

SEEING THROUGH CLOUDS

THE STORY OF AN AIRSHIP APPRENTICE

by PAUL LAGASSE

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DEDICATION

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GERMAN WORDS USED IN THIS BOOK

Direktor: Director; in this book, another term for school principal.

Doktor: Doctor

Frau: Mrs.

Fraulein: Miss.

Gestapo: The Nazi government's secret police force.

Herr: Mister.

Kapitän: Captain.

Luftwaffe: The German air force.

Meister: Master. This is a term of friendship and respect that indicates a person's status as a master craftsman.

Onkel: Uncle.

Tante: Aunt.

CHAPTER 1

The news of the *Hindenburg* crash didn't just make Erich Lindemann's miserable day worse. It changed his whole life.

The day had started off badly enough. Instead of stopping at his friend Rudi Schnabel's house on the way to school as he did every day, Erich impulsively decided to keep walking, pausing only to shift his book bag to the other shoulder.

For a few moments he thought he had gotten away with it. But then he heard the rapid slapping of shoes on concrete behind him, coming closer.

"Lindemann!" a voice panted from behind. "Hey! Wait up!"

Erich turned back to look but did not stop. He saw that Rudi was running frantically, his schoolbag flapping like a broken wing atop his brown Hitler Youth uniform.

"Why didn't you stop, Lindemann?" Rudi wheezed when he caught up to Erich. "Did you expect me to run all across Berlin to catch you?"

Erich shrugged and kept his eyes down on the sidewalk.

“Never mind,” Rudi said, oblivious as always to Erich’s moods. “We’re supposed to give our reports in history class today,” he continued. “What did you write yours on? Wait, let me guess. Airplanes again. Am I right?” Rudi nudged Erich’s arm.

Erich sighed. “Yes, Schnabel,” he said. “I wrote about airplanes again.”

Rudi laughed gleefully. “I knew it!” he said. “Don’t you get bored writing about the same thing over and over?”

“No, I don’t,” said Erich.

“Well, I would,” Rudi said. “Why can’t you just be normal?”

Like you? Erich thought, glancing at Rudi’s swastika armband.

“Sometimes I don’t know why I keep being your friend,” Rudi said, throwing a playful punch at Erich.

“Because I’m smarter than you, Schnabel,” said Erich, returning the jab. “You have to copy off me in math, remember?”

Rudi scratched his head and looked up. “Oh, that’s right!” he laughed. “So, do you want to come over tonight?”

“I can’t,” said Erich.

“You used to come over every day. Now you’re always busy these days,” Rudi said. “How can you be? You’re not part of the Hitler Youth or anything. Or did you finally join something?”

“No,” replied Erich. “I’ve just been using this a lot,”

he said, pointing to his head.

“You think too much,” Rudi said, shaking his. “It’s not healthy to think when you’re not in school.” He snapped a low-hanging branch off a tree as they walked past.

Erich tried to think of a comeback but couldn’t. He didn’t want to talk at all.

“Anyway,” Rudi said casually as he hurled the stick over a fence, “you’re going to have to join something soon. It’s the law.”

Erich tried to act like he didn’t care, but his stomach tightened the way it did during a math test. They walked on for two blocks in silence.

“My mom wanted me to ask you how your mother is doing these days,” Rudi eventually said.

“She’s not getting better,” Erich replied. “She still spends most of the day in bed.”

Rudi mumbled something in reply and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“I’ll tell her that you asked,” Erich said after a moment’s awkward silence. “That will make her happy.”

Rudi nodded sullenly. Three small birds perched on the gnarled branch of an elm tree across the street filled the silence with a song whose cheer Erich did not share.

“Fräulein Kropp’s father was sick for a while too,” Rudi said suddenly. “Maybe you could ask her for advice.”

Erich grimaced. “Marta’s—I mean Fräulein Kropp’s—dad only had the flu, Schnabel.”

Rudi nudged Erich playfully with his elbow. “Oh, so she’s ‘Marta’ now?” he teased. “So when did you become a couple?” He emphasized the last word with a singsong voice and pretended to swoon.

Erich cursed silently, remembering his mother’s admonition to follow the complex and highly formal rules that governed forms of address. Sometimes when he got nervous or angry, Erich would forget that first names were reserved for the closest of friends and family members—and for people you were secretly in love with.

“She really likes you, you know,” Rudi said. “And you used to like her too. But I haven’t seen you walk her home for a long time. What happened?”

“Actually,” Erich replied quickly, dodging the question, “I think you two would make a *lovely* couple.”

“You think so?” said Rudi, his face brightening.

“Sure,” Erich replied, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice anymore. “After all, you’re in the Hitler Youth, and she just joined the Nazi League of German Girls.”

“Hmm,” Rudi said, contemplating. “You’re right! We’re a perfect match!”

“By the way,” Erich said, desperate to change the subject, “since when do you think airplanes are boring?”

“Airplanes aren’t boring,” Rudi replied. “It’s *writing* about airplanes over and over again that’s boring. When I finish school, I’m going to join the Luftwaffe and become a fighter pilot.” He raised an imaginary machine gun to his chin, firing on an unseen adversary.

“I don’t know why they don’t let fifteen-year-olds like us join,” Rudi continued. “I can’t wait three more years. What about you, flyboy?”

Erich thought about it seriously. “Well, I’d still like to be a crewman on a Zeppelin.”

Rudi laughed. “A Zeppelin?” he said. “Zeppelins are just big, slow targets. Fighters are the only way to fly.”

Erich didn’t feel like arguing. “Remember how we used to talk about flying across the Atlantic together in a Zeppelin?” he asked. “Now all you want is to shoot everything down.”

“Yeah, well, things are different now.” He raised his chin and pushed out his chest. “That was before I joined the Hitler Youth.”

Erich silently agreed. That was definitely the moment that everything had changed.

Rudi slapped Erich’s shoulder. “Why don’t you join up, Lindemann?” he asked. “We could be in the same squad together. It would be fun! I mean, everybody knows we’re best friends anyway.”

Erich was working on his response as they rounded the corner and arrived at the schoolyard. Rudi waved at a group of students who were also wearing Hitler Youth uniforms. Erich recognized several bullies and trouble-makers among them.

“That’s my squad,” Rudi said. “I have to go. I’ll see you in class, right?”

“Right,” Erich said, raising his hand to wave.

“Heil Hitler!” said Rudi with a grin, shooting his right arm into the air before turning and running off.

Erich’s stomach knotted even more tightly as he turned and walked through the school’s arched gate. He slowly brought his arm down, his hand involuntarily clenched into a fist.

* * *

History class didn’t improve matters for Erich. He had worked hard on this paper and had practiced reading it out loud several times at home. Nevertheless, he was so nervous that he didn’t listen to three reports in a row.

“Thank you for your report, Herr Schnabel,” said Professor Krause, the history teacher. “Who will volunteer to go next?” Her eyes surveyed the room from above the rims of her silver eyeglasses. “No one?” she asked.

Erich did not raise his hand, but he knew that Professor Krause would call on him next anyway. It seemed to happen in all his classes now: first Schnabel, the dutiful Hitler Youth, followed by Erich, Schnabel’s wayward friend, the boy who wouldn’t join.

Sure enough, as Rudi sat down Professor Krause looked right at Erich and said, “Herr Lindemann, please give your report to the class now.”

Erich stood and made his way up the aisle to the front of the classroom, gripping his paper like a shield. He was aware of everyone’s eyes on him.

Erich turned to face the class and stood as straight as he could, trying to remember his mother’s advice on

public speaking. *Stand up straight*, she had said. *Make eye contact with your audience. Be confident. And smile!* That last one was still the hardest.

“German Airlines and the Growth of European Air Commerce,” he began, “by Erich Lindemann.”

In the fifth row, Rudi rolled his eyes.

Erich started by talking about the exploration of jungles and deserts by air. He explained how aviation was helping to expand Germany’s economy and its prestige. “When our airliners began flying over the Alps to Switzerland,” he said, “the rest of Europe realized how much German pilots and airplanes had advanced since the Great War. But when our Zeppelins showed that they easily could cross entire continents and oceans at a time, the whole world noticed.”

At that point, Erich stopped looking at his paper and spoke from memory. He began by describing a Zeppelin—imagine a giant silver fish that swam in the air, he explained, or maybe a silver cloud that could carry people. Inside a Zeppelin’s fabric-covered metal skeleton, Erich said, was a string of giant balloons. Each balloon was filled with enough hydrogen lifting gas to carry a house. But unlike a balloon, Erich pointed out, propellers on the side and fins at the rear allowed the Zeppelin crew to steer the giant craft in any direction.

Erich was pleased to see Marta Kropp’s eyes widen in surprise.

“A Zeppelin is like a flying ocean liner,” Erich said. “It can carry dozens of passengers and fly them in luxury

anywhere they want to go. Zeppelins were invented in Germany. They are built by men who were born and raised as farmers, ordinary Germans like you and me.”

Erich paused and then, almost in a whisper, said, “And now, instead of farming, these men voyage around the world in the air.”

He talked about the *Graf Zeppelin*, the famous airship that had flown around the world in 1929. The ship had traveled from New Jersey to Germany, then across Asia to Japan, and from there nonstop to Los Angeles. Then the ship had flown across the United States back to New Jersey in one leap, and then across the Atlantic again back to Germany. Throughout the trip, the passengers had slept in their own cabins and had had meals served to them by waiters, as if they were in a flying luxury hotel.

“Last year, 1936, the *Hindenburg* began making regular trips across the Atlantic, as regularly as an ocean liner.” Erich said. “The *Hindenburg* is the largest aircraft ever flown. It weighs more than two hundred tons and can carry a hundred people.”

Erich was in the middle of comparing the length of the *Hindenburg* to the Washington Monument in America when Professor Krause interrupted him with a rap of her knuckles on her desk.

“Your time is up, Herr Lindemann,” she said firmly.

Erich, caught in midsentence, stammered. Giggles rippled across the classroom.

“And that’s why Germany should continue to try

and lead Europe in the development of commercial aviation,” Erich said quickly. He thanked the class and Professor Krause, bowed nervously, and rushed back to his seat.

“Thank you, Herr Lindemann, for your, shall we say, *thorough* presentation,” said Professor Krause. “Who will be next?”

Erich did not pay attention for the rest of the class period. When Marta Kropp bobbed to the front of the room to give the day’s fourth report on the history of the German empire under the Kaisers, Erich could not concentrate on what she was saying. He could only stare at the title page of his report as the burning sensation of embarrassment climbed up the back of his neck.

Professor Krause’s class was the last before lunch, and Erich tried to be the first out the door. He didn’t feel like being teased, especially by Rudi. As Erich stood up, he saw Rudi heading his way. But before Erich could make it to the door, Professor Krause called his name.

“I would like to speak to you,” she said.

“Yes, Frau Professor Krause,” he responded.

Rudi deftly changed course and headed out the classroom door without looking back. Several other students glanced at Erich, some with pity and others with glee.

Hiding once again behind his report, Erich approached the formidable oak desk at the front of the classroom. He did not meet Professor Krause’s gaze.

“Herr Lindemann,” Professor Krause said after a

pause, “your presentation ran over the allotted time.”

“Yes, Frau Professor,” he said. “The paper is the correct length,” he said hopefully, holding up his report for her to see.

Professor Krause nodded. “Remember, the oral presentation is half of the grade,” she said. “People won’t listen to what you have to say if you don’t present it well. Do you agree?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Erich said.

“I’ve been meaning to talk with you anyway,” Professor Krause said. “Herr Direktor Kreidler asked me to speak with you about your future.”

“Ma’am?” Erich asked. Why would the school principal care about *his* future?

“He told me that you haven’t joined a youth organization yet,” she said. “You’ve been spending less time with your friend Herr Schnabel and more time alone than you used to. Or so I am told.”

“I have to take care of my mother, Frau Professor,” Erich answered. “She’s sick. We don’t have any other relatives in Berlin.”

“Yes, I know,” she said. “But your friends are eager to help their homeland by joining the State youth organizations. You are interested in airplanes. Perhaps you could join one of the flying clubs and fly gliders with other boys who share your interests.”

Erich thought for a moment. Sometimes it seemed like spending time alone was becoming a crime. “Will I be expelled if I don’t join a group?” he asked.

Professor Krause raised an eyebrow. “The school year is almost over,” she said. “You could have all summer to work in a glider camp. I am asking you to think about it.”

Professor Krause tapped her desk with a bony finger. “But I must remind you,” she said, “public service will soon become a requirement for all students. What do you think people will say about a person who serves his country only because he *has* to and not because he *wants* to?”

“Yes, Frau Professor,” he said quietly, looking at the edge of the desk.

“You may go,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.” He turned to leave. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

As he walked to the lunch hall, he tried to think about what Professor Krause had told him. All he could remember was the small swastika pin on her lapel and how it had danced when she had tapped her desk.

* * *

And then, after lunch, came math class.

“I heard that old—I mean, Herr—Professor Schnitzler is probably going to give us another math test today,” said Rudi as he and Erich entered the classroom and took their seats. Rudi’s old wooden desk creaked as he shifted back and forth. “I wish I had studied more last night. Maybe he’ll forget?”

“Don’t worry, Schnabel,” Erich said, “I sure won’t

remind him.” Erich liked math, but he didn’t like the way Professor Schnitzler taught it.

A rasping cough echoed from the hallway, signaling that Professor Schnitzler was nearly at the door. Feet shuffled and desks scraped on the floor as the other students rushed into their seats. More than anything, Professor Schnitzler detested students who weren’t ready the moment he walked in.

“Good morning, children,” Professor Schnitzler said as he entered the room and closed the door behind him. He was thin and stooped over, and his long white hair was brushed straight back. In his black overcoat and black bow tie, the professor reminded Erich of an orchestra conductor.

“Good morning, Herr Professor Schnitzler,” the students replied in unison.

Professor Schnitzler opened his leather briefcase, withdrew a large notebook, and placed it on the lectern. The class was silent as he flipped the pages back and forth.

“Ah,” he said with satisfaction, pulling a pair of oval spectacles out of his coat pocket. “Today we will discuss how to graph quadratic equations. Who knows what a parabola is? Anyone?” Professor Schnitzler looked over the rims of his glasses. “Yes, Herr Rausberger,” said the professor, pointing to a hand raised in the back of the classroom.

Kurt Rausberger stood up and cleared his throat. “A parabola is an arc formed by the intersection of a plane

and a cone.”

“Well, then, young man, what is a hyperbola?” asked Professor Schnitzler, his voice rising. “Is it not also created by a plane intersecting a cone?”

Erich watched as Kurt looked helplessly at his closed math book. *It’s just like old man Schnitzler to start the day with a trick question*, thought Erich.

A knock on the classroom door drew everyone’s attention from Kurt’s reddening face. Direktor Kreidler walked into the room.

“Forgive me for disturbing your class, Herr Professor,” the principal said.

“Not at all, Herr Direktor. Students, say good morning to Herr Direktor Kreidler.” The students dutifully repeated the greeting.

The principal was short, but he stood straight as if he were at attention. He clasped his hands in front of his frock coat and vest. “Young men and women of the Reich, I have some very grave news,” the principal said, nodding his head for emphasis. “Today is a sad day for our country. Our Zeppelin *Hindenburg*, the largest aircraft in the world, crashed very early this morning as it was landing in America. Many people have died, and many more have been injured.”

As the words echoed through Erich’s mind, he became dizzy. *But that’s impossible*, he thought. *I was just talking about it in history class!* Erich saw a number of students glance in his direction. They wanted to see how the flyboy was reacting to the news. He avoided their

hungry gazes but could still feel his face flush with the unwanted attention.

“We will now have a moment of silence for the fallen heroes of the Reich,” Direktor Kreidler said, gesturing for the students to stand.

Erich’s thoughts continued to race as he stood and bowed his head with the rest of the class.

Was it a hydrogen fire? Erich wondered. *Or maybe the weather?* While his friends prayed for Germany’s loss, Erich tried to play out the accident in his mind. But he had too few facts to draw a picture.

Direktor Kreidler clicked his heels together and held his arm out, interrupting Erich’s thoughts. “Heil Hitler!” he said loudly. Professor Schnitzler and many of the students did the same. “Now I must go to the other classes and share the sad news. You may resume your studies,” the principal said. He left the room quickly.

“Be seated,” Professor Schnitzler ordered with a cough. “Except for you, Herr Rausberger. You were about to favor us with your explanation of the difference between a parabola and a hyperbola.”

Erich sat back down. His stomach hurt the way it had when he had been told that his father had died. He forgot all about Kurt and his hyperbolas as he remembered the night the *Hindenburg* flew over his house last year.

He had been upstairs in his room one evening, doing his homework, when through the open window he heard people talking excitedly in the street below.

From his window he could see small groups of people looking up into the sky.

Erich went out into the cool March night air and approached an old man standing on the street corner.

“Good evening, Herr Schörner,” Erich said. “What’s going on?”

The man pointed up with his cane. “It seems we have visitors,” he said.

In the distance, Erich saw a row of lights in the sky. Then a spotlight swept across it, revealing a sleek silver fish shape surrounding the lights. Silently, the glinting object moved behind a building as another spotlight beam crossed the night sky.

Erich smiled. “A Zeppelin!” he said. Herr Schörner nodded.

Erich raced back across the street and climbed the rickety fire escape to the top of his house. He had spent many nights stargazing on the roof, from which all of Berlin was visible. On the roof the wind was stronger, and it swept away the sounds of the people and traffic below. Instead, he could hear a muffled, throbbing sound that seemed to be coming from nowhere but was growing louder.

The spotlights lost their targets temporarily. Then, one at a time, they located the ships again. When they did, Erich recognized the slimmer of the two ships as the *Graf Zeppelin*, the first airship to fly around the world. The other was larger but stouter. He realized that it must be the brand-new *Hindenburg*. Erich marveled at the

way they defied gravity, floating like celestial visitors in the darkening sky.

Suddenly, one of the giant ships flashed on its own spotlight and aimed it toward the ground. The other ship did the same a moment later. They seemed to be playing in the light, turning and floating slowly toward him, then turning the other way, like dancing slivers of moon.

After a few minutes, the ships straightened their course, heading directly for his house. Erich was breathless as the two vessels, still illuminated by the spotlights, slowly came closer. The throbbing sound and feeling of their engines grew louder as their curved silver flanks filled more and more of the night. Dogs howled and barked at the false moons crossing the sky.

When the ships were almost directly above Erich, the spotlights extinguished one by one. The ships passed overhead as black phantoms, star-like lights winking from numerous windows. He could almost reach out and touch the ships; there was no distance in the dark.

The massive ships glided swiftly, effortlessly, over Erich. The sounds of the engines filled him, reaching all the way to his feet. Erich felt like he was being swept away, and he didn't care.

Dizzy and with a sore neck, Erich spun around and watched the ships blur into the horizon, the sound of their engines fading behind the dull rumble of a busy city. He ran downstairs and woke his mother to tell her what he had just seen. But it had been hard finding

words to describe his experience.

The ringing bell interrupted Erich's memory. He and Rudi walked out of the classroom together. "So what happened to the *Hindenburg*, flyboy?" Rudi asked.

"I don't know," said Erich, annoyed. "I only heard about it when you did."

"So that's it for Zeppelins," said Rudi. "The *Hindenburg* was the last one, right?"

"No," replied Erich. "There's still the *Graf Zeppelin*. And they're building another one right now that's as big as the *Hindenburg*."

"Well, anyway," said Rudi, unimpressed. "If it turns out that the crash wasn't just an accident, I'll bet it was the Jews who were behind it."

Erich stopped and stared at Rudi.

"Hey, Schnabel!" called a thin, curly-haired student wearing a sash marked *Hall Leader*. "No wearing hats indoors!" Rudi liked putting on his brown Hitler Youth uniform cap between classes, even though it was against school rules.

"Quiet down, Zuckerman," said Rudi, "or I'll turn your father in to the Gestapo." Rudi laughed as the boy scurried away at the mere mention of the government's secret police.

"Did you see the way he ran, flyboy?" said Rudi. But Erich had turned and was walking away.

"Hey, Lindemann!" Rudi called, reaching for his arm but missing. "Wait a minute! What's up?"

Erich stopped and turned to look at him.

“What’s eating you?” Rudi asked plaintively.

“You really don’t know, do you, Schnabel?” Erich said, turning away again.

Rudi reached for Erich’s arm again and this time caught it. Erich spun around, his eyes blazing and his hands balled into fists. Rudi’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Why did you speak to Zuckerman that way?” Erich said.

Rudi rolled his eyes. “Oh, is *that* all that’s bothering you?” he said. “Just forget it, will you?”

“No, I won’t,” Erich said. “Why did you threaten him?”

“I didn’t *mean* it,” Rudi said, raising his hands. “It’s just that, you know...,” he shrugged. “He’s just...”

“A Jew?” Erich said flatly.

“Yeah,” Rudi replied. “One-quarter. That’s enough.”

“Since when do you hate Zuckerman?” Erich said. “Or Stein? I heard what your gang did to him.”

“We’re not a ‘gang,’” Rudi said, more aggressively. “We’re Aryans, they’re Jews. It’s a historical thing. And they’re not welcome in our country anymore. Jews, Gypsies, none of them. That’s just the way it is now.”

“Someone tells you that you’re supposed to hate some group of people and you automatically start hating them?” Erich asked. “And blame everything on them?”

“Hey!” Rudi replied, shoving Erich in the shoulder. “We have to take back what belongs to us! Take it from

the people who've been freeloading while we do all the hard work!"

"Freeloading!" Erich said. "Zuckerman's father is a *grocer*, Rudi! Your mother shops at their store all the time!"

"We don't buy from Jews anymore!" Rudi shouted, shoving Erich again, this time with both hands. "And next time maybe we'll break more than just his store windows!" he taunted.

Erich let out a shout and charged at Rudi, slamming him against the wall. Erich swung wildly, missing Rudi but sending his book bag skittering across the floor.

Rudi pushed Erich off and caught his breath. "You're crazy, Lindemann!" he shouted. "Don't fight me! You're one of us!"

"I'll *never* be one of you!" Erich shouted. "Smashing windows and painting threats on walls is for cowards! And that's all you are, a bunch of cowards!" Erich swung clumsily, but Rudi easily avoided the punches.

"You're just a big baby," Rudi said, seeing the tears well up in Erich's eyes. "You can't even fight. But *I'm* learning how to fight. I'm learning how to stand up for the Fatherland!"

"Fight?" Erich said. *My* father fought in the war!" he shouted. "Where was *your* dad?"

Rudi grabbed his shirt and pulled him close. "Don't you *ever* say anything about my father!" he said, cocking his arm to punch Erich in the face.

At that moment, a teacher pushed through the

crowd of students that had clustered around the two boys. “Here, now!” he said, pushing them apart. “Stop this right now!”

“He started it,” Rudi said with a whine, his hand over his bleeding lip.

“Liar!” shouted Erich.

“I don’t care who started it,” the teacher said to the squirming boys in his grasp. “Give me your names. I’m sending you home, but you can expect to report to Herr Direktor Kreidler’s office first thing in the morning. And your parents too. We will be calling them, rest assured! Now, march!” He pointed to the doors at the end of the hall.

As the professor propelled the boys down the hall, he saw Zuckerman in the back of the crowd. His face was deathly pale, and he avoided meeting Erich’s eyes.

Erich felt like it was the worst day of his life. *What’s next?* he wondered.