


FREEDOM to LIVE



*The
Robert
Hartman
Story*

Second Edition

Edited by

Arthur R. Ellis

**ROBERT S.
HARTMAN**

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THE ROBERT HARTMAN STORY

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many. You see, my real name was Robert Schirokauer. That next winter, in London, chiefly to hamper the Nazis in their efforts to keep track of me, I changed my name legally to Robert S. (for Schirokauer) Hartman.

I left Germany for Paris on June 6, 1933, with only about sixty marks and a Leica camera, and it was miserable living for awhile. The money lasted only a week, and Paris can be cruel to a man who is down. One time, discouraged, I decided my family was right – I *was* crazy – and made up my mind to go back. I was actually on the Berlin train. When the conductor called the French for “All aboard!”, however, I shot up from my seat and out of the car. It was a close call.

Then my Leica saved me. I had taken a picture of a Paris boulevard scene, and one of my fellow refugees was inspired to try to sell it to a Paris newspaper. I was amazed to learn that the paper had bought it. This bit of luck eventually led to the setting up of a photographic agency, *Agence Centrale*, which sold pictures to news syndicates. That December I went to London and tried to set up an English branch of the agency. But the income was meager, and I couldn’t even afford pennies for the gas grate meter. I had to go to bed to get warm. And I can remember making a point of passing by bakeries just to be able to smell the bread. **One minor miracle after another, though, kept me going, and one bright day in May, 1934, came a break.** On a routine photographic trip to the opening of the London Air Post Exhibition, I met Gerhard Zucker, a young German of 34 who had invented a rocket, the forerunner of the lethal German V-2 rockets of World War II and of the rockets of today which are taking man into space. Zucker wanted his rocket to be used to carry mail. Hitler, he said, had wanted to use the rocket to deliver bombs, and he wouldn’t go along with that, so he got out of the country. He planned to interest the British government in his rocket, and that’s why he had set up a display at the Air Post Exhibition. I liked the guy, and he liked me, and I agreed to serve as his publicity man. Zucker, meanwhile, had obtained financial support from a postage stamp collection dealer named C. H. Dombrowski, who stood to gross several thousand dollars if the rocket venture turned out successfully.

The project, however, met many obstacles. Only in Germany was the proper rocket fuel produced, and the Nazis had banned its export. The cartridges had to be specially made, and no one in England knew how to pack the powder properly. The rocket runners also required a special lubricant which was not available in England. Efforts to elude the Nazi export ban, including a trip to Germany by Mrs. Dombrowski to bring fuel back in her hat box, failed. The vigilant eye of the Gestapo was watching every step taken by Zucker, as well as by Dombrowski and me. So substitute fuel (much less powerful), substitute cartridges (packed inexpertly), and substitute lubricant (butter) had to be used, and Zucker had to rebuild the rocket

to accommodate the substitute materials. With German stubbornness, however, he plodded on. Finally, everything was set for the first trial. In the early morning of June 6, 1934, six men -- Zucker, Dombrowski, a reporter and a photographer from the *London Daily Express*, a philatelic magazine editor, and I -- assembled secretly on a Sussex Downs hilltop. And, by golly, it worked! Three times, twice loaded with letters, the rocket flew for distances of a half-mile to a mile. The *London Express* next day had a big front page banner, FIRST BRITISH ROCKET MAIL, and a sub-headline, "Syndicate Plans 1-Minute Postal Service Between Dover and Calais."

Now the government was interested, and a public demonstration was arranged. Zucker was to fire his rocket from the Isle of Harris in the Hebrides over one mile of water separating Harris from the Isle of Scarp. Government officials were present. It was to be the first over-water rocket flight ever tried. Alas, this time it was a failure. The rocket exploded and some 1,200 letters with rocket mail stamps affixed flew all over the beach. "It was the cartridge," Zucker explained. "The powder had not been properly packed and air pockets caused the explosion."

Zucker tried again and successfully fired a rocket in December, 1934, but the blast on the Isle of Harris had killed official interest in the rocket, and Zucker could never regain the lost ground. Meanwhile, his visa had expired and he had to return to Germany. He was arrested when he stepped off the train in Cologne and put in a concentration camp. He was threatened with death unless he cooperated in developing the rocket. He refused. One day there was a small notice in the *Hamburg Fremdenblatt*: Gerhard Zucker has been executed for "an attempt to sell an invention important for Germany to a foreign power." Even so, he may have held back the development of the German rocket long enough to save many thousands of English lives in World War II. It was two more years before a rocket equal to Zucker's was produced in Germany.

In London, meanwhile, I had come across a man I thought might somehow make it possible for me to go to America one day. He was an American (typical, I thought, because he sat with his feet up on his desk) who represented Walt Disney in England. I kept pestering him until one September day in 1934 I coaxed out of him the job of representing Disney (handling licensing arrangements and contracts) in Scandinavia, with headquarters in Copenhagen.

It was shortly after I had set up shop in Copenhagen that my father died. I had not seen him since I left Germany for Paris, and he had gone to Vienna to direct a movie. Nor had we corresponded regularly. During the night of October 2, I awoke, shivering, chills running down my back, my bed wet with sweat. I cried out: "Don't let him die, God, don't let him die!" I jumped out of bed, turned on the light, and paced the room. I felt drawn irresistibly