killed thousands of people in Europe. Yes, there are American citizens who feel that Dr. Von Braun and his rocket team should have never been allowed to come to the United States. How dare they let these Nazi’s into the country?!? In my opinion, we cannot know the intention of

others until, like the old Native American adage says, we have walked a mile in their moccasins. According to my husband, Adam Martin, PHD, Hitler diverted significant resources to the development of the V2 missile. As a result, there were fewer resources available to fight the Allies in Europe, Africa, and the Soviet Union. This may have enabled us to defeat the Nazi Germany. As I pen these words, it has been almost eighty years since Hitler's rise to power. "What is done is done." We can only work for peace on earth right now.

SURRENDER

With the impending defeat of Germany in the closing months of World War II, Wernher von Braun and his closest colleagues met to discuss which country they should surrender. In von Braun's mind, the one and only choice was the United States of America. Dr. von Braun opined, "The rocket team must surrender to America, the only country whose system of checks and balances would assure that the knowledge of the German Rocket Team would not be used wantonly." The team voted to surrender to America.

Two days before the Russian forces closed in around them in February 1945, von Braun decided to make a break for the American lines. He forged false orders to evacuate the base at Peenemunde. In a convoy of disguised trucks, he moved his team to the village of Oberjoch, in South Germany. Thousands

of pounds of equipment and documents were moved with them.

The Rocket Team only traveled by night to avoid Allied bombing runs. One night, the truck in which von Braun was riding plunged off a cliff. It resulted in the death of the driver and a shattered shoulder and broken arm for von Braun.

In the meantime, the Allied forces began to search for the scientists and engineers behind the Vengeance Weapon, also known as the V2 missile. American and British forces approached from the west and the Soviets from the east. This campaign was known as “Operation Backfire.”

After months of hiding out, Wernher’s younger brother, Magnus, was selected to venture out from their hideout and contact the Americans with a request to surrender to the United States. Magnus recalled, “I was the youngest, spoke the best English, and the most expendable.”



THE BICYCLE MAGNUS VON BRAUN RODE TO SURRENDER TO THE ALLIES

On May 2, 1945, while Magnus was riding his bicycle, he encountered P. Schneikert, PFC 44th Infantry Division and immediately surrendered. Colonel Holger Toftoy later brought von Braun and the rest of the team to the United States.

The top brass in the Army decided they would not permit the relocation of all of the 300 German scientists, as requested by Colonel Holger Toftoy. It was decided that 118 of these scientists would be allowed to come to America. As they were selected, a paperclip was placed on the top of the file of each

man that was chosen. This decision-making process was named “Operation Paperclip.” The scientists eventually became known as “The Paperclip Scientists.”



PHOTO OF “THE PAPERCLIP SCIENTISTS”

Dr. von Braun and his team of Rocket Scientist were transferred to Fort Bliss, Texas.

Next blog: **Dr. Wernher Von Braun – Life in the United States**

References:

The information in this blog was obtained from the 100th Birthday of Dr. Wernher Von Braun's exhibit at the US Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, AL.

Photographs were from the Wernher von Braun exhibit from the US Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, AL