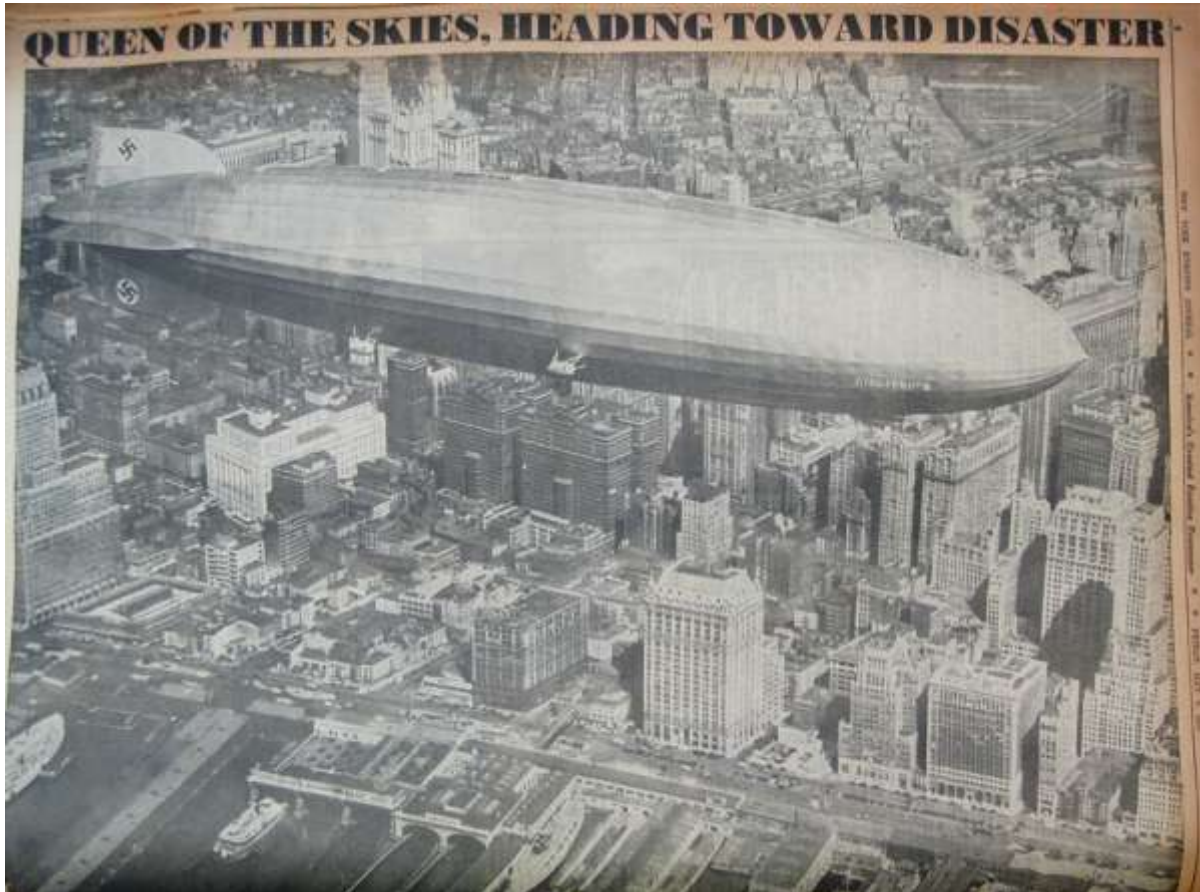


# The Promise and Loss of the Hindenburg

New-York Historical Society

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*"Queen of the Skies, Heading for Disaster." New York Evening Journal, May 7, 1937.*

This spring we have heard much that commemorates the disaster that befell the ocean liner Titanic, but it is not the only mournful anniversary of the destruction of a beautiful, efficient and luxurious way to cross the Atlantic. Seventy-five years ago, on May 6, 1937, the airship Hindenburg caught fire while landing in Lakehurst, New Jersey and burned in a little over half a minute, killing 36 people. Unlike the Titanic sinking, the horror was witnessed by spectators, captured on film, and, most memorably, recorded as anguished commentary by the radio announcer Herb Morrison.



*Menu for the reception and dinner held at the Waldorf-Astoria for the Hindenburg's first visit, May 10, 1936.*

The fateful 1937 crossing was not the maiden voyage of the great zeppelin, but rather the promising beginning of its sophomore year. It was the previous May when the Hindenburg embarked on its mission to transform luxury transatlantic travel. The German-made rigid airship was, and still is, among the largest objects ever to fly: More than two football fields in length, it offered speedy travel in roomy comfort, the very features that we veterans of cramped airplane travel increasingly covet. The promise held by these lighter-than-air ships is apparent in this banquet menu feting the officers and crew taken from the Library's collection of approximately 10,000 dining menus. The specially-dubbed dishes, "Zeppelin Eisbombe," "Lakehurst Potatoes," "Cocktail a la Eckener," display the enthusiasm at the 1,500-guest reception at the Waldorf-Astoria. In the more modest precincts of Manhattan, the German community of Yorkville staged its own welcome for the crew, while the New York Times opined that the voyage was "an event of major historic importance for the simple reason that it inaugurates regular commercial transoceanic service by air between Europe and the United States and thus justifies these visions of the future. Far below them, her passengers could see the two fastest liners ever built lunging hugely and cumbrously through waves that must

have seemed thick and obstructing compared with the pellucid and unresisting air above.” Indeed, the crew of the Hindenburg, in its normal passage of two and a half days, had graciously refused to “race” the Queen Mary then preparing for her maiden voyage of five days.

The promise was assuredly an upper-class one, as the \$400 one-way fare greatly exceeded the cost of first-class ocean passage. A reporter on board noted that the “women passengers appeared as fresh and chic as though they were on an ocean liner,” even though the sleeping cabins were small and without private baths. Nonetheless, the 50 or so passengers could enjoy a lounge with a baby grand piano, a dining and writing room, and viewing windows that opened in flight, the very feature that would provide escape for many of the 62 survivors of the 1937 disaster. Incredibly—given that highly flammable hydrogen gas lifted the ship—the Hindenburg also included a carefully isolated smoking room.

But a disturbing undercurrent can be observed on the menu photograph in the form of the swastika on the tail fins. The New York press was pointedly aware that the developer of the Zeppelin program, Hugo Eckener, had been stripped of effective command of the company and the airships when he attempted to resist Nazi pressure to use the Hindenburg for pro-Hitler propaganda in Germany. Eckener protested at the time that the propaganda flights came in place of necessary test runs for the Hindenburg, a claim that was tragically vindicated; Eckener himself would die of burns sustained in the Lakehurst disaster. The looming war haunted the project as the Hindenburg, designed to fly with safer, but heavier, helium, had to be refitted to use flammable hydrogen because the United States controlled the world’s rare helium supplies and withheld it against military use by Adolf Hitler. On the occasion of this optimistic 1936 welcome The New York Times had suggested, “All may not be morally well with the world, but it is not a world utterly lost when a Hindenburg can be built and navigated with such dramatic success,” but in the end, the Nazi menace could not be separated from the disaster and the effective end of this compelling way to travel.