MURDER ON THE
Hindenburg

Hindenburg

STORY BY FLOYD KEMSKE

Murder on the Hindenburg

The first time Klaus von Klinkhofer performed the little trick with his fountain pen, everyone at the table found it very entertaining. As the four diners sat down to eat, Herr von Klinkhofer pulled the pen from the breast pocket of his jacket. He unscrewed the cap, which was flat on the end, and put it over the other end of the pen. He stood the pen in front of his dinner plate. It remained standing on the white linen tablecloth with its gold nib in the air.

"The Hindenburg," he said, "is the smoothest sailing vessel ever built. We are traveling at a speed of eighty miles per hour, and yet there is not enough vibration in this cabin to knock over my fountain pen."

And then he left the fountain pen standing on the table for the duration of the sumptuous meal, all the while declaiming the technical specifications of the airship to his dining companions.

The fountain pen trick was amusing the first night at dinner, but Herr von Klinkhofer repeated it at every meal, and by the fourth performance some of his fellow diners began to find it tiresome. But he was the oldest one at the table, and the people who could afford to travel on the Hindenburg tended to be very polite, so—despite what Herr von Klinkhofer's traveling companions had seen in three previous meals—they all studied the fountain pen as if they were worried it might fall.

"Aren't you afraid we might hit an air pocket?" said the handsome, well-dressed Wolfmann Schwer, who sat next to Herr von Klinkhofer's niece, Ursula.

"Not in the least," said Herr von Klinkhofer. A steward in a light blue jacket came up behind him. Herr von Klinkhofer, like everyone else aboard the Hindenburg, was used to being waited on, and he did not lean aside to accommodate the steward, who swept a dish of consomme around the old man's shoulder and onto the table in front of him with the grace of an April breeze.

"Forgive me, Herr von Klinkhofer," said Schwer, "but just such a misadventure occurred in the first Atlantic crossing of the Graf Zeppelin. Dishes, crockery, and passengers were thrown about the dining room like confetti over a parade."

"Things have changed a lot in eight years, Schwer," said Herr von Klinkhofer. "Weather prediction is much better now. This airship is the Graf Zeppelin's superior in every way. And I remind you that the Graf Zeppelin has made 590 flights, including 144 ocean crossings. It has a record of over one million accident-free miles."

"Only if you don't count the dishes broken in 1928." Schwer turned to Ursula. "If it happens to us, you may need to rely on your gymnastics skills, Fräulein von Klinkhofer."

Two months previous, Ursula von Klinkhofer had taken a bronze medal at the Berlin Olympics, and the newspapers had published breathless stories about her, marveling at the surprising feats performed by this "slip of a girl."

It was not the first time Schwer had attempted to include Ursula in the conversation. But she would not be drawn in. Sullen and withdrawn, the "slip of a girl" studied a color postcard of the Hindenburg's promenade deck. She could have seen the real thing if she would look up from the table, for the promenade deck ran along the dining room. But studying the postcard with murderous intensity prevented her from having to look at her uncle, the sight of whom made her want to pick him up and throw him across the room. Certainly her performance at the Olympics showed she had the balance, strength, and agility to do it.

The steward began setting before them plates of sole topped with a dollop of a delicate sauce concocted by the Hindenburg's incomparable chef.

"When will we make landfall?" Schwer asked.

"The Captain says we're fighting a headwind, sir." The steward set a

dish on the table in front of Schwer. "But we should wake up in the morning over Newfoundland."

"How large would you say the airship is, Father?" Franz von Klinkhofer asked the question as if he didn't already know the answer.

"She's 804 feet," said Herr von Klinkhofer to his son. "Just 78 feet shorter than the ocean liner Titanic. She has a turning radius of four-fifths of a mile, and above our heads, there are gas bags holding seven million cubic feet of buoyant hydrogen gas."

Franz nodded as if it impressed him to hear the same specifications enumerated for the ninth time. Over the course of his 23 years, Franz had become adept at hiding his real feelings from his father, for whom he had neither affection nor respect. The small enameled swastika the old man wore on his lapel was for Franz the emblem of everything deplorable in his father. Franz was the heir to von Klinkhofer's considerable estate and a beneficiary (with his cousin Ursula) of a rather extravagant life insurance policy the old man had purchased just before their departure from Friedrichshafen.

Franz looked at the yellow rose on the table. It made him think about his friends, Hans and Sophie Scholl. He had met the brother and sister at school in Munich, where they "published" a private literary journal called The White Rose, which they circulated among their close friends. Dedicated to the overthrow of the Nazis, they hoped one day to print anti-government leaflets and distribute them all over Germany. Franz thought about how many leaflets his father's fortune could produce. The Nazis had outlawed political opposition in Germany, and now they had put the country on a war footing. But the people could still be persuaded of the truth. Somehow, it was poetic justice that The White Rose would benefit from the fortune amassed by the chief provisioner of the German Army, the millionaire clothier Klaus von Klinkhofer.

"Just this May," continued Herr von Klinkhofer, "this airship broke the record for an Atlantic crossing, at 78 hours, 30 minutes."

Herr von Klinkhofer was extremely well-informed about the Hindenburg. But then, as a businessman, he had always been a conservative investor. And before committing $400 to a one-way ticket for Lakehurst, New Jersey, he had apparently researched the zeppelin as carefully as he would have investigated the balance sheet of a company in which he wanted to buy shares of common stock.

Franz looked at his father's fountain pen as if expecting it to fall. It stood as straight as the stem of the wineglass next to it.

"Franz, I want to give you something." The old man reached into his pocket.

"What is it, father?"

Herr von Klinkhofer pushed toward his son several sheets of printed material bound in a pasteboard jacket. "It's the insurance policy. You should hold it." He looked over toward the open windows at the promenade deck. "In case anything happens to me."

Franz stared at the insurance policy. He did not touch it. He did not want to seem eager. "Don't talk like that, Father."

"Don't you think you've had enough to drink?" said the elder von Klinkhofer.

Franz did not answer, but turned to the handsome Schwer, who was smiling as if they shared a joke.

"Tell me, Lieutenant Schwer," said Franz. "Are you at liberty to discuss why the Gestapo has assigned someone to this zeppelin flight?"

"Indeed," said Schwer. "We've had reports there may be an attempt at sabotage by anti-government partisans. The largest swastika in the world appear on the tail of the Hindenburg. This airship is a symbol of party power, and it would be a serious matter if saboteurs were to damage it."

"Wouldn't it be easier to catch them if you kept your identity as a Gestapo officer secret?" said Franz.

"I am not so interested in catching them," said Schwer, "as I am interested in simply preventing embarrassments of the government." He turned to Ursula, as if she had spoken. "The Gestapo is not all gorillas in ill-fitting suits, my dear girl. Some of us are just very fond of good order."

Ursula felt her face flush at the expression "my dear girl," and it reminded her of the purpose of this trip, which was never far from her mind. She was accompanying her uncle to America as the victim of an arranged marriage. She had never met her intended husband and knew him only as the scion of a dry cleaning dynasty whose family had emigrated to the United States from Germany when her uncle was a little boy.

Ursula had not wanted to be a party to the arrangement, and she did not want to leave Germany or her fiance, Stefan, the manager of her father's factory. But she had not yet attained the age of majority, and her uncle, as her guardian, had authority over her. He had forced her to break off her engagement with Stefan for social reasons, and now he was forcing her to marry a dry cleaner. Where was the social justice in that?

Ursula hated her uncle for taking her on this trip, and she hated him for intervening in her love affair with Stefan. She had begun to wish her uncle would encounter a mishap on this trip. She did not hope for a big mishap. She didn't want the airship to explode or anything like that. She wanted just a small one, say a stroke that would render her uncle incapable of speech or a bad batch of foie gras that would give him a stomachache leading to a coma. She spun her fantasies as she stared at her postcard. Daylight poured through the windows on to the red velvet settees. She looked up at the same deck, not fifteen feet distant. It was dark out, but the windows were all open, for it was a pleasant night over the Atlantic. The ocean was about two-tenths of a mile below them, and she could walk over to the window right now and look down and perhaps see whales swimming below in the moonlight.

The crew kept the windows of the zeppelin open when the weather was temperate, for the air was refreshing. That is what they said, anyway. In truth, however, they liked to show off a cabin so well designed and constructed that even at the speed of eighty miles per hour, the wind noise was less than a whisper.

Schwer noticed Ursula's gaze and wondered what was going on in her mind. Did she know her uncle was in contact with the enemies of the state? Did she suspect the Gestapo knew he was trying to escape to the United States with his family and his money?

He doubted she suspected any of these things. He doubted Franz von Klinkhofer suspected anything, either. In fact, Klaus von Klinkhofer was all Schwer had to worry about this trip. He had satisfied himself that there were no saboteurs on this voyage. There was only this pitiful old man, who had sold his principal assets and taken from his bank account as much money as he could take without drawing the attention of the police. And now he was trying to get to America with his son, his niece, and his booty, which he kept in a small box in his cabin. Before the end of this voyage, Herr von Klinkhofer was going to learn that for those who betrayed the Fatherland, there was no escape from the Third Reich. For Schwer, the old man's lesson would be profitable, for when the policeman reclaimed the assets of the Reich from this old man, he would subtract his commission before turning it over to the authorities. The old man could testify to the amount, of course, but Schwer was confident of his ability to persuade him to silence. Not everyone in the Gestapo was a gorilla in an ill-fitting suit. Some of them knew how to dress.

Schwer had been given this assignment by his Captain as a sort of working vacation. Chasing college students around Munich had taken its toll on him. The students, who published a supposed literary journal whose intent was to overthrow the government, were surprisingly shrewd. Every time Schwer thought he had found the journal's publishers, he was left empty-handed. Six months of that and he was feeling played out, overmatched. His Captain, sensing a difficult situation for one of his best and most ruthless detectives, had sent the Lieutenant on the Hindenburg to watch for saboteurs. Catching someone with a bomb is a lot more clearcut than catching someone with a hectograph.

So here he was with no saboteurs in sight. He had nothing to do but relax. This truly was a vacation.

Schwer had to admit to himself he had not had a better or more enjoyable assignment since joining the Gestapo. The Hindenburg had two passenger decks, both completely enclosed within the great hull of the ship. Passengers boarded via a retractable staircase into B Deck, the lower of the two. B Deck had a shower bath, crew and officers' mess, lavatories, nine passenger cabins, a bar, and a smoking room. The smoking room was utterly unique, and the Hindenburg was the only airship in the entire fleet of Zeppelin Rederei to have one. The only place in the entire airship one could smoke, it had an airlock door and positive pressure to prevent any of the dirigible's highly flammable hydrogen from getting in. In the smoking room, there was an electric cigarette lighter, the only one in the ship, fastened to the wall by a cable. In the smoking room, you could watch the scenery through a plexiglass window in the floor.

Up the steps from B Deck was A Deck and its 25 double-berthed cabins. Each cabin included a wardrobe, folding writing table, folding stool, and folding washstand with hot and cold running water. All cabins had forced-air ventilation and heat. Outboard of the cabins were the public rooms--the writing room and lounge on one side and the dining room and promenade deck on the other. There were long banks of windows on the hull sides of these rooms, and when they weren't eating, the passengers spent most of their time sitting or standing at these windows, because the view from the Hindenburg's cruising altitude was nothing short of spectacular, no matter what was below. The inboard dining room walls were decorated with murals of the Graf

Zeppelin, the Hindenburg's famous predecessor, in South America. The writing room had pneumatic letter tubes to deliver passengers' letters to the mail room.

The closest of the powerful engines were 90 feet to the rear. As long as no one was playing the specially-built aluminum grand piano in the lounge, the loudest sounds you could hear in the passenger area were conversation and the occasional clink of silverware laid by a steward in too much of a hurry .

For a passenger manifest of no more than 68, the Hindenburg carried a crew of up to 50, 15 of whom were quiet and unobtrusive stewards and cooks who ministered to the needs of the passengers. And minister they did! Meals were served on stiff white tablecloths under fresh flower arrangements, with silver cutlery and white porcelain specially designed for the ship and bearing the trademark of the Deutsche Zeppelin Reederei--the German Zeppelin Line. A given day in the air might feature duckling for lunch, sole and venison for dinner, and French and German vintage wines, including Moselles, Rhines, and Champagnes. In the smoking room, there was a bar where one could get any of a number of cocktails mixed expertly by a steward, including a gin-and-orange juice number called the "LZ 129 Frosted Cocktail," LZ 129 being the model designation of the Hindenburg.

The Hindenburg's claim to fame was its unbelievably short two-day Atlantic crossing. But no passenger ever arrived in Lakehurst, New Jersey without wishing the trip had lasted longer.

Klaus von Klinkhofer, however, was the exception to this rule. Every minute of the trip was excruciating to him, relieved only by the occasional opportunity to share his knowledge of the great airship with the people around him. He loved this airship; it was a symbol of German greatness. But he had far different feelings about the Nazis, who had appropriated it for their propaganda purposes by painting the great swastikas on the tail.

Von Klinkhofer was glad his wife, Franz's mother, had not lived to see what the Nazis had done to Germany, with their ridiculous mass rallies and their persecution of everyone they deemed to be insufficiently German. Von Klinkhofer had gone along with everything, made his fortune provisioning the new Nazi army, in fact. But when they came and took Stefan to prison—not for doing anything wrong but for the sound of his last name and the religion of his ancestors—the old man had finally realized he had to get out of Germany. He concocted a story of an arranged marriage so he could make his orphaned niece come with him, and he knew his son—who hated him—would come along just to keep an eye on his inheritance. There would be time enough to explain it all to them in America, and for now the less they knew, the better for them.

He hoped that he and his family were on their way to a new life, but his complicity with the Nazis still troubled him—so much so that he had actually gone to the writing room and written a letter explaining it all to Ursula. It was a letter he wanted her to have if he found the opportunity to take his own life. He would need to find a particular opportunity, for he must make it look like an accident if the children were to benefit from the insurance.

There was a pause in the conversation, and the four diners sat in silence, each wondering if any of the others had any inkling just whom they were traveling with.

Herr von Klinkhofer withdrew the envelope with Ursula's letter from the inside pocket of his jacket and unobtrusively laid it on the table. It was not addressed. He felt sure someone would open it if it were found after his death. The letter was his last chance to persuade Ursula of the truth. The girl was active, with all her friends, in the Party's youth branch. Von Klinkhofer knew she would reconsider her Party loyalty when she learned that he'd broken up her engagement with Stefan for her own protection. The man was already in the clutches of the Gestapo and beyond their help. If she had known the truth, she would have gone to Gestapo headquarters to try to free him, and that would have called attention to von Klinkhofer and his escape plans. The old man cast his glance over toward the open windows along the promenade deck.

"I wonder if you all would excuse me," he said. "I would like to get some air." He rose and weaved slightly on his feet. He felt alert, but the whole thing would look better if they all thought him a little drunk.

Franz von Klinkhofer glanced at the open windows and saw in them an invitation. He looked back at his father. "May I join you?"

"Please don't," said the old man. "I prefer to be alone." He turned and walked unsteadily toward the promenade deck.

The Chief Steward looked in on the dining room to make sure things were proceeding smoothly. He saw Herr von Klinkhofer walking unsteadily toward the empty promenade deck. The man probably needed some air. The Chief Steward went back into the galley and told the table steward that the von Klinkhofer table appeared ready for dessert.

"They haven't had time to eat their entree yet," said the steward.

"Do as you're told," said his chief.

At the von Klinkhofer table, the three remaining passengers sat quietly.

"I could do with a cigarette." Franz rose, not much more gracefully than the old man, and looked at his father, who was leaning against the window frame and looking downward. Franz turned and headed in the opposite direction toward the stairs to B Deck.

Schwer watched von Klinkhofer at the windows. He turned to Ursula. "Would you care for some piano music?"

"No," she said to the untouched fish on her plate.

"I would," he said, "and I don't know how to play. You would make my life complete by playing the Moonlight Sonata just once."

The man was very charming. And the Moonlight Sonata was her best piece.

"If you insist," she said.

Schwer rose and held her chair while she stood. Then he led her toward the piano lounge on the opposite side of the airship.

The steward came upon the empty table and would have sighed aloud if he hadn't thought it might be unseemly. They had left their food virtually untouched again. These four people must all have a lot on their minds. He began to stack the dishes along his arm when he noticed the envelope. It was unsealed and unaddressed. Gratuities were forbidden on the Hindenburg, but a man has to feed his family. He put down the dishes and pulled open the flap of the envelope. Inside was nothing but a one-page letter that began "My dear niece Ursula." The steward dropped the letter back on the table without reading any further and hurriedly began to pick up dishes. He could hear the soft notes of the Moonlight Sonata from the grand piano in the lounge. He stacked the dishes up his arm and hurried away.

As he was leaving the dining room, he nearly collided with the younger Herr von Klinkhofer, who had apparently had too much to drink. His face was flushed, and he was in the process of removing his double-breasted jacket, which was not permitted in the dining room. But the steward was so embarrassed for having looked at a passenger's private letter that he said nothing and took himself out of the dining room right away.

But before he reached the galley, he encountered the charming Lieutenant Schwer, who appeared bound for the table as well. The steward regretted then having cleared the dishes.

"Did the Lieutenant wish to finish his dinner?" He held out one of the plates of sole.

Schwer looked at him with disgust. "Take it away."

The steward hurried away.

In the piano lounge, Ursula was nearing the Allegretto, always the hardest part, for her, of the sonata. She looked around and saw that she was alone in the lounge. Lieutenant Schwer had left. She stopped playing. She realized she was alone. Perhaps she could find her uncle on the promenade deck.

The steward was still smarting from his mistake in opening the unaddressed letter in the dining room. Furthermore, he knew the passengers at that table would return, find the letter out of its envelope, and realize he had done it. He decided to go to the Chief Steward and make a clean breast of what he'd done.

The Chief Steward heard his story in stony silence. When it was done, he spoke softly but firmly.

"You are restricted from passenger areas for the rest of this voyage. Report to the head of maintenance for cleaning assignments in the crew areas. I will explain to the passengers at the Klinkhofer table what has happened."

The steward slunk away, and the Chief Steward started toward the dining room. As he was making his way past the galley, he thought he heard a faint cry, like that of a frightened man, from a great distance away. He wondered if his ears weren't playing tricks on him. He stopped and looked about the galley but found nothing but the airship's two cooks busy with dessert preparations.

In the dining room, he saw three of the passengers assigned to the Klinkhofer table seated before their empty places. Two of them looked quite pale. The way the young woman studied her postcard so closely, it was as if she did not want to look anyone in the face. The young man, flushed and in his shirtsleeves, looked as if he had something to hide. The third person at the table turned to the Chief Steward as he approached.

"Champagne, please," said Lieutenant Schwer.

The Chief Steward looked at the table, which was beautifully set with a single yellow rose in a bud vase and gold-trimmed dishes of the Deutsche

Zeppelin Reederei collection. There were papers there. One appeared to be a handwritten letter, another was some kind of insurance policy. And there was a fountain pen lying there. He watched in horror as an ink stain from the tip of the pen began to spread across the white linen.

Lieutenant Schwer saw what he was looking at and reached over to the pen. He was already holding something, and he opened his hand and looked in it as if seeing what he was holding for the first time. Then he dropped the item on the table, a small piece of jewelry of some sort, and reached over to take the pen, which he then stood on end on the table. He smiled at the pen.

"And a chilled glass as well," he said.

Just then, the first airship engineer entered the dining room. The Chief Steward had never seen an engineer in the passenger dining room before. The man beckoned to him, and he excused himself.

"Has anyone dropped a large object from the promenade deck?" he said. "The crewman attending the forward engine to starboard says he saw a large object drop from the window."

"Keep your voice down," said the Chief Steward. "You will alarm the passengers."

"We shall want to alarm them if they are dropping things from this airship," said the engineer self-righteously.

"Well I believe Herr von Klinkhofer is the only one who has been near the windows for the past half hour." The Chief Steward looked over at the windows, but there was no one there at all. He turned back to the engineer. "Please report to the Captain. I think there has been an accident."

Was there an accident? If you assemble the puzzle successfully, you may be able to see the clues that will tell you. But be careful. The puzzle picture is not the same as the picture on the box, and—like this story—it will not give you all the information you need. Only the puzzle and the story can give you that.

Solution: *Now assemble the puzzle and see if you can learn what happened to Herr von Klinkhofer and who was responsible for it...*

(To read solution hold booklet up to a mirror)

Everyone at the von Klinkhofer table, including the victim himself, had the motive, the opportunity, and the ability to murder Klaus von Klinkhofer.

Filled with remorse for his contribution to Nazi success, the old man wanted to take his own life, and he actually contemplated doing so when he walked over to the windows on the promenade deck. Who could say if he wasn't just a passenger with a little too much to drink who, trying to get a better view, leaned too far out the window? At their cruising altitude of 800 feet, the fall would take less than half a minute, and then he would reach some kind of peace, especially knowing that his son and his niece were handsomely provided for by his small estate and the insurance policy.

These were the thoughts that were going through his head when Franz von Klinkhofer returned to the dining room and sat down at the table to take a drink of wine and summon the courage to go to the promenade deck and throw his father from the window in the name of The White Rose and a remaining shred of German decency. But as Franz took the sip of wine, he saw the letter the steward had left on the table, and he read it. It was a confession by his father to Franz's cousin, Ursula. In it, he explained that he was against the Nazis and he felt that taking her and his son away from Germany and the Party was the best thing he could do for his little family.

While he was reading the letter, Lieutenant Schwer entered the dining room and went directly to the promenade deck.

Franz got to the end of the letter. His father had decided to commit suicide! Franz looked up from the letter in a panic, filled with remorse for his own desire to kill the old man, who turned out not to be such a villain after all. He looked up from the letter and saw Ursula, who was heading for the

promenade deck. He called to her.

"I think you should read this."

Ursula came over and sat down to read the letter, and Franz rose to go to the promenade deck and stop his father from jumping. But as he stood, he heard a faint and distant cry. He saw Schwer approaching the table, smiling.

"Sit down," said Schwer. There was steel in his voice.

Franz sat.

Ursula, who had finished reading the letter, looked up, and it was plain from her expression that she was racked with contradictory emotions.

The Chief Steward approached their table, and Schwer turned to him.

"Champagne, please," said the Gestapo man. "And a chilled glass as well."

Then the Chief Steward gasped at the ink stain on the tablecloth, which had started when the fountain pen fell over.

Schwer reached over to stand the pen up again and seemed to realize for the first time there was something in his hand. He opened his hand and dropped the object on the table. It was Klaus von Klinkhofer's enameled swastika. Bits of serge material were still fastened to the back of it, having been torn from the old man's jacket when Schwer took him by the lapels and threw him out the window.

It was not the first murder committed by the thugs of the Gestapo. It would not be the last.

Epilogue

It actually was possible to stand a fountain pen on end in the dining room of the cruising Hindenburg. Harold G. Dick, who traveled on the airship many times, claims to have done the trick repeatedly. The famous incident of the flying crockery that Wolfmann Schwer describes on the Graf

Zeppelin was the result of a crewman's overcompensation against a downdraft with a horizontal fin. Airship crews prided themselves on the smoothness with which they piloted their enormous crafts.

It is also true that the windows were generally open along the promenade deck of the Hindenburg. Passengers could relax on the settees there and read, or they could look out and see the surface moving below at a stately pace while the airship cruised at eighty miles per hour.

The magnificent, unique passenger vessel that was the Hindenburg burned up a year later in May, 1937, at Lakehurst, New Jersey, when its buoyant hydrogen mysteriously took flame and incinerated the entire airship in thirty-seven seconds. Surprisingly, only thirty-five passengers and crew were killed. Sixty-two survived the accident, most of them walking away from the conflagration. Two boards of inquiry, an American and then a German, looked into the source of the accident, but neither produced a satisfactory explanation. The German government, in the hands of the Nazis, fearing the appearance of vulnerability, forbade any discussion of sabotage. Some modern scholars believe sabotage is the only possible explanation for the fire. But some say it was static electricity. One thing is certain the accident, captured on newsreel, was one of the most spectacular events recorded on film up to that time. The film of the flaming airship was shown all over the world in a very short time. Unintentionally effective as propaganda, it turned public sentiment against airship travel forever.

The Nazis, who had so haughtily appropriated the elegant airship to their purposes by painting great swastikas on its tailfins, met a fate similar to that of the Hindenburg eight years later.