

A PRESS CONFERENCE

February 12, 1959 is a cold winter day. The trees in Bremen's Municipal Park are coated with withes hoary frost. Hundreds of skaters cavort on the thick ice of the Park Lake.

In front of the gate of the Park Hotel, which hugs the northern flank of the Lake like a royal castle out of the past, an unusually large number of cars are parked on the afternoon of this February 12th. The passengers, mostly men, pour out of the cars and disappear in the magnificent hotel building.

The guests pass through the lobby between two lines of apprentice sailors in snappy blue uniforms. The uniformed chief porter of the hotel directs the guests to a large conference room, the doors of which are marked by a large sign reading: "Press Conference North German Lloyd".

But even if the visitor does not read this sign, he soon notices by the easy-going manner in which the visitors relax into their chairs that they all belong to the Fourth Estate. Visiting journalists from almost every country in the world are among them. Nevertheless, their air of feeling at home is common to all of them — an international attribute of newspaper folk everywhere.

Within a very short time the large conference room is crowded. About 150 journalists are seated around the tables and gaze expectantly into a corner of the room towards three men seated behind a microphone.

These three are North German Lloyd executives. They occupy the full interest of the TV and camera newsreel reporters who in another corner of the room bring their equipment into position, including Jupiter lamps. The latter are used for eliminating all shadows from the faces of the three men.

Now one of them gets up. He is of medium height and substantial build, his eyes shaded behind dark-framed glasses. He is Richard Bertram, one of the two members of the North German Lloyds Board of Directors.

Amidst the whirring of the cameras, he begins his welcome address:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, may I thank you on behalf of my company for having accepted our invitation to come to Bremen in such a large number. We have asked you here in order to have you meet our future flagship, the 55 Bremen'."

Now the Director raises his arm and signals one of several young sailors stationed at the door. The lights go out. The conference room is dark. The spotlights swerve around and cast their full glare on the door. For a second the reporters feel they are dreaming. Out of the dark the brightly lit bow of a ship bears down upon them. Some of the reporters' eyes widen in sudden fright. Like a scene out of a 3-D movie, the ship seems about to roll right over them.

Director Bertram chuckles. The surprise has succeeded. But it soon wears off. The reporters have quickly recovered their wits and their professional curiosity is aroused. They are fascinated by the more than nine-foot-long model of a giant ocean liner mounted on a rolling table which is being pushed into the middle of the conference room by the young sailors.

This, then, is the unveiling of the new "Bremen". For eighteen months she has been berthed in the shipyards at Bremen-Vegesack. And until today nobody knew how the ship would look — the ship, which after an interlude of twenty years was slated to resume a great tradition along the North Atlantic route.

Rumours had it that in contrast to her famous predecessors the new Bremen would have only one smokestack. That this rumour was correct is the first thing noted by the newspapermen. Yet the modern streamlined form of the smokestack creates a favourable impression. In fact, it lends impact to the entire ship.

Now Richard Bertram has the lights turned on again and invites questions by the visiting newspapermen. He is not kept waiting either. Before many minutes have elapsed, he is in the middle of a hot discussion cantering around the "Bremen" — the fifth ship bearing the Same name.

First come questions of a technical nature, cantering on details of organization and equipment. Then Pit Lorenz gets up, the transportation expert for a leading financial newspaper. Bertram has known Lorenz for many years. Although he likes him personally he fears his often overcritical articles.

‘Tell me, Mr. Bertram’, Lorenz asks ‘are you able to sleep through a single night? I could imagine that the responsibility for the 95 million marks which this ship costs weighs on you like so many nightmares. Finally, future prospects for the shipping industry do not seem exactly rosy. The airplane especially the jet which in the next few years is bound to exist in vast numbers, represents a very menacing competition.’

The Lloyd Director takes off his glasses, since he only uses them for reading. Firmly he faces Lorenz as he replies: ‘Unfortunately, Mr. Lorenz, I myself have to do a great deal of travelling. Almost every night I have to sleep in a different bed. But will you believe me when I tell you that at present I sleep very well indeed — not because I am irresponsible. but because in my opinion our ‘Bremen’ is going to have a real chance — despite competition in the air.’

Isn’t that exaggerated optimism, Mr. Bertram? As you know during the past year more passengers were transported across the Atlantic by air than by ship. And this development continues its trend. In two or three years probably more than 70 percent of travellers will move by air across the Atlantic.’

‘You forget’, Bertram interrupts the journalist, ‘that the overall total of passenger has doubled within the last ten years and is bound to grow still further. There will always be enough passengers for our ships, as has been demonstrated by the experience of the last few years.’

Pit Lorenz sceptically raises his eyebrows: ‘Hope you are not going to be disappointed.’

‘We are certain that will not be the case. We are so sure that we even have taken the chance of calling our ship the ‘Bremen’.’

‘What do you mean ‘Taking a chance’?’

‘Because the name carries a heavy responsibility. You may perhaps know that one hundred years ago we started with a Bremen’ as the first passenger Ship. Four times since then a Bremen has ushered in a new epoch on the Seven Seas of the World. The ‘Bremen’ was always our pacemaker and she shall be so again.’

The journalist shakes his head and doubtfully asks:

‘Pardon me, Mr. Bertram, but do you really believe in a great new epoch’ in maritime passenger traffic?’

‘If not in a great one, I certainly believe in a new era.’

‘And you believe the name Bremen will suffice to usher in this new era?’

‘No, the name alone, of course, will not do it. It has never done so. Instead, it was always the new performance which placed the ‘Bremen’ at the start of a new period of prosperity. But this time we also have a few aces to back her up.’

The assembled reporters pick up their ears. This promised sensations. And they live for sensations.

Yet they are called upon to be patient. While they overwhelm the Lloyd Director with questions about these ‘new aces’, Richard Bertram for the moment detours a bit. He devotes a little time to reminiscing about the four previous ships of the ‘Bremen’ family. He knows that the fifth ‘Bremen’ will indeed have a rough time to keep from being overshadowed by her illustrious predecessors. After all, each of these four ships was a sensation in her day.