

Zeppelin Posts at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair:

Integrating Philately & History

by Dr. Cheryl R. Ganz

As a zeppelin collector and professional historian, I have striven to bring the two very distinctive approaches of each discipline together in my life, my hobby, and my career. By sharing my experience, I hope that other collectors will rethink their approaches to collecting, exhibiting, researching, writing, and judging to expand their perspectives, ask new questions, and, as chef Emeril Lagasse says, “Kick it up a notch.”

Why do I think this is important? I believe it is one way to reach potential philatelists and to share the rewards of our hobby as being fascinating and meaningful on multiple levels. This article discusses my holistic approach to the hobby, and includes an example from my own research, which integrates the story of zeppelin mail, the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, and the diplomacy that stabilized a potentially volatile situation. I hope to illustrate the way in which philately, in context, can touch people's lives and inspire new as well as fellow collectors.

As a collector of philately and related ephemera and artifacts, I relish each detail and thrill to each newly discovered fact. A descriptive approach identifies each object collected and, often through exhibiting and writing, relates objects to one another — all celebrated because they exist and because I have collected them for some reason.

As a historian, however, I place objects, details, and facts into a larger framework, asking how each relates to the his-

torical process. In other words, I put the research in context and interpret it. I must answer what historians call the “So what?” question, and I must develop a thesis that presents a fresh perspective.

By reading the current literature in both fields — philately and history — I am able to apply ideas from other philatelists and historians to my own work. For example, in his book *The Postal Age*, David Henkin examines mail users rather than the state postal system or the envelopes themselves.¹ As a result, he makes new discoveries about how mail changed lives and how

lifestyles changed mail handling in the nineteenth century.

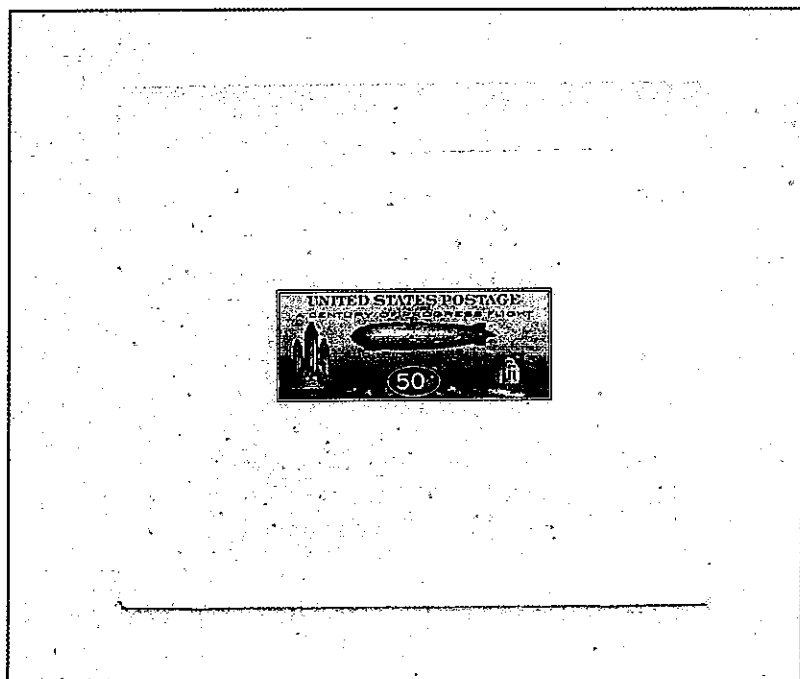
Henkin inspired me to examine the mail in my collection that the LZ127 *Graf Zeppelin* had flown from Germany to Brazil to the United States and back to Germany on the 1933 Chicago flight. I was stunned to discover that forty

of sixty covers in my United States dispatches had names of Germanic origin for either the American sender or American addressee. German-speaking immigrants comprised the largest ethnic group in Chicago, almost 13 percent of the city's population in 1930. Even Ernst J.

Kruetgen, the city's postmaster, was of German heritage. So while other collectors also serviced mail, the *Graf Zeppelin's* visit was a source of special pride for the German American community. This evidence proved significant when I studied the German American community's reaction to the zeppelin visit.²

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Large die proof of the 50-cent *Graf Zeppelin* stamp issued in 1933 for the flight of the airship to A Century of Progress, Chicago's second world's fair.



Hugo Eckener

Case Study: 50-Cent *Graf Zeppelin*, A Century of Progress Stamp

Approaching Chicago at daybreak on September 26, 1933, Commander Hugo Eckener ordered the *Graf Zeppelin*, a 775-foot long German airship, to fly west beyond the city and then to circle clockwise, although a northerly route from Indiana with an approach to Chicago from the east over Lake Michigan would have been more expeditious. After circling above the city for about an hour, the *Graf Zeppelin* flew north to suburban Glenview for a brief exchange of passengers and mail.

Adolph Hitler, leader of the National Socialist party, had become Chancellor of Germany earlier that year. The German government had required the Zeppelin Company to paint the National Socialists' swastika banner, which was one of the two official German flags, on the port side of the upper and lower tail fins. Rather than display the two red billboards featuring twenty-foot swastikas, Eckener preferred to show Chicagoans the starboard side of the craft, which featured the traditional tri-color German flag.³

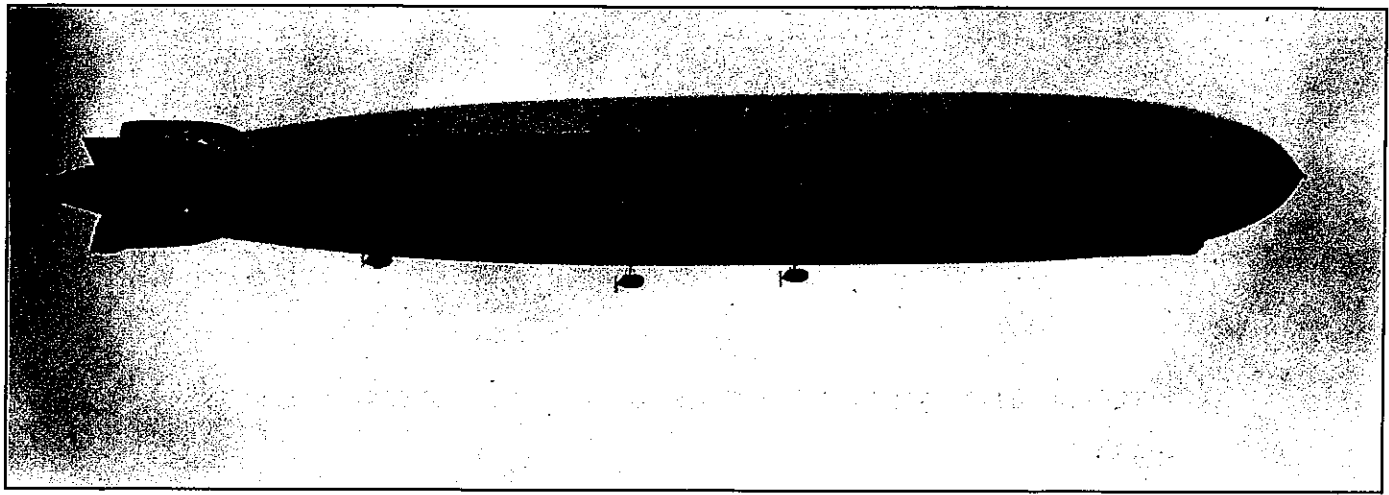
Willy von Meister, the United States special representative of Luftschiffbau Zeppelin GmbH, the Zeppelin Company, was in the control car with Eckener during the approach to Chicago. He asked why Eckener had not taken the shorter circle. "And let my friends in Chicago see the swastikas?" asked Eckener, who had a doctorate in psychology and was sensitive to the German community's reaction.

As a result of the arrival time, the choice of the flight



path, and the press's selections of which photographs to publish to represent this flight, however, the local population saw more images of the *Graf Zeppelin* with the swastika than without it. In flying a route that brought the airship toward Chicago from the east at daybreak, the *Graf Zeppelin* became a silhouette against the sunrise. Photographers could either take photographs of the shadow side of the airship over the lake or, as it made its circle over the fairgrounds and central business district, of the sunlit side with the less photogenic elements of the city in the background. In order to photograph the *Graf Zeppelin* with the fairgrounds in the same image, one newspaper photographer shot his images from an airplane. He was able to capture the sunlit side of the *Graf Zeppelin* over the Chicago World's Fair, and consequently his photograph showcased the swastika. The *Chicago Daily News* and the *New York Times* published these images, reaching yet a larger audience than the eyewitnesses.

Germany's *Graf Zeppelin* became the fair's most powerful and divisive emblem of national identity. As a symbol of Germany and its technological progress, the *Graf Zeppelin* captured the public's imagination and ultimately became an international symbol of goodwill and cooperation. On the



The LZ127 *Graf Zeppelin* over the landing field north of Chicago with its starboard fins painted with the tri-color German flag.

other hand, the swastika broadcast anti-Semitism and Hitler's National Socialist policies. The swastika clearly inspired racial pride and patriotic obedience in Nazi followers, but it antagonized or embarrassed many German Americans.

On August 1, 1933, the Zeppelin Company had responded to an official invitation from Rufus Dawes, president of A Century of Progress. Hugo Eckener had accepted the invitation, saying that the LZ127 would visit Chicago as an extension of the final trip of the 1933 season to Brazil if the United States Post Office Department would issue a zeppelin postage stamp. Eckener had requested the stamp because he needed to secure adequate financing before committing to the special flight. He had proposed sharing profits from the sale of the zeppelin postage stamp. The plan was not unique. Philatelists had already financed several special flights of the *Graf Zeppelin*.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's lack of support for the stamp threatened to bury the idea and create diplomatic problems with Germany. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing, which designed and printed postage stamps for the Post Office Department, had prepared three designs of the stamp to be presented to Roosevelt for his final approval. The president immediately protested, "This zeppelin is just toddling back and forth across the ocean. I don't see why a stamp should be issued again for it," and he rejected the issue.⁴ Negotiations followed, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull advised that the breach of diplomacy resulting from the rejection of the stamp issue would be a disaster. The argument swayed Roosevelt, and the new zeppelin stamp was available at the New York City post office just ten days after its approval.

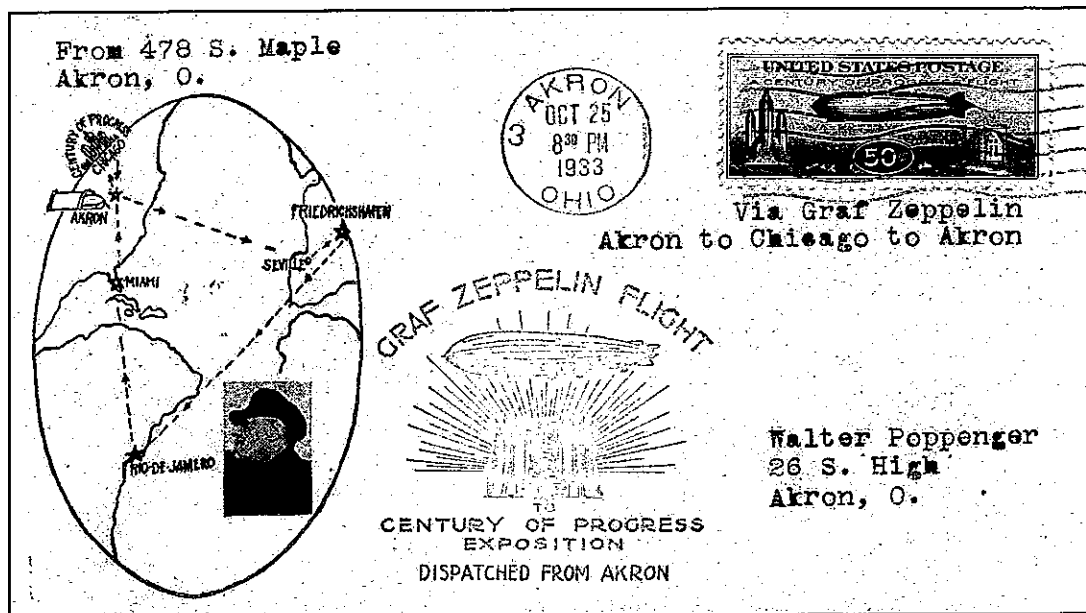
As printed, the 50-cent green stamp depicted the *Graf Zeppelin* without the swastika, the Federal Building at the Chicago fair, and one of the zeppelin hangars in Friedrichshafen, Germany.⁵ The United States Post Office Department would receive 15 percent or 7.5 cents of the fifty-cent rate. The remaining 42.5 cents would be paid to the German Postal Administration to help offset the expenses of the Zep-

ppelin Company for operating the *Graf Zeppelin* at a cost of about \$300 an hour.⁶ The Zeppelin Company expected to realize \$10,000 from the United States stamp sales, but it actually accrued several times that amount. More than 100,000 American stamps on souvenir envelopes were flown, in addition to mail carried from Germany, Brazil, and more than sixty other countries.

Meister informed fair president Rufus Dawes that the *Graf Zeppelin*, operating under the auspices of the German government, would fly the flags of the German government, including the swastika. He then posed the issue of possible protests by Jewish citizens in response to Nazi harassment of German Jews and laws that stripped them of German citizenship. Dawes wanted to be prepared for a possible demonstration against the swastika emblem or the arrival of the pro-Nazi German ambassador and former chancellor, Hans Luther. The Post Office Department made special arrangements to examine all mail and parcels intended for delivery to the zeppelin. Postmaster General Farley also requested that local authorities cooperate to assure proper protection for passengers and the crew.⁷

Because of a bomb threat, Eckener altered his flight plans slightly. He decided to fly to Chicago and make a short landing in a closed field. The day before the *Graf Zeppelin's* arrival in Chicago, the press announced that the great airship would arrive at about nine o'clock the next morning. In fact, the *Graf Zeppelin* arrived three and a half hours earlier. Because of the misinformation provided to the press and the sheriff's order to close the airport to those without passes, only a few hundred spectators were on hand at the landing field besides the landing crew, press, and welcoming officials.

Following a busy day of touring the fairgrounds and attending luncheon and dinner events, Eckener was present of the Zeppelin Day evening event at Chicago's Medinah Temple. Thousands of enthusiastic German Americans filled the hall, many wearing the Zeppelin Tag lapel pin sold at the door for fifty cents. The program included patriotic German music, with speeches by the mayor, representatives of the



Envelope flown by the *Graf Zeppelin* over the world's fair. The cachet maker Walter Poppenger, who was also the addressee, had a name that suggests German ancestral heritage.

German community, Eckener, and Luther. Postmaster Kruetgen, president of the German Group of the World's Fair, had refused to attend what he saw as a Nazi reception.

News of the gathering had, of course, reached the general public. Theodore Light, a twenty-year-old stamp collector, went with a friend to Medinah Temple that evening, hoping to get Eckener's autograph on some letters he had mailed himself via the *Graf Zeppelin* using the special zeppelin stamp. Upon arriving home from work he found that his mail delivery included envelopes transported by airship from Miami and Akron to Chicago. Meanwhile at Medinah Temple, limousines dropped off local politicians and members of the diplomatic corps. Delighted to discover that the public was permitted to enter, Light and his friend joined the crowd. Once inside, however, they "found ushers all in storm trooper uniforms and across the stage was the biggest flag I have ever seen and it was the swastika." The astonished young men looked at one another, thinking that this was the wrong place for them to be at that moment, and said "Let's forget about autographs and get out of here."⁸

The swastika experiences at the exposition forced German Americans, Chicago's largest ethnic group, to face difficult choices of national allegiance even before the outbreak of the Second World War, to reassess their identity, and to act on their convictions. The German Group of the World's Fair had tied its nationalism to the proud display of German accomplishments, both cultural and technological. It had fought the display of the swastika at all fair events because it represented a political party and anti-Semitism. When the *Graf Zeppelin* arrived with swastikas on its fins, there was no way to prevent the Consul General in Chicago and the German ambassador from displacing the German Group of the World's Fair as the welcoming leadership of the community. German Americans in Chicago were forced to make choices, not only of their political alliance but also of their identity as Germans or Americans. By the time the fair closed in No-

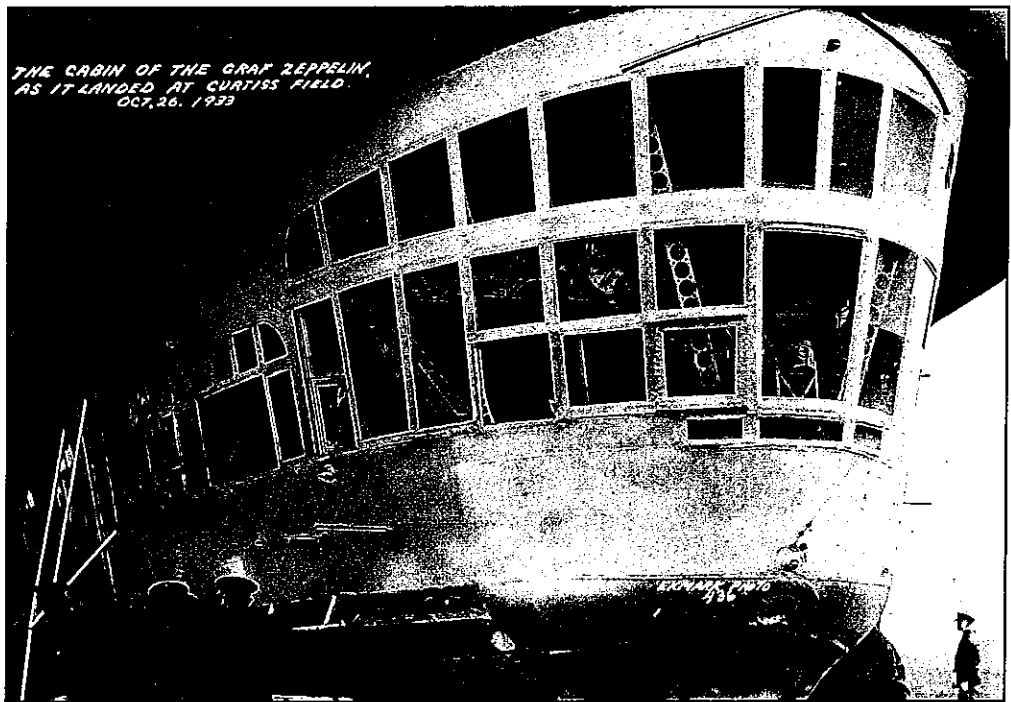
vember, Chicago's German societies had divided over Nazi policy and the Jewish question. They had been able to distinguish the differences between the symbols of the *Graf Zeppelin* and the swastika. German Jews in America and German Christians in America would, however, find themselves no longer unified as "German Americans."

Conclusion

By placing the 50-cent *Graf Zeppelin* stamp in the context of its philatelic story as well as its social and cultural story, the significance of this issue is enhanced and has a stronger appeal to larger audiences without diminishing the philatelic study aspects. While many collectors research and study the subject depicted on a stamp, the production of a stamp, or the uses of a stamp, fewer collectors ask, "Why was this particular stamp or series issued at this time (beyond fulfilling a rate need) and what impact did it have on senders, recipients, and society?" Examining cause and effect can inspire collectors and researchers to ask new questions and, as a result, can offer new insights. As for me, thinking outside the traditional philatelic box has allowed me to understand not only how the United States government and post office helped subsidize this 1933 flight but also the role of the *Graf Zeppelin* and the 50-cent stamp as symbols of progress and goodwill during tough political times and economic strife.

Endnotes

1. David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
2. For an expanded study of this story, see: Cheryl R. Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
3. *Chicago Tribune*, October 26, 1933, 4; and LZA 016/385-6 *Fahrtberichte LZ127* [logbook], 1933, Archiv der Luftschiffbau Zeppelin G.m.b.H., Friedrichshafen. Wilhelm von Meister, interview with author, Peapack, New Jersey, July 1976. *Chicago Daily News*, October 26, 1933, pp. 4-5; and "Mid-Week Pictorial," *New York Times*, November 4, 1933, p. 7.
4. Meister interview.



Following a bomb threat, Commander Hugo Eckener ordered an earlier arrival than reported in the press. The clock inside the control car indicates it was shortly after 7 a.m. That clock, however, was set for Eastern Standard time so that it was actually just after 6 a.m. in Chicago.

5. The artists at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing used a 1929 photograph of the *Graf Zeppelin* from its landing at Mines Field in Los Angeles on the World Flight. At that time the zeppelin carried no government flag on its fins. Stamp Design File, National Postal Museum Library, Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Washington DC; *Graf Zeppelin* postage stamp files, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Washington, DC.

6. *Chicago Daily News*, October 26, 1933, p. 1. On March 26, 1931 the Reichspost and Luftschiffbau Zeppelin agreed to the Zeppelin Company's share of the postal revenue: five-sixths of the total fees paid for mail carried by the airship. John Duggan, "Income from Carrying the Zeppelin Mail," *Zeppelin 12* (February 1997): 12. For arrangements of the United States fees for this flight, see E. R. White to F. W. von Meister, Stamp Design File, National Postal Museum Library, Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Washington, DC.

7. James Farley, Postmaster General, to Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, October 23, 1933, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

8. Theodore Light, interview with author, tape recording, Morton Grove, Illinois, October 25, 1993.

The Author

Dr. Cheryl R. Ganz is co-editor of *The Zeppelin Collector* and Chief Curator of Philately at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. This article is drawn from her presentation at the 2007 Postal History Symposium and her book *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress*.

When the Mail Goes to War

The 2008 Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposium, jointly sponsored by the Smithsonian National Postal Museum and the American Philatelic Society, will be held in the museum's Blount Conference Room on September 26 and 27, 2008. This will be the third annual national conference for academic scholars, philatelists, and industry experts to discuss their research into the history of postal organizations and systems.

The theme for the 2008 Symposium is war and the mail, broadly interpreted to include everything related to defense and the postal system in all countries and eras.

Postal topics are usually framed in peaceful terms: mail "binds the nation together" by enabling commerce and encouraging technological development, while stamps are "works of art in miniature" or "little paper ambassadors" of national culture and achievement. Often overlooked is the fact that when a nation goes to war, its stamps and postal system are always an integral part of the mobilization — and the relief effort.

Friday the 26th will begin with a luncheon talk by Cheryl Ganz on "*Z* is for *Zeppelin*," followed by an open house in the museum and library. Around 5 p.m., we will have a talk by Lynn Heidelbaugh on the NPM military collection and the plans for a new exhibit. Then, at 6 p.m., we will have a presentation with our Key Note Speaker(s).

On Saturday the 27th, panels will begin at 8:30 a.m. and end in the late afternoon.

Institutions presenting at the Symposium include The Holocaust Museum, International Committee of the Red Cross, Department of State, Canadian Postal Museum, Denmark Postal Museum, and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, to name a few.

General Panel Topics and Themes (five panels; seventeen papers) include: Propaganda, Morale, Censorship, the Home Front, and Logistics and Systems at Work.

To register online visit: <http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/symposium2008/registration.html>.