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Chapter 15

Activities of Former Peenemünders Who Remained in Germany*

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The German rocket development center known as Peenemünde, and a team of the most brilliant German scientists and engineers called the Peenemünders, are well known names in the history of rocketry and astronautics. One reason for this fame is that, during World War II they succeeded in developing and launching the first large guided rocket called V-2 or A-4, and this is considered to be the beginning of a new rocket and astronautics age in the history of humanity.

The Peenemünders, after World War II, were able to continue their rocket research and development work. One group of them went to the U.S.A., another to the U.S.S.R., and still another remained in Germany. All these former Peenemünders contributed greatly to the further development of rocketry and astronautics, especially in the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.

It is not the objective of this presentation to discuss the work and achievements of ex-Peenemünders in the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. Rather, this paper

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discusses the postwar activities of the former Peenemünders who remained in Germany, their organization in Germany, their participation in postwar Germany's missile, rocket, and space programs, as well as in the present German astronomical societies.

The history of rockets can be traced to ancient China, but the real rocket and astronomical age began on a little-known island off the coast of Germany, in the Baltic Sea, at a place called Peenemünde. There, after many unsuccessful experimentations, a group of brilliant German scientists and engineers, known today as the Peenemünders, finally succeeded in launching the first large liquid propellant rocket, called V-2 or A-4, on October 3, 1942.

Dr. Wernher von Braun, at that time a chief scientist in the Peenemünde rocket project, recalls the words of General Dr. Walter Dornberger, military commander of the Peenemünde base: "Do you realize what we accomplished today? Today the space age was born!" Indeed, this date, October 3, 1942, can be considered as the beginning of the astronomical age and, in significance, can be compared with such dates in the history of astronautics as the date of launching of the first satellite, the Soviet Sputnik; the date of orbiting the first man, the Russian Gagarin; or the date of landing the first man on the Moon, the American Neil Armstrong.

After World War II, the ex-Peenemünders were able to continue their rocket research and development work in different countries. One group of them, including such space luminaries as Wernher von Braun, Walter B. Dornberger, Arthur Rudolf, Kurt Debus, Ernst Steinhoff, Eberhard Rees, Walter Häussermann, and many others went to the U.S.A., where they significantly contributed to the development of many great American space projects, such as the Apollo project, Shuttle project, and others. The history of their involvement in the American space effort is excellently presented in many books of today's most prominent and prolific American writer on the subject of space history, Frederick I. Ordway III, especially his outstanding book *The Rocket Team*.

Another group, rather smaller in size, went to the Soviet Union and took part in the initial Soviet space developments, which resulted in producing the first satellite, Sputnik, the first orbital voyage of Gagarin, etc.

Still another group of ex-Peenemünders remained in Germany. Most of them either retired, or they were employed in various nonspace branches of German post-war industry. However, a few of them played an important role in the revival of the national interest in modern space developments by fostering astronomical research in post-war Germany. This was done by organizing the space oriented societies, such as the Hermann-Oberth Society of Germany (HOG), or by assisting in the establishment of astronomical research and development centers, such as ERNO near Bremen and MBB near Munich.

Among those ex-Peenemünders who remained in Germany, the following personalities have been most active and most successful in their space-related activities in Germany:

1. August Frederick Staats, president of HOG. He is well known to international space communities for participating in the IAF world congresses during some 30 years. He is the founder and, by acclaim, re-elected president of HOG from 1952 until 1990. Today he is honorary president of this society. The history of HOG was presented at the 40th IAF Congress in 1989, in Torremolinos, Spain, by Boris Kit, author of this paper.¹ Dr. Staats is a very dynamic and resourceful personality. An outstanding speaker, he displayed powerful and talented leadership in the restoration of post-war German involvement in world space efforts.

Among the many accomplishments of HOG under the presidency of Dr. Staats, the following must be mentioned. HOG, after initially breaking, in post-war Germany, the syndrome of passiveness, contributed significantly to the revival of interest and support for space research. This was accomplished by:

- o Creating a permanent and successful space information center at HOG, at the disposal of members of the society, the general public, and the government;
- o Establishing a center for university students and other qualified young people, which influenced many young enthusiasts in their decision to join the national space research;
- o Maintaining a space liaison center to stay in contact with worldwide space organizations and industries (Internationaler Förderkreis Wernher von Braun/Hermann Oberth);
- o Organizing an international space philatelic center for the promotion of space research;
- o Publishing an outstanding professional periodical, *Astronautik* (for the past 26 years);
- o Establishing the Hermann Oberth Space Museum in Feucht near Nuremberg;
- o Erecting the Wernher von Braun monument on the East-Frisien island of Spickeroog.

For his historical role as president of the HOG for almost 40 years, Dr. Staats is, deservedly, receiving national and worldwide recognition today. In addition to numerous awards from the government and private organizations, Dr. Staats has been especially honored, at his 75th birthday celebration in October 1988, in Hannover, by congratulations from the President and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Minister President of Bavaria, and

many outstanding space research leaders in Germany and abroad.

2. Heinz Grösser, also an ex-Peenemünder who remained in Germany, is known today as the founder of the Society of Ex-Peenemünders. Heinz Grösser, and a few others, initiated this society in November 1967. The originally small number of members grew rapidly and reached the number 60 at the annual meeting of the society in Darmstadt in January 1968. At this time, Hermann Oberth also joined the society, but Wernher von Braun politely declined his membership for political reasons. After 1967, the society was holding its annual meetings in larger cities like Darmstadt, Bayreuth, Friedrichshafen, Salzburg, and many others. The objectives of these meetings were:

- o Preserving, through recollections and documentations, their historical achievements in Peenemünde and informing the world of their significance;
- o Assisting space efforts in Germany in every way possible;
- o Holding together at all times.

The annual meetings of the Society of Ex-Peenemünders continue to this day. The 1991 upcoming meeting will be held in France, and a trip to the location of the former Peenemünde Rocket Center in East Germany is planned for the following year. Today the society has a mailing list of some 4,000 names who are either ex-Peenemünders or friends. The headquarters of this organization is located in Hainberg, near Hanau.

3. It is important to also mention the most distinguished member of this society, Hermann Oberth, one of the greatest pioneers of astronautics. He played, to the end of his life in December 1989, a leading role in the revival of the German national interest in modern space developments. The Hermann-Oberth Society, one of the leading German astronautical societies today, is named after him. This society held space symposia in his honor every year on June 25, his birthday, in his home town of Feucht, near Nuremberg. Furthermore, his 75th (1969), 80th (1974), 85th (1979), 90th (1984), and 95th (1989) birthdays were celebrated with special splendor during the HOG congresses in Salzburg, Austria.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the successful launching of the V-2, also called A-4, the first large liquid propellant rocket in history, and thus marking the beginning of the space age, the society of former Peenemünders is inviting all former Peenemünders and other space celebrities in the world to the historical meeting which will take place on October 3, 1992, at the "Prüf-St. VII" [Test stand VII] in Peenemünde, Germany.

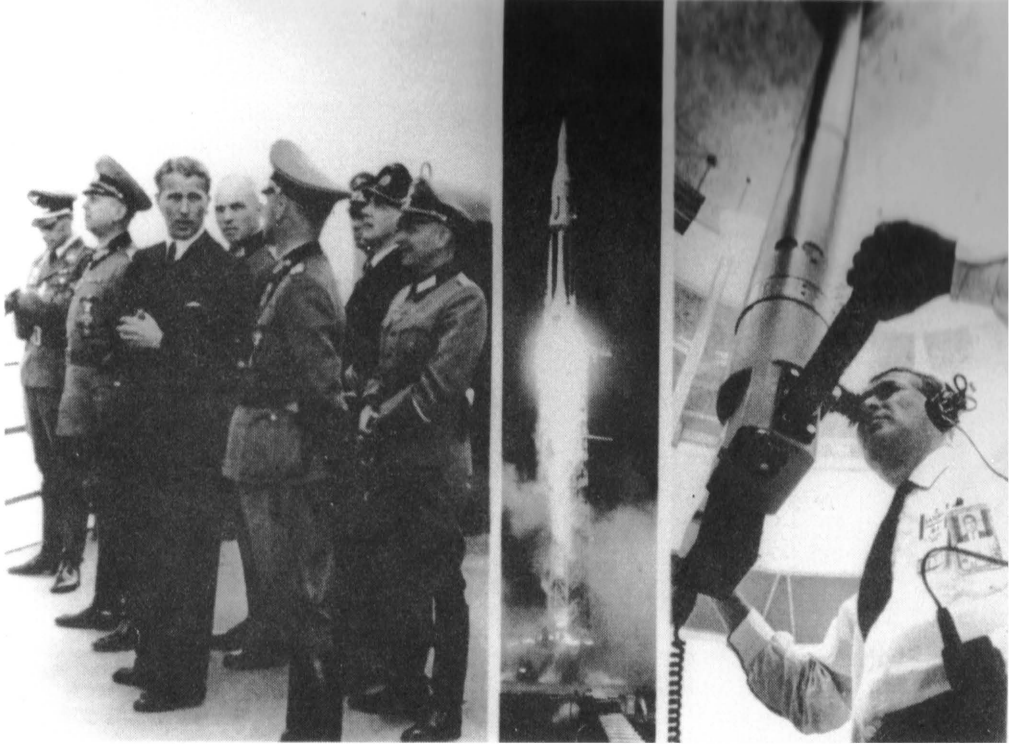


Figure 1 Rocketry and space career of Wernher von Braun, from V-2 rocket launch at Peenemünde, 1943, left, to Saturn I rocket launch at Cape Canaveral, Florida (Alabama Space and Rocket Center photo).

For detailed information please write to: Heinz Grösser, President, Society of former Peenemünders, Roentgenstrasse 4, 6452 Hainburg/Hessen, Germany.

Reference

- ¹Boris Kit, "A Brief History of the German Rocket Society," in *History of Rocketry and Astronautics*, J. Becklake, Ed., *AAS History Series*, Vol. 17, 1995, pp. 217-220 (Paper presented at the 40th IAF Congress held in 1989 in Torremolinos, Spain).