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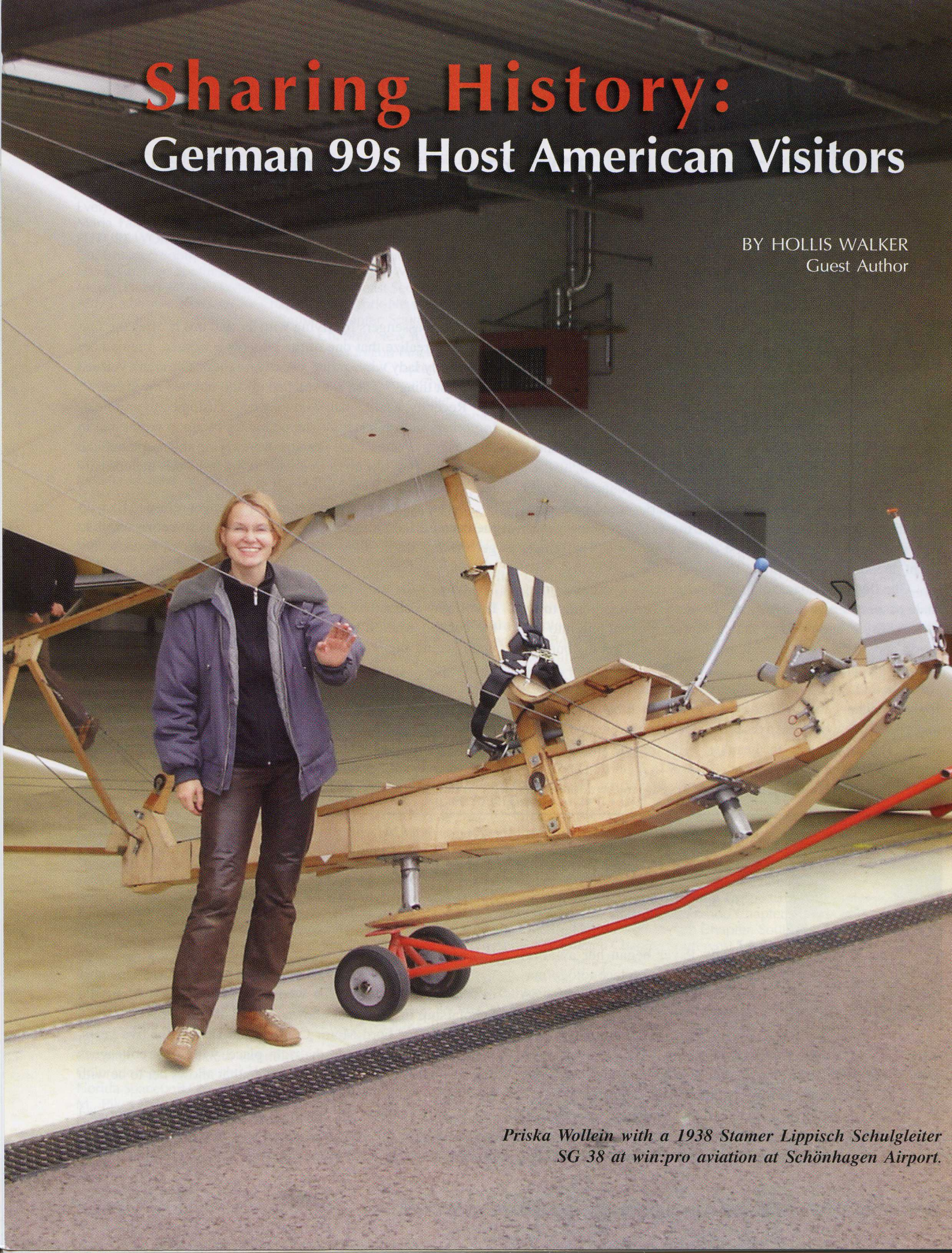
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Sharing History: German 99s Host American Visitors

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Guest Author



*Priska Wollein with a 1938 Stamer Lippisch Schulgleiter
SG 38 at win:pro aviation at Schönhagen Airport.*

We thought we were planning what is probably a typical American vacation in Europe – three weeks in Germany and Spain. Aviation wasn't playing a role in our trip, except of course for our commercial flights: the long round trip from Albuquerque, New Mexico, the nearest airport to our home outside of Santa Fe, and one intracontinental flight from Germany to Spain.

But then Jacque Boyd, a Ninety-Nine in the Rio Grande Norte Chapter, to which my partner and pilot Amy Ecclesine belongs, told Amy to email the German Ninety-Nines Section before our trip. Jacque said she'd emailed Ninety-Nines in the vicinity of her vacations in the past and always managed to meet up with some interesting women pilots.

Amy emailed the Governor of the German Section, explaining that she and her "copilot" (I'm not licensed) would be coming to their country in late October. Would anyone like to meet for coffee?

The response was surprising. Karola Schmorde, the German Section president, promptly wrote back. "Thank you for coming to Germany. I live close to Berlin and two other Ninety-Nines, too..." She passed our email along to other Ninety-Nines, who also wrote back. One, Marion Hof, who happened to be in the States, phoned to say she'd love to connect in Spain, where she would soon be traveling.

Another, Cecilia Rentmeister, a professor of gender studies in Erfurt, told us she would be in Berlin at the same time we would, and asked if either of us were interested in attending a conference of women in science that happened to be occurring while we were there.

We wrote back, promising to be in touch. Once we arrived in Germany, and after a few jet-lagged days in Frankfurt, we made our way to Berlin, showing up at the women in science conference at the German Technical Museum. There we first met Cecilia and her friend Cristina Perincioli, a media producer. Cecilia insisted on being our tour guide to some of the city's museums the next day and said that afterward we would meet for dinner with Karola and Priska Wollein, another Ninety-Nine. The next night the five of us met for a lively dinner full of flying stories.

Cecilia's affection for flying dates to her childhood in the years immediately after World War II. During the 1948-49 Russian blockade of Berlin, Cecilia said she and her mother survived

on food provided by Americans who were part of the Berlin Airlift; the pilots flew supplies into Tempelhof Airport, which had been the Nazi's showcase airfield in Berlin.

Cecilia said she had wanted to learn to fly ever since childhood, but airspace restrictions because of East-West tensions meant one had to travel 200-300 miles away from the border of the two Germanys to take lessons, making it prohibitively expensive. When aviation restrictions eased after the 1990 German reunification, she took flying lessons at Schönhagen Airport, not far from her home in the village of Stöcken. Cecilia earned her license in 1999. She usually flies planes owned by her flight school, most often a tail-dragger '51 Piper Cub or a French four-seater Robin.

Priska, who is co-owner of a graphic design firm in Berlin, also flies out of Schönhagen. She, too, earned her license in 1999. She and her boyfriend Mathias co-own a Stemme motorglider and are also part owners of a Lehrmeister, a 1960 wooden glider built in East Germany.

"Only 101 of them were built, and they destroyed them all to prevent East Germans from escaping to the West," Priska explained.

Two other surviving Lehrmeisters are in museums, but Priska's is the only one flying. It survived because the East Germans had given it to an Austrian Communist flying club in 1962. When she and her boyfriend saw it for sale online, they got into a bidding war with another potential buyer, only to discover through a few phone calls that the other bidder was a Berlin flying club. The solution? They and the club now share ownership of the historic plane.

Ninety-Nines get to know each other over dinner in Berlin: from left, Amy Ecclesine, Rio Grande Norte Chapter, USA; Hollis Walker, article author; German Section Governor Karola Schmorde; and German Section Ninety-Nines Cecilia Rentmeister and Priska Wollein.





German Section Ninety-Nine Priska Wollein shows her Lehrmeister to Amy Ecclesine. It is one of only three Lehrmeisters in existence.

Several years ago, Karola, who works in economic development for Teltow-Flaeming County (known for having the longest continuous inline skating path in Europe – 170 kilometers!) was assigned the job of developing an airfield for her county. “I said to myself, ‘I have to develop an airfield, so I’d better learn something about it,’ ” she said. She began taking flying lessons, and like Cecilia and Priska, she earned her license in 1999. She flies a single-engine 172 owned by the Berlin Bears, the flying club to which she belongs.

The women also told us about the German Section, which formed in 1997 with five members. The group now has 20 members who meet three times a year at different cities throughout the country.

Amy was struck by the fact that German women pilots face challenges quite different from those that she faces. In northern New Mexico, where Amy does much of her flying, air traffic is very light, and the skies are clear about 320 days a year. In contrast, Germany is under cloud cover much more often. And greater Berlin — like much of the country — is densely populated. A number of busy airports, including American and Ger-

man air force bases, mean numerous airspace restrictions. Karola said she often flies into Czechoslovakia and Poland, where the restrictions are fewer, and she has learned how to fly over the Alps and deal with their tricky cloud banks, which can obscure the mountains.

The German pilots also must pay 4 to 5 euros (about \$5 to \$6.50) per landing at most airports. That’s a deterrent to keeping in practice. “It’s a security issue, in my opinion,” Priska said. Hangar costs also are much higher than in the United States and some other countries, they said, which is a deterrent to owning a plane. Therefore most of the pilots they know, including women pilots, are members of flying clubs that buy planes together and share costs of hangars and maintenance. They also said getting a pilots license is expensive, averaging about 10,000 euros (\$13,000).

Our interactions with the German Ninety-Nines didn’t end with dinner, though we had to finally call it a night. The next day we drove to meet Cecilia and Priska at Schönhagen Airport. Cecilia took us up in the Robin, whose Plexiglas cockpit offers spectacular visibility comparable to a helicopter. She received airspace clearance over Berlin, and we had the joy of flying over the

sights we had seen the day before, plus seeing the famous Tempelhof Airport from the air. "We were only 2,000 feet above ground, which gave us a really clear view of everything," Amy recalls. "The flavor of the history, the fact that it had been forbidden for so long — it seemed like an incredible privilege to fly over it."

Back on the ground, we found Priska and her boyfriend with both their gliders. Mathias took up the Stemme, while Priska and some helpers prepared the Lehrmeister for a flight, ultimately towing it to the end of the runway with her Audi wagon. Both got airborne, but alas, the potential of joining her in the Lehrmeister was dashed by weather, and they decided to tow the glider to Tegel Airport and hope for better weather for a later flight there. But for us, an unexpected tour was in store. The manager of the flight school, win:pro aviation, took us on a walk-through of their facilities, including the Charles Lindbergh Lounge, the equivalent of a posh country club bar, complete with Lindbergh and other aviation memorabilia.

That day, the flight school's hangar (so spotless we joked that it had been *licked* clean) held four Cirruses, the '51 Piper Cub and a primitive open-air German wooden glider, a 1938 Stamer Lippisch Schulgleiter SG 38.

We spent a pleasant afternoon at Cecilia and Cristina's home, and Karola joined us later with an *apfelkuchen* (apple cake) she'd made with apples from her own trees. Later the five of us drove to Potsdam and walked across the famous Glienicker Brücke, the "freedom bridge" over the Havel River that separates Potsdam from Berlin and on which spies were exchanged between East and West during the Cold War.

We stayed the night with Karola and her husband Ecki in the beautiful home they restored themselves in the village of Rangsdorf, in what used to be East Germany. (Although Ecki isn't a pilot, he and Amy quickly discovered another love in common — motorcycles.)

The next day our trip resumed, but our Ninety-Nines experience wasn't quite over. Toward the end of our vacation, we met Marion Hof in Valencia, Spain, where she was taking Spanish lessons in an immersion program. Marion, though German, actually lives most of the time on her farm in Kent County, England. As an aviator, she is quite well known internationally. In 1990, with her friend Dr. Angelika Nachinek, she flew an ultralight seaplane into Burry Port, Wales in a quasi-reenactment of Amelia Earhart's 1928 transatlantic flight. She also wrote the first book in

German on Earhart, *Amelia Earhart: First Woman to Fly the Atlantic*. We spent a pleasant evening walking through Valencia, eating tapas and visiting the home where Marion was living during her Spanish tour.

Later, as we told friends about our trip, Amy and I found ourselves time and again talking about our marvelous interactions with the German women pilots — which seemed to outstrip all of our sight-seeing experiences.


Amy has a theory about this: "In life, I think we all belong to a lot of different 'tribes' like our families, our professional groups, our sports teams. The tribes that are hard-won, that are difficult to get into because you have to put a lot of effort into it in the first place, tend to be the ones in which you have more instant connections with people," she said. "Think about those women: all of them have followed their dreams. No one becomes a female pilot by accident. The very nature of The Ninety-Nines is wanting to share that dream, to help other women get there. Going to another country and seeing how they do *their* Ninety-Nines is another extension of that."



Author Hollis Walker, left, with German Section Governor Karola Schmorde and her husband Ecki at their home in Rangsdorf.

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