

Murder on the Hindenburg

By Fabrizio Altieri

“Oh, the humanity!”

Radio announcer Herbert Morrison
upon witnessing the Hindenburg go up in flames,
May 6th, 1937

Chapter 1

The greatest adventure of our life

Frankfurt, Germany

May 3rd 1937

Astrid and Olmo Altmaier hadn't slept one bit. The image of the world's largest airship, the Hindenburg, had etched itself into their minds, keeping them awake as if a blinding light had been shining on their faces all night long. They welcomed the dawn as a salvation and sprang like grasshoppers out of bed.

Their mother was already in the living room:

"Eat everything—who knows when you'll get your next meal".

Their father, from behind the newspaper, grumbled:

"They're not going to explore the polar ice caps, Martha. They're boarding the most luxurious and safest airship in the world".

Grandma Gertrud chimed in:

"That's what they said about the Titanic too".

"Gertrud!" said the mother.

"Grandma" Astrid's voice was patient, "there aren't any icebergs in the sky that can hit you." But Gertrud didn't give up.

"That thing is full of hydrogen. One little spark and... boom!" she spread her hands and puffed out her cheeks to simulate the explosion in which her beloved grandchildren would be burned alive, and then she fell silent, satisfied.

Their father closed the newspaper with a sharp snap:

"I'm going to warm up the engine. I'll wait for you in the car" he said and left.

He didn't want to show it, but he was also worried about that trip that would take his children across the ocean to meet the branch of the family living in Philadelphia.

The only ones who weren't worried were the two kids.

"What an adventure, can you imagine?" Astrid had said to Olmo when they first heard about the trip. "We'll fly over the Atlantic Ocean on the Hindenburg airship all the way to the United States!" And Olmo, too excited to speak, had just stood there with his mouth open in awe, a small bubble of drool forming and popping right on the tip of his nose.

When they got into the car with their Dad, Mum, and Grandma, they truly believed they were the luckiest kids in the world.

Things wouldn't turn out quite that way.

Chapter 2

The imprisoned giant

Dad followed the directions of the uniformed staff to the car parking lot.

“So many of them!” exclaimed Olmo. It wasn’t easy to see that many cars all at once. Plus, they were all luxury cars, unlike theirs.

“They must be very rich, those who can afford a ticket on the Hindenburg” Dad muttered. “Except us” Grandma Gertrud added. It was true. The tickets for Olmo and Astrid had been gifted by their American relatives, who were doing very well.

“Aunt Virginia was very kind to pay for your tickets just to see you again” Mom said, giving Grandma Gertrud a sharp look. Gertrud didn’t flinch:

“Well, since she’s so rich, she could have paid for me too. Anyway, I wouldn’t have gone—I’d rather die in my own bed than become a human torch in the sky”.

The airship wasn’t visible, hidden inside a huge hangar. The five of them walked toward the entrance, following the flow of travelers and their relatives. Many languages could be heard besides German. French, Italian, Spanish, and American voices were raised, excited by the imminent departure of a journey everyone would remember forever. The excitement was like an electric snake moving through the crowd, weaving back and forth.

When they entered the hangar, everyone fell silent, as if stepping into a sacred place. The Hindenburg was the most imposing object they had ever seen. It was tied to the ground with enormous ropes that, compared to its majesty, looked like thin threads of spider drool, making one wonder how they could hold such a colossus. Yet it stood still, a prisoner like the giant Gulliver tied up by tiny little men. Everyone looked at it as if it really were something from another universe, an incredible spectacle.

“I... don’t...” Olmo began but stopped, speechless.

“Goodness, it really is huge” Dad remarked, taking off his pipe before his mouth opened in amazement and made it fall.

“It looks like a whale, only floating in the air” Astrid said. Olmo found his voice again:

“It’s only twenty-four meters shorter than the Titanic.”

“Precicely” Grandma Gertrud concluded.

Chapter 3

A peculiar luggage

Astrid and Olmo queued to get their luggage checked. Two uniformed staff accurately examined every suitcase, making no exceptions.

“They do it for security” their Dad said.

“Right, there’s also the risk of an attack, in addition to everything else” added Grandma Gertrud. They heard a horn sound and the roar of an engine and the crowd opened to let a sports car pass through.

“Make way, make way!” the driver shouted before slamming on the brakes with a screech that made their skin crawl. The driver was a young man, elegantly dressed in leather like an aviator, with pilot goggles and a leather cap as well as the gloves. He jumped out of the expensive car and ran to the passenger door to open it. A young woman stepped out, a very elegant and very beautiful woman. She was blond and she was smoking a thin cigarette almost as if she was bothered by it.

“Hey, you can’t drive up here with a car” protested a man in line. The pilot smiled in a way that sparked sympathy and a few blushes among the young women who had witnessed that unusual arrival.

“Sir, we have permission” he replied to the man, a gruff Frenchman dressed like a dandy.

The man insisted:

“Oh, really? On what grounds, if I may ask?”

“Just wait a few minutes, and you’ll see.”

Everyone was curious to find out what would happen next, and even the baggage check attendants paused to watch. A team of mechanics in jumpsuits arrived and began to harness the car with ropes and chains. When the team leader gave the signal, with a clatter of metal the car began to rise toward the belly of the airship.

“Good heavens” said Dad, “they’re loading it on board!” The Frenchman who had spoken now fell silent, following the car with his eyes as it rose and disappeared into a compartment of the dirigible.

“Hooray!” shouted Olmo. That scene had thrilled him. After a few seconds, other cheers followed, and finally the whole crowd broke into applause. Except for the French gentleman.

Chapter 4

Welcome to the Hindenburg

The pilot and the woman skipped the line and boarded. But before stepping inside, she was stopped and asked to put out her cigarette in an ashtray handed to her by an attendant.

“Well done, one can’t smoke next to a hydrogen-filled bomb” remarked Grandma Gertrud.

Once all the luggage had been loaded, it was time for Astrid and Olmo to say goodbye to their parents and grandmother. Their father, frowning, took out his pipe and hugged Astrid, then Olmo. Their mother kissed them, and even Grandma Gertrud seemed moved.

“Who knows if we’ll see each other again” was all she said. A marching band suddenly began playing, taking everyone by surprise. When the music ended, a man in dark formalwear gave a brief speech, declaring that the Zeppelin LZ 129 Hindenburg was not only a milestone for Germany but for all of humanity, a symbol of hope and aspiration to overcome limits. He concluded:

“Hindenburg, may your journey be safe and an inspiration to all dreamers!”

Everyone applauded, except Grandma Gertrud.

Once the passengers were on board, the family members were led out of the hangar to watch the departure.

The Hindenburg was pulled outside and finally released. It dumped thousands of liters of ballast water to lighten the load and began to rise. From the large windows on the main deck, Astrid and Olmo could see their Dad waving his pipe, their Mum waving with one hand while wiping away tears with the other, and their Grandma waving her white handkerchief and shaking her head, convinced this would be the last time she saw her grandchildren. Soon, the crowd waving goodbye became tiny dots, then a blurry smudge, until everything outside turned white.

“We’re inside a cloud, Olmo” Astrid whispered. She spoke softly, afraid of disturbing the cloud, of breaking the enchantment.

Olmo stared at the white fluff, still unable to believe they were flying. The silence was nearly complete; only the faint hum of the engines and the passengers’ hushed voices could be heard.

The whispering atmosphere was broken by the chime of a bell.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please.” The speaker was a tall man with a white goatee, wearing an officer’s uniform.

“The captain welcomes you aboard the Zeppelin LZ 129 Hindenburg, the largest airship in the world. I’m Leonard Spock, your flight purser, and I’ll give you a quick overview of this magnificent aircraft.” He waited for complete silence before continuing: “We are currently on Deck A. This deck features a promenade and a lounge on each side of the airship. The angled windows allow you to enjoy the view during the journey. Your cabins are located at the center of the ship, while below, on Deck B, you’ll find the restrooms, kitchens, and a pressurized smoking room equipped with the only lighter permitted on board”. Someone huffed loudly, Olmo saw it was the blonde woman who had arrived in the car.

“I want my lighter back. It’s gold, and you had no right to take it!” she said angrily. Spock gave an awkward smile:

“Dear miss, it will be returned to you as soon as we land in Lakehurst. In the meantime, it is safe in the captain’s vault.” The woman, annoyed, turned and left the room toward the cabin area.

Spock, after a brief pause, resumed in a cheerful tone:

“If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask me or any member of the crew. A small welcome buffet has been set up in the dining hall on the opposite side of Deck A. Enjoy your flight!”

The passengers made their way to the dining hall, pretending at first to be mildly interested in the refreshments. But after a moment, they threw themselves at the sandwiches and drinks with abandon, as if that were their last meal before a catastrophic event.