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Uncertain Crossing

A young seaman stood on Bremerhaven's Columbus Quay early one August morning in 1939, gazing up at *Bremen*'s graceful bow. He could hear the humming of the auxiliary plant providing power inside the black-hulled giant as he contemplated the journey ahead. Wilhelm Bohling, an eighteen-year-old apprentice waiter in the first-class dining salon, treasured the early predawn hours before the pier area and large ship awoke to a beehive of activity, deck hands washing down the decks, shining the brass fittings, and readying the ship for departure. In a few hours hundreds of passengers would be arriving by train, bus, and car for embarkation. Bohling had walked the entire way from the center of town to the pier area in the early morning hours anticipating the departure, wearing his blue uniform with its triple rows of shiny gold buttons. He had overheard two passersby say in response to an unheard question, "Oh, he's a sailor off *Bremen*." The phrase had made Bohling happy and proud to be so identified. He gazed up at the high stem of the ship with its graceful flaring bow of highly polished steel. He could make out the city crest of Bremen in relief high atop the prow, giving the ship a seal of identity and setting her apart from her sister ship, *Europa*, which looked identical with the two squat yellow funnels. The mooring lines, thick as Bohling's upper arms, stretched like a spider web to the bollards on the pier side. This was not just a ship, he thought, the largest and fastest in Germany; it was his home, it was warm and it fed well.

Wilhelm Bohling, an apprentice waiter on *Bremen*, taken in the 1950s. (Courtesy of Wilhelm Bohling)

SS *Bremen*
At sea
Tuesday, August 22 to Monday, August 28, 1939

Bremen sailed from Bremerhaven on Tuesday, August 22, at 2:00 P.M., with 1,220 passengers aboard bound for New York via Southampton and Cherbourg—officially logged as *Bremen*'s Voyage 187. In brilliant weather the next day she steamed past Dover and anchored off Southampton for two hours to embark more passengers. Many of the crew aboard were wrestling with quiet doubts and fears of the unpredictable future. Most felt an uncomfortable foreboding that events at home in Germany were spiraling out of control, and above all, feared they might lose their precious access to world travel, specifically their regular trips to New York. Indeed,

at this time *Bremen* was widely viewed as a metaphor for German American esteem that had emerged and flourished following the dark days of World War I. To those who cultivated strong friendships and ties with Americans, the mutual respect and closeness took on an importance far greater than the crew's loyalty to the new German political dogma. As sailors they were primarily internationalists, but in Germany it was not prudent to openly admit it.

The *Bremen* sailed again the same day to make Cherbourg, taking on a total of five hundred additional passengers and disembarking very few. It seemed that more people were leaving Europe than going the other way. There were now 1,770 passengers embarked.

On this same day Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin signed the nonaggression pact with its secret clause for the division of Poland. Of course, the ship's crew learned of this only much later.

Early on Thursday morning, to punctuate their concerns for the future, the *Bremen* bridge watch sighted the French liner *Normandie* coming from Le Havre bound also for New York via Southampton. Previously, such chance encounters at sea were celebrated with excitement, waving, and exchange of salutes. This time, however, crew and passengers aboard both ships appeared uncharacteristically glum and merely stared quietly across the sea at the other ship, showing little sign of emotion, perhaps their thoughts dwelling on the gradually withering security of peacetime. The two ships were steaming on nearly parallel courses, but for some reason *Bremen* veered away to the south until she drew outside visual range, then swung back to a westerly heading. The crew guessed their captain was shunning company, especially with a French or English ship, given the tense state of affairs in Europe.

The ship's passengers were kept well aware of the current situation in Europe through the *Lloyd Post* newspaper, copied daily by wireless and run off on a mimeograph machine for all to read. Feelings aboard were tense, especially since it appeared that the standoff between Germany and Poland was reaching a climax. Most of the crew had little to say about what was happening, yet some believed the whispers of the Nazi Party SA Bordsturm people integrated aboard with the crew who were claiming the Polish

hordes were knocking at the gates of Berlin. But most sailors serving in the first-class areas, like Bohling, were too busy meeting the demands of the passengers and scrambling for tips, which in those times were gold mines for those men and women who had experienced the ravages of the last ten years of Germany's economic doldrums.

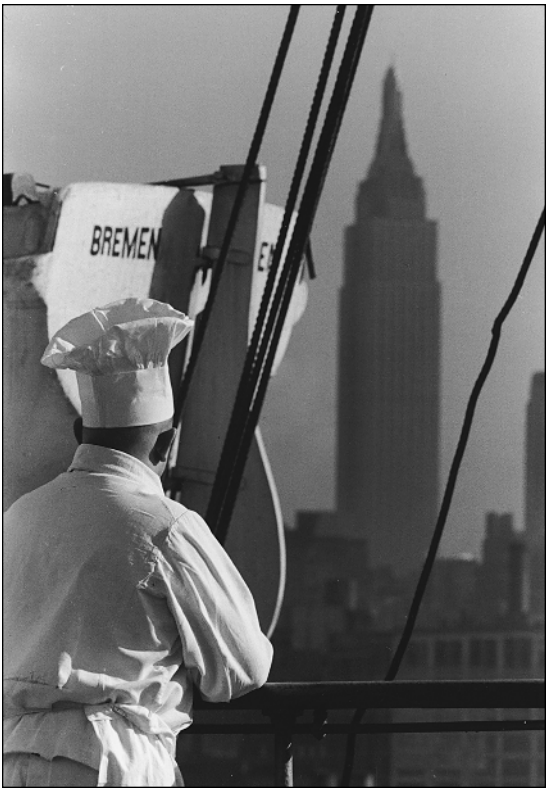
The *Bremen* crew had been imbued with the code that their single most important function was pleasing the passengers, and they were clever enough to succeed in meeting those demands in manners affable enough to garner handsome remuneration in the form of U.S. dollars or reichmarks. Thus, the crew lost themselves in the daily routine, but always kept their ears attuned to the abundant rumors circulating the ship for any tidbits that might indicate a change to the voyage schedule.

Bohling had made friends with a second-generation German American family in Hoboken, New Jersey, on his first trip to New York, and on each subsequent visit spent time with them, went on outings, and gradually became accepted as one of the fold. Ernst Henningsen, also from Bremerhaven, the son of a sailor who had served for many years aboard Norddeutscher Lloyd passenger ships, was a waiter in the first-class dining room. He was especially happy to be on this trip. Having spent two years as a waiter aboard the sister ship *Europa* before changing to *Bremen*, the twenty-year-old waiter had worked his way into the coveted job as a top waiter with its many rewards. Heinz Slominski, a rough-and-tumble seaman from Bremen on the ship's deck force, was also happy to be aboard, as this would be his second trip to New York, where he had made fast friends with a family originally from Germany whom he visited on every opportunity. Walter Renneberg, a twenty-two year old from Hamburg, had shipped aboard *Bremen* as an intern cook working directly for Leading Cook Hans Künlen, the rotund and jovial chef with thirty years' experience aboard Bremerhaven liners. Renneberg was especially pleased to be close to all major events in the galley, a position that enabled him to barter with other crewmen for precious items, such as American cigarettes, French cognac, or English toffee, in return for delicacies he could easily

Ernst Henningsen (third from right), a waiter in *Bremen*'s first-class dining room. (Courtesy of Ernst Henningsen)

pilfer from the plenteous galley. Besides misappropriating food to trade, Renneberg kept a detailed memoir of his time on *Bremen*.

Thus, while hard at work during the frequent transits, many of the *Bremen* crew enjoyed their ties with American families in and around New York. The families' relations with the ships' crew provided the new Americans a fond link to their past and the nostalgic memory of German customs, food, and, especially during this time, rumors and tidbits of news from their homeland. These contacts had taken on vital importance as the printed news was gradually being filled with half-truths and outright lies pumped out by the new Berlin Propaganda Ministry. It was growing more and more difficult to know precisely what was going on at home in their towns and villages. Loyalties became more diffused with the growth of the Nazi Party, and while the crew were limited by regulations to possessing only four American dollars, there were innumerable ways to enlist the help of their many New York friends to overcome the restrictions to purchase American items, which were rare in Europe, and bring them home as gifts to their families or



Many of *Bremen*'s crew had nurtured close ties with American families in and around New York. (Hanns Tschira—courtesy of Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven)

girlfriends. The regulations were spelled out in detail in the passenger brochure for each transit:

> According to the German Regulations Governing the Control of Foreign Currency German coins can be accepted from passengers in payment for services on board only during the ship's voyage from Bremerhaven to the first foreign port of call, Southampton and then only within the limits of 10 Reichsmarks. No German money whatever, notes or silver, will be accepted on the homeward bound voyage from New York to Europe.

Bremen's passengers on this trip were mostly Americans, heading home after cutting short vacations on the Riviera or elsewhere in Europe, instigated by the rumors of war and abuses of certain minorities. On this transit, there were a half-dozen high-ranking

German diplomats, five of them envoys to South American countries returning to their posts following consultations in the Foreign Ministry in Berlin. The first-class passenger list boasted important personalities such as Claudius Dornier Jr, scion of the famous aircraft manufacturer; Baroness Elisabeth von Epenstein-Mauternburg; Prince Egon zu Hohenlohe-Langenburg, and Princesses Maria Franciscaes and Elisabeth zu Hohenlohe-Langenburg—high-sounding names that may have meant something to the ship's officers but not to the normal sailor. Also aboard for this crossing were State Councilor H. E. Pabst, the Reich's wool minister, and Keizo Yamamoto, cousin of the Japanese admiral soon to become famous in the Pacific war. There were also a large number of tourists who looked as if they were hauling their life's belongings in their baggage. There was even Donna Fox, captain of the 1936 U.S. Olympic bobsled team, and another lady, a Jewish author in tourist class, who never left her cabin for fear of the German authorities.

The passengers seemed more solemn than they normally would be after embarking on a five-day luxurious voyage. There was considerably less dancing in the ballroom and the bar dispensed much more alcohol than normal, already a considerable amount. Many guests remained in the bar until the wee hours talking about the situation in Europe and could be heard discussing the most recent offers of compromise made by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.

The first night out of Bremerhaven a fist fight erupted in the tourist lounge on C deck between a British passenger and a German from Berlin. Bohling said the Englishman was drunk and had taken offense when the Berliner, also in the advance stages of inebriation, called him a Jew-bastard and punched him in the nose. Leading First Officer Eric Warning was called to the scene after two of the SA Bordsturm pounced on the hapless Englishman and beat him nearly to a pulp. That same evening, the crew learned that one of the night stewards, Heinrich Behrens, was missing. They searched the ship and never found him. It was rumored he was involved with a French girl in Cherbourg, and no

The first-class lounge on *Bremen*. (Hanns Tschira—courtesy of Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven)

one could remember seeing him since they left that port. Captain Adolf Ahrens made a log entry to that effect and reported him as missing by wireless message to the Norddeutscher Lloyd Bremerhaven office. Another rumor had it that Behrens was in trouble with the onboard SA Bordsturm troopers, who were known to do some pretty nasty things. He reported to work the first day out of Bremerhaven, after having been summoned by the SA for disciplinary action for failure to salute properly during the departure ceremony. He had acquired a black eye and showed signs he had taken the worst in a fight. He was never seen again.

Captain Ahrens was a likable man. The crew mostly saw him at a distance, but he seemed friendly enough, appearing much like a benevolent bear, with a ready smile, looking as if he was sharing a pleasant secret when he gazed at his crewmen. Born in Bremerhaven in 1879, he first shipped out at age fourteen aboard the fully rigged *Renée Rickmers*. After five years aboard sailing

ships, he attended the Maritime School at Elsfurt and qualified as a quartermaster. He began serving with Norddeutscher Lloyd in 1901 and continued with their ships, achieving his first command of the SS *Columbus* in 1928. After periodically replacing the first and original captain, Commodore Leopold Ziegenbein, during vacations or sickness, Ahrens became the permanent captain of *Bremen* in 1936, in the midst of the ongoing struggle with the new Nazi effort to take control of the spiritual backbone of the German merchant fleet.[1]

On Friday, August 25, still three days out of New York, a *Bremen* radio telegrapher handed Leading Radio Officer Kurt Gerstung the message he had just copied on the typewriter while guarding the Berlin *Norddeich* merchant broadcast. It was a wireless warning message sent with the prefix key H followed by the code QWA, signifying it was for *Bremen* to copy. Gerstung took the message and read it, immediately stiffening in reaction. "Exact time of receipt?" he queried the operator sharply.

"Exactly 20:06 Greenwich time, sir," the operator answered, surprised at the officer's reaction.

Gerstung bolted for the radio room door. He had been briefed about the new emergency operational codes promulgated by the Navy High Command in Berlin to all German merchant ships two weeks before. In view of the deteriorating situation with Poland, the navy was preparing to take over operational control of all shipping, which would happen following a series of radio alert commands using the code QWA prefixed by the letter H, for Handelsmarine (merchant fleet). Gerstung now had in his hands the first message with that code. He raced one deck up from the boat deck to the bridge on the sun deck level and directly aft to Captain Ahrens's sea cabin, stopping at the door to catch his breath before knocking.

Gerstung was the ship's senior radio officer, trained in the well-known DEBEG, in Hamburg, which had for years proven their worth as one of the leaders of the world's maritime radio services.[2] Gerstung had recently attended the special Abwehr school in Wilhelmshaven, under command of military intelligence, for

Adolf Ahrens became the captain of *Bremen* in 1936. (Courtesy of Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven)

radio direction finding and communications intelligence, specializing in traffic analysis. He was fluent in English and had a reinforced team of talented radio-intercept personnel aboard, also trained in Berlin with the DEBEG and subsequently by the Abwehr B Service in Wilhelmshaven. Gerstung's assistant was a Bordsturm officer and several of his men were subordinate to the SA Bordsturm party organization. Despite the integration of these SA men, Gerstung's radio room operated efficiently and his operators buried their feelings of animosity. He and his men would play a key role in the next months during *Bremen*'s dash into history.

Gerstung opened the door and stepped into the cabin as soon as he heard Captain Ahrens's soft, "Enter."

Gerstung saluted, then handed the message to the captain. "Important alert signal," he said.

Ahrens studied the message:

> QWA 7—All ships deviate from scheduled tracks by 30–100 nautical miles as security precaution.

Ahrens looked up at the communicator. "Very well," he said. "Please call First Officer Warning and ask him come to my cabin. Let me know as soon as you hear anything new." He turned and walked back to his desk, looking intently at the chart laid out beneath a reading light. "And Gerstung," he added calmly, "be very alert regarding intercepts from any other vessels, especially British. I wish to know immediately if you hear any chatter from British or American warships. Understood?" He paused, then added, "Oh yes, and from now on there will be no lettergrams sent for the passengers; we are to transmit only what I give you. Tell the passengers that atmospheric conditions have made this service unavailable."

"Perhaps we should notify the passengers officially that this service is canceled," Gerstung suggested.

"Yes," Ahrens replied. "Good idea. I'll have Master Warning post a notice to that effect on the passenger bulletin board."

Gerstung clicked his heels, "Aye, Herr Captain!" He departed quickly and slid down the ladders three steps at a time thinking, This action is exactly what I love! Plus, it was good not to have to send those lettergrams; it was always a bother for his men.

A few moments later, First Officer Warning was in the captain's sea cabin. After reading the QWA alert, Ahrens pointed to the chart on his desk. "Number One, let's adjust our track to the south a hundred miles; make up the time by cranking on another half a knot. I'm not sure what the threat is, but I've alerted Gerstung to keep us informed quickly."

"I agree, Herr Captain," the first officer nodded. "The news we've been copying in the *Lloyd Post* has not been encouraging. Seems the British are taking a stand on the Poland issue." The first officer left the cabin and proceeded to the bridge to adjust the navigation track.

Warning strode forward along the promenade deck past the officers' living quarters, mounted the carpeted staircase, opened two more doors, and stepped into the grandeur of the wheelhouse. He glanced toward the array of thick plate-glass windows. Looking forward, he could observe the green ocean below and make out the ship's blunt bow ten stories down through the gleaming windows.

Bremen's grand wheelhouse offered a view to the ocean below through its gleaming windows. (Hanns Tschira—courtesy of Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven)

The bridge windows bulged slightly forward, and the first officer could see the glistening wheel and the four sturdy brass engine room telegraphs, proudly symbolizing their connection with the power of the four main engine rooms located nine decks below. They served as the relay between the ship's brain, the pilothouse, and the ship's heart, the engine room. To the right of the wheel was Iron Mike, the steering system designed to hold the ship on course automatically, and used only during bright and clear daylight and never at night or in poor visibility, in case its ease of use and accuracy might be used as a substitute for visual vigilance. To the left of the wheel stood two large brass-encased compasses, one magnetic, the other the main gyrocompass repeater, on which the ship's course was set and steered; the magnetic being merely a backup in case of gyro failure. The gyrocompass itself was located amidship and nine decks below in a solitary den from which it controlled the many gyrorepeaters located at key positions throughout the ship, rotating in a single plane, and electrically transmitting its resistance to the slightest movement away from that plane,

thus recording all minute two-dimensional changes in the ship's heading. Mounted on the forward bulkhead of the pilothouse was the latest aid to safe navigation, the Svenska Log, functioning as the ship's speedometer. It read out the actual speed of the ship's hull through the water so accurately that even when the ship was anchored, it read the velocity of the current washing by the hull. Four large brass-encased dials, mounted on a gleaming mahogany board above the wheel, gave the exact number of revolutions per minute of each of the ship's bronze propellers. The rest of the bridge was the size of a tennis court and exuded irreproachable tidiness of brass, mahogany, and brilliant white paint surrounded by brightly shining levers, odd-shaped knobs, and batteries of oversized telephones for communications from stem to stern.

When the ship was underway there were six men in the wheelhouse or on the commander's open bridge. The supreme being was, of course, the captain, and below him the leading first officer, also called the chief officer. These two men were always found on the bridge during maneuvering, poor visibility, or fog; continuously during entry and exit from port; and in cases of key decision making. There were three additional first officers, all wearing the four gold rings of a captain and who served as the watch chiefs for each section answerable directly to the captain or leading first officer. One of the three first officers was always in the wheelhouse, in the chart room, just behind the bridge, checking the navigation plot, or on either wing of the bridge, scanning the horizon with his marine glasses for hazards to navigation. Three additional officers, the second officers, served on each watch section, roaming the ship checking remote course and depth indicators, trim gauges, barographs, and patent logs for safe navigation. One experienced quartermaster in each section, seasoned by many years in the trade, steered the ship during the four-hour watch and was assisted by a half-dozen deck seamen to answer phones, serve as lookouts, and carry out any commands that came their way from the senior officers.

Other key instruments were to be found in the chart house, which was set off from the bridge with a green curtain and a polished mahogany door. One was the fathometer, or echo sounder,

which functioned by transmitting sound pulses through the water, whose echoes were timed to warn the navigator of shallow and dangerous waters and to assist him in fixing the ship's position by matching the ship's bottom with soundings shown on the hydrographic chart. There were two of these in the chart house, one for shallow depths at one frequency, and another for deeper seas transmitting at a higher frequency. Together they marked every change in depth below the keel from two to fifteen thousand feet. The newest navigational aides in the chart house were the radio direction finders fixed to a loop antenna that could be tuned toward coded radio signals keyed from transmitters dotting the shores of most countries. These measured their exact bearing, allowing the navigator to triangulate and fix his own position to the nearest mile in good conditions. Even though they could not provide a precise range, they could indicate distance based on the signal strength. A passive hydrophone receiver located on the hull similarly detected the bearing and strength of sound signals transmitted underwater from a myriad of navigational aids such as lightships, buoys, or shore stations; the navigator used these signals to more accurately fix the ship's position. In August 1939 these were the sum total of navigational aides augmenting the sextant, chronometer, and compass, the navigator's basic tools, used for centuries by sailors to plot their courses across the earth's oceans.

After correcting the ship's track, First Officer Warning left the chart house and stood for a while observing the watch on the bridge. Warning was a reserve naval officer who had seen action in World War I. Ahrens liked the efficiency of his number one, who also held the rank of kapitänleutnant (senior lieutenant) in the German Naval Reserve. Warning was born in Gross-Mölln, near Stolp in 1901, the son of a customs official. He served in the Norddeutscher Lloyd aboard *Kronprinzessin Cecile* and *Hannover* before World War I and, following duty on *Bremen*, would soon make himself famous as the prize commander of the captured Norwegian tanker *Storstad*, the seven-thousand-ton ship renamed *Passat* and converted into a commerce raider and minelayer.[3] Warning viewed the discipline aboard all merchant and passengers ships as somewhat lax and often felt the need to crank up the vigi-

First Officer Eric Warning (second from left). (Courtesy of Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven)

lance and responsiveness of some indifferent crewmen. But he had been cautioned by Captain Ahrens that too snappy a crew might be off-putting to the passengers, many of whom were already reluctant to travel on German ships because of the burgeoning reputation of the harsh Nazi discipline. Warning studied the watch, sighed silently, and retired below to his cabin for a cup of tea.

That same day a curious chain of events began to unfold.

The White House
Washington, D.C.
August 25, 1939

Concerned about the maritime situation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a White House memorandum to Acting Secretary of the Treasury John W. Hanes (Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. was away in Europe):

> Dear Mr. Secretary—
>
> I have reason to believe that there is a possibility that merchant ships belonging to European governments, which may become

involved in war, or belonging to their citizens, are carrying armaments capable of being mounted on the high seas, thus converting them into armed ships. This raises immediately the question of American responsibility for giving clearance papers to such ships unless this government is wholly certain that such armaments are not being carried.

You will, therefore, withhold clearance papers from all ships suspected of carrying armaments until a complete search has been made and you are satisfied that no armaments are aboard.

Very sincerely yours,

FDR[4]

That same day, the U.S. embassy in Berlin passed on more sinister news. Two intelligence reports arrived in Washington from the U.S. naval attaché in Berlin, causing additional concern in the White House. The first stated that the German Navy High Command had assumed control of all merchant shipping. The second was a report containing an extract from a year-old letter purloined from the German Navy High Command:

From: The Marine Kommandoamt [Naval Command Department]
Berlin, 16 September 1938

Subject: Operation of Naval Auxiliary Cruisers [Hilfskreuzer] on the High Seas

Considering that in the case of mobilization against Britain as an enemy the swift transfer within the time allowed of auxiliary cruisers stationed in home waters to the Atlantic is not ensured. The Chief of the Navy High Command has ordered a speedy examination to be made determining how quickly, during peacetime conditions, the navy can convert and equip the largest possible number of merchant vessels suitable for that purpose without essentially restricting their use in peacetime. The report is to address what could be done upon issuing the mobilization order to provide for their support from any base, for their conversion and preparation for use as auxiliary cruisers on the high seas. The Commander in Chief has demanded that in the case

of a positive result of the examination the largest possible number of auxiliary cruisers should be available by 1941–1942.

[signed]
Nordron
Government Senior Inspector[5]

SS *Bremen*
At sea
August 26 to 28, 1939

That Saturday, August 26, Radio Officer Gerstung brought the captain the second warning:

QWA 8—All ships don camouflage paint and return to German ports immediately, avoid Strait of Dover.

"This doesn't make sense," Ahrens muttered to Warning as the two officers stood in the chart room with Radio Officer Gerstung again standing close by.

"How the blazes are we going to camouflage the ship by painting while steaming at twenty-seven knots?" Warning asked bitterly.

"I'm sure it could be done," Ahrens replied. "But I'm thinking this order couldn't apply to us." Indeed, the order seemed vague, with empty words. Ahrens turned toward his first officer. "No, of course we're not sure what will happen. This warning could be extended indefinitely; we're not at war yet."

Ahrens lit his pipe thoughtfully and began pacing his cabin. He was quiet for a few moments, inhaling deeply, then blowing the smoke out toward the large mirror over the ornate cabinet where a few photos of his previous ships stood. Also on the cabinet was a model of *Columbus*, his last command before taking over *Bremen*, now Norddeutscher Lloyd's lead ship and Germany's top liner.

Ahrens thought his decisions could soon prove to be of national importance. He liked that idea. "I think, Mister Warning, that we should call a meeting with the six envoys and the key first-class

passengers in the Hunting Salon. It's just past five P.M., please call them individually and invite them to meet with the two of us following the dinner for brandy and discussion of an important question. I want to reply to Berlin with the full backing of these key individuals. Begin with the Baron von Schön, who's going to be our ambassador in Chile; he is very senior."

"Aye, Captain," Warning replied. The first officer was more apt than his captain to follow orders blindly. As a naval reserve officer, he had no interest in the views of German diplomats and especially of wealthy Americans. To Warning, things were black or white, no questions asked. But he was loyal and carried out his captain's orders without question.

Warning left the sea cabin and strode to the bridge, picked up the intercom, and, reading from a list of passengers hanging by the phone, started to dial the various first-class passengers. He stopped suddenly and instead dialed Dr. Gertrude Ferber, the director of special passenger services. Let her earn her keep, he thought. Ferber was on excellent terms with the special passengers and had a knack for cajoling them to do whatever the captain or the first officer wanted without a hint of coercion. She was smooth, and the passengers liked being pampered. Warning hated dealing with the stuffy diplomats and loathed the sight of the paunchy American industrialists and their perfumed ladies. He'd rather spend time with Frederich (Fritz) Müller's stinking engineers, Gerstung's sharp communicators, or even Schulwitz's SA Bordsturm thugs. At least they were predictable.

At 9:00 P.M. a group of passengers met with the captain and the first officer in the Hunting Salon as Ahrens requested. A long, heated discussion took place, lasting two and a half hours. At 11:30, Ahrens and Warning returned to the bridge and stood on the open port wing. Ahrens leaned forward, opened a voice tube, and called into the wheelhouse, "Have Mister Gerstung report to me here." As the two officers stared out into the oppressively warm night, the captain turned to the first officer, who stood properly on his left and slightly behind. Ahrens thought, How predictably correct this officer is. He ought to be a regular naval officer instead of

in the merchant fleet. He's too stiff for the passengers. "Mister Warning," he said suddenly, "post a notice on the promenade deck tonight announcing that we will continue to New York and arrive on Monday evening instead of that morning. Then adjust the track with the navigator to arrive off Sandy Hook at four P.M. Monday. I'll have Gerstung radio ahead to Captain Drechsel so he can arrange the clearance, pilot, and tugs. Then, of course, I'll draft the answer to Berlin." He paused. "And, Mister Warning," Ahrens looked directly at his second in command. "Then, and only then," he said, moving toward the outboard side of the bridge wing, "will I wire Berlin and tell *them* what we are going to do. That way we'll spare them the necessity to direct us. I'm sure this is the right thing to do."

The first officer responded properly, "Aye, Herr Captain," while thinking, I hope so, for our own good.

When Radio Officer Gerstung arrived on the bridge, the captain was in the chart house finishing the draft response to the QWA warning message. He handed the draft to Gerstung, who read it quickly:

> Considering six German envoys and 1,770 passengers aboard, intend to continue to New York.
> Ahrens

Despite the order to maintain radio silence, the next day Ahrens ordered Gerstung to transmit a second message to Berlin:

> Distance to New York 700 nautical miles. Fuel board for three days. For the Navy High Command: Spain impossible, Havana possible. Intend to disembark passengers in New York then head to Havana.
> Ahrens

When First Officer Warning read the captain's draft, he smiled. The captain certainly knew what he was doing. Gerstung transmitted the message in the clear, knowing that every listening American station would intercept and relay that nugget of intelligence to the British. When *Bremen* left New York, all eyes would follow her south, and then she would simply disappear. Warning

was pleased. Ahrens was more clever than he realized. This was going to be fun, he thought. But first they had to get into and out of New York. That same day Britain had signed a mutual assistance treaty with Poland.

The next morning passengers hovered around the bulletin board on the promenade deck, reading the notice that despite rumors to the contrary, the ship would continue to New York to disembark passengers, arriving on Monday evening the twenty-eighth, the scheduled date, only about ten hours late. One irate American passenger, Dr. George Priest, a professor of German language at Princeton University, complained to First Officer Warning that the extremely high temperatures and humidity of the past two days had convinced him that the ship was heading south toward South America instead of west to New York, and he demanded to look at a plot of the ship's track. After Warning calmed the angry passenger with assurances that there were no deviations of track, the passenger promptly stomped into the bar for a morning drink. While sitting at the bar, he complained to a fellow passenger about the termination of the wireless service for passengers. "They won't allow us to send notice of our delay, and I think it's because they don't want to reveal the position of the ship."

The reply to Ahren's message came in from Berlin:

> Proceed to New York then comply with measures in QWA 9.

Ahrens was happy; he had *told* Berlin what he was going to do instead of asking. That was an important issue to him. He had always sought independence of operations.

The captain's farewell dinner was held as usual that Sunday evening followed by a short and early dinner the next day before their 6:00 P.M. arrival in New York. The ship steamed in on a swift flood tide, so strong it required ten tugs to go alongside their usual berth at Pier 86.

The White House
Washington, D.C.
August 28, 1939

President Roosevelt issued the following order:

> From FDR for the Acting Secretary of the Treasury:
>
> The Secretary of Treasury under your direction may issue instructions to all collectors of customs substantially as follows: Immediately upon the President being satisfied that Germany is in armed conflict with another nation with or without formal declaration of war seize all German and Italian vessels in American territorial waters remove officers and crew therefrom and take all precautions against sabotage in engine rooms or otherwise.[6]

The cause of the sudden action may have been a report not yet seen by any German eyes. A radio message sent from U.S. Coast Guard District Headquarters in San Francisco on Monday, August 28, 1939, to Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C., contained the following information: "An unofficial source stated that the German liner S.S. *Bremen* had a false bottom in her swimming pool and that she is to be met at sea by an undersea craft which will place special equipment aboard her." The report further recommended that New York customs control be informed as quickly as possible to search *Bremen*'s swimming pool.[7]

Just prior to *Bremen*'s arrival in New York, President Roosevelt made the following demand to Acting Secretary Hanes: "I want to know whether *Bremen* is carrying guns or not."