

6

Ritter, Hannes Stelzer and a Hero's Death

The stage and screen actor Hannes Stelzer was one of many young performers who rose to fame during the Third Reich but died before the war's end through military service.

Hans Heinrich Eduard Stelzer was born in Graz, Austria on June 20, 1910 into a poor itinerant family of actors. His father was both an actor and an opera buffo and his mother a dancer and a ballet mistress. He moved in and out of schools and had a somewhat difficult upbringing. Young Hannes dreamed of being a seafarer, but it was not to be. His mother encouraged him onto the stage as a child actor and at age 14, he made his stage debut performing as a dancer in *Die Fledermaus*. Later he worked as a carpenter's helper to earn money for acting school tuition in Vienna.

At first he was denied stage roles because he looked even younger than he was. He started his career in earnest in 1928 with an engagement at the Neuen Theater in Frankfurt am Main. After three years as a contracted artist, he moved to the Schauspielhaus in Bremen and in 1934 was called to join the Landestheater in Darmstadt. In these years he appeared in such stage works as Schiller's *Die Räuber* (as Kosinsky), his *Kabale und Liebe* (as Ferdinand) and as the Young Baron in Hebbel's *Anges Bernauer*. A year later, he was considered for the role of the young Friedrich in Steinhoff's biopic *Der junge und alte König* with the great actor Emil Jannings as his father.

After first committing to the role, he eventually declined it in or-

der to take up another stage engagement, but Jannings remembered him and in 1935 Stelzer made his film debut in *Traumulus* with Jannings in the title role.

The film's Director, the venerable Carl Froelich, in a letter dated October 28, 1935 to casting director Curt, stated that 'the ideal casting' would be with Stelzer in the role of student Kurt von Zedlitz.¹⁷¹

His next film role was in the Roelf Randolf Produktion of *Abenteuer von Paris* made in early 1936. He played the role of Igor, and earned a much higher fee of RM6,000- for the production period, and he added a clause in his contract stating that: 'In advertising I shall be named as a leading actor.'¹⁷²

The Reichsfilmkammer's organ *Der Deutsche Film* highlighted three young up-and-coming artists in its issue of October, 1936 under the headline "We present," and Stelzer was described as an actor who with just three films behind him had already found 'great respect and veneration...'¹⁷³ Between 1935 and 1943, Stelzer made a total of 19 feature films, including five with Karl Ritter.



Illustration 49 – Hannes Stelzer, 1932, Bremen.

171 Letter from Carl Froelich Film Produktion, 28 Oktober 1935, to Herr Curt. BArch R9361–V/124631. Stelzer was paid RM100- per day with a guarantee of twelve days' work, a further RM 50- per day honorarium, and a further RM20- per day for meals, and provided a train ticket between Berlin and Darmstadt.

172 Roelf Randolf film contract in BArch R3361–V/124631.

173 *Der Deutsche Film*, Berlin, Heft 4, Jhrg.1, Oktober 1936, S.119



Illustration 50 – Stelzer in his new 1936 BMW 2 litre automobile, with his father, in a previously unpublished family photograph.

Stelzer was a handsome rising film star whose versatility provided him key roles in comedies, costume dramas, and sophisticated contemporary films from the very start of his film career. He played the son of a great industrialist (Emil Jannings) in Veit Harlan's *Der Herrscher* (1937), an accomplished tight-rope artist in *Truxa* (1937), the jilted lover in the screwball comedy *Ein hoffnungsloser Fall* (1939), portrayed the role of Mozart in the *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (1940) and a young visual artist in the anti-modern art, anti-Semitic tendency propaganda film, *Venus vor Gericht* (1941) by Hans Zerlett.

Stelzer had married actress Johanna Maria Lucie Weyand in Darmstadt on January 23, 1935 but the marriage did not last.¹⁷⁴ They had performed on stage in Bremen between 1931 and 1933 in the

174 *Deutsches Einheitsfamilien Stammbuch der Stelzer/Weyand*. Weyand was born in Duisberg on 14 December 1902, so was eight years older than Stelzer. The *CineGraph* entry (Lieferung 47) on Stelzer argues that she was ten years younger than he was, and furthermore that he left Maria Bard for her, prompting Bard's suicide. The entry has the two marriages reversed and a false motive attributed to Bard's suicide. Weyand lived in Düsseldorf into the late 1970s under the name Lucille Vollmert.

plays *Jenny und Jonny, Deutschland*, and *Die Melodie des Geldes*,¹⁷⁵ and moved to Darmstadt thereafter.¹⁷⁶



Illustration 51 – Stelzer and his first wife, Lucie Weyand, circa 1936.

On October 10, 1935 Hannes applied for membership in the Reichsfachschaft Film, the forerunner to the Reichsfilmkammer. On his membership questionnaire he stated that he had attended an Oberrealschule (secondary school prior to university) and then had attended four semesters at the Actors' Academy in Vienna. He gave his skills as that of a swimmer, horseback rider, skier, sailor, and kayaker. He was at this time, aged 25, 1.73 meters tall, weighed 150 pounds, with dark blond hair. He stated that he had had NS-

175 *Das Bremer Schauspielhaus 1932/1933, Das Bremer Schauspielhaus 1933/1934*, beide: (Bremen Verlag Werbezentrale Hansa, Albert Wichelhaus, 1933 u. 1934)

176 Their address at the time was Jahnstrasse 133 in Darmstadt. See the Roelf Randolf film contract for the *Abenteuer in Paris* dated 12 Februar 1936 in BArch R3361-V/124631.

DAP membership since 1933, and was neither a member of the SA nor of the SS. He had been a RAD (Labor Service) member in 1934 in Berlin. He was granted membership as an actor and thereby allowed to continue work in film. After the Reichsfachschaft Film was transferred out of the 'Kraft durch Freude' division of the RAD and re-constituted as the newly formed RFK, he was issued with RFK membership #4738 on 28 June 1938. The RFK personnel roster for male actors typed him as a 'Liebhaber' or lover.¹⁷⁷

Between Stelzer's signed contracts for the roles of Husen in the film *Truxa* and that of Egert in *Der Herrscher* – that is between July and October 1936, his address changed from Darmstadt to the Wilmsdorf neighborhood of Berlin. The apartment building at Prinzregentenstrasse 88 still stands today.

Stelzer and the actress Maria Bard had worked on the theater stage as early as June 1937, appearing together in Shakespeare's *Was ihr wollt* (Twelfth Night) at the Preußische Staatstheater in Berlin with Gustaf Gründgens and Marianne Hoppe.¹⁷⁸

Bard was also a fine film actress and appeared in small roles in the classic *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931) and in Zarah Leander's *Premiere* (1937), amongst other films.

Bard had had a somewhat scandalous backstage affair with the renowned actor Werner Krauss, and his wife committed suicide in 1930 when she discovered it. The next year Krauss married Bard but they divorced in 1938.

Between May and September 1940, Bard and Stelzer worked together filming Karl Ritter's *Über alles in der Welt*. On July 28, 1941 they were married.¹⁷⁹

Karl Ritter's diary entry that day reports that he (in uniform) and wife Erika traveled to Caputh to visit the couple and their assembled family members prior to the ceremony, at which Ritter gave a speech,

177 BArch R9361-V/11996

178 Kohse, P; *Marianne Hoppe* (Berlin, Ullstein, 2001), S. 238

179 Their marriage is commonly but incorrectly stated as having taken place in 1940.

and then both he and a Captain von Gahlen served as witnesses to 'a solemn wedding ceremony,' after which he and Erika and the new mother-in-law Frau Kraus returned to Berlin by train.¹⁸⁰



Illustration 52 – Stelzer and Maria Bard in a private family photo.

Three months before the wedding, on April 24, 1941, the Head of the Media Law department in the Propaganda Ministry, Dr. Hans Schmidt–Leonhardt, wrote a two page letter to Dr. Joseph Goebbels, outlining the bribery case between a military recruitment officer, Köhl, and an antiques dealer named Harms. The criminal police had arrested Harms on March 27th for having bribed Köhl with cash, with liquor, with gifts of a ring and furniture; and for paying the costs of a vacation to Kitzbühl for Harms and his family. The case was of interest to the men in the Propaganda offices because also implicated were Hannes Stelzer and his his fiancée, Maria Bard.

180 Ritter, K; Tagebuch, 28 Juli 1941, S.296

The week before, on April 18th, the military court handed down three prison terms. It sentenced the military officer, Feldwebel Kühl, to 2 years, 3 months imprisonment for damaging the war effort by taking bribes for granting deferrals on behalf of the antiques dealer Harms; after Harms was to be called up for military service in 1939/40. Harms himself was sentenced to 1 ½ years imprisonment.

After Kühl was arrested by the police, he volunteered that he had also often deferred the actor Hannes Stelzer. He mentioned the popular actor's name undoubtedly as a lead to possibly mitigate his impending sentence. Hannes Stelzer was sentenced that day to one year's imprisonment as well. The sentences were approved by Generalfeldmarschall Brauchitsch.

Dr. Schmidt-Leonhardt explained that Stelzer and Bard had strenuously denied bribery, and that the Prosecutor had said that their conviction was 'not so easy to prove' and that his office was awaiting further instruction from the Justice Department. Schmidt-Leonhardt promised a new report would be sent to Dr. Goebbels pending any further progress in the matter.¹⁸¹

Further proceedings were then taken up by a court-martial at Stelzer's "Pilots Training Command 3," Hohenzollerndamm 33a¹⁸² in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, by General der Flieger Erich Quade (Commander, Supreme Luftwaffe School, Berlin) and by Dr. Möhring, a Luftwaffe Chief Investigator in the War Court. On August 13, 1941, the court-martial handed down a six page ruling, entitled "The proceedings against Pilot Hannes Stelzer, Pilot Training Regiment 11, Schönwalde, because of bribery, is halted."¹⁸³

As documentation on the life of the actor is sparse, a recap of the

181 Letter, April 24, 1941 from Dr. Schmidt-Leonhardt to the Reichsminister, BArch R9361-V/113126

182 Stelzer's apartment at Kunostraße 67a (now Cunostraße) was located directly across the street from this Weherkrieskommando III HQ, which also still stands today as a commercial office building known as Hollenzollerndamm 150-152, Berlin-Wilmersdorf.

183 Letter, August 13, 1941, Feldgericht des Höhern Fliegerausbildungskommandeurs 3, Hohenzollerndamm 33a, Berlin-Wilmersdorf, Ref. 3 K. St.L.323/41. BArch R9361-V/113126

case against him found in this ruling provides some real insight into his life whilst juggling pilot training with his on-going film career during the war. The document reads:

Hannes Stelzer was mustered in 1938. On 13 June 1939, his call-up [notice] for community service for the period from 18 July to 17 October 1939, was sent to his apartment in Dahlem. The postcard did not reach him there, as he was residing with Maria Bard in Caputh. The induction notice was sent back to Military District Command with the remark “unknown out of town.” The police found Stelzer and informed him. Stelzer had already gone to the Military District Office in June 1939 and was then ‘yelled at terribly,’ in his words. He knows not by whom, but possibly by Kühl, who through this occasion came to know him. He explained to him that he was already working on a Mozart film and through his induction the film studio would lose RM300, 000. Therefore, Kühl wrote on the notice “Film actor 300, 000-RM September 1939 Kühl.” This action was, after a later discussion by his superiors, found to be in order. At this first discussion, NCO Kisker, who sat in the same office, asked Stelzer for free [cinema] tickets for his section.

Stelzer then sent on-going free tickets to Kisker or to Kühl at the District’s address, often with the words “Greetings, Stelzer.” Kisker maintained that Stelzer had sent tickets from the end of 1938. This claim seems unlikely, as Stelzer only knew Kühl and Kisker from June 1939. Stelzer strenuously denies the assertion.

On 22 November 1939 Kühl sent Stelzer an official postcard, by which he was informed that on 1 December 1939 he would be drafted into military service and that further news would follow. As Stelzer received a large volume of mail daily, he overlooked this card until the beginning of December. Stelzer then was terrified that he had missed a deadline, hurried to the Military District Command to be told that Kühl, who had sent the card, was already at home.

To resolve the situation Stelzer was provided Kühl's private address and looked for him that same evening. Kühl calmed him down and told him to come to the Command Office the following day. Frau Kühl, who knew Stelzer from his films, spoke to him for a long time and then invited him to her birthday party on 27 February 1940, as her birthday guest. As Frau Kühl hinted that Stelzer would probably not come to such a gathering of commoners, he then agreed and made note of the date. At the discussion at the Military District Command, Stelzer informed Kühl that he would be needed on the production of the film *Was wird hier gespielt?* until the end of January and asked for a deferment. Kühl said that 'everything is in order' and wrote on the postcard 'Draft January 1940.' Stelzer received no further draft notice through to the end of March 1940, because no draft notices were issued in January and February 1940.

On 27 February 1940 Stelzer came to the birthday party and brought Frau Kühl a bouquet of roses and the gift of a purse that had belonged to Maria Bard. Over time a friendly relationship developed between the couples Kühl and Stelzer/Maria Bard. Stelzer visited the Kühl apartment about twenty times and arrived with sandwiches, beer or Schnapps. The couple Kühl was invited to the Stelzer/Bard apartment about five times. The invitations were made without effort and oftentimes large amounts of beer or wine were consumed.

Stelzer gave as the grounds for these friendly visits the fact that the Kühl apartment was very favorable as he found peace after work, before being picked up by Maria Bard's car. Previously, he had to wait on the street where he was always hounded by autograph seekers. The Kühl couple's simple, friendly nature appealed to him. Wider acquaintances would make his relationship with Bard public. Over time he brought the Kühls 4 bottles of cognac or liquor. Otherwise, he provided them with cinema or theater tickets regularly. At his suggestion he arranged for telephone calls in the Kühl apartment because Stelzer could be reached by Bard there. Without knowing the cost of such calls Stelzer gave the Kühls RM50- to cover the cost. He

guessed that the cost would be that amount. In reality, the calls only cost RM20-. Kühl kept the rest. Stelzer had no knowledge about this.

On 23 March 1940, Stelzer received from the MDC (Kühl) the message that his military induction would be on 1 April 1940, and that he should report on 26 March. Stelzer had before this command was issued, a certificate from film director Karl Ritter (dated 19 March 1940) whereby Stelzer was urgently needed for a leading role in the film *Über alles in der Welt*. The film was prepared by agreement with the Propaganda Ministry. Professor Ritter had asked that the deferment remain in place until the end of the film shoot. Stelzer had therefore already learned from Frau Kühl that his call-up was imminent. After the submission of this certificate, Kühl wrote “Ja, Kü.” To Stelzer he said that everything was fine. Stelzer did not learn anything further and believed that he was properly deferred. He did not know that Kühl had single-handedly approved the deferral without consulting the Staff chiefs, because according to the applicant, the reasoning appeared to have been sufficient. The work on *Über alles in der Welt* lasted until the end of 1940.

On 2 September Stelzer was again drafted. This time he was put on the spot by the direct intervention of the Propaganda Ministry for further filming, without his assistance. He was not in agreement, as he wanted to join the Wehrmacht himself. For this reason, he had already rejected a collaboration by the Bavaria film studio to make a film.¹⁸⁴ However, against his will, he was only able to join the Wehrmacht on 3 June 1941, when he entered Pilot Training Regiment 11 (Schönwalde.)

On the basis of the above, the suspicion that the bribery has been committed (§ 333 RstGB) cannot be maintained. If as a result Secretary Kühl was to blame for an unlawful act, that he had single-handedly submitted a deferral on 19 March 1940, Stelzer cannot be incriminated, because he neither wanted it or knew about it. It can be thought that Stelzer did not intend to

184 This would have been for his leading role as Brake in Hans Zerlett's *Venus vor Gericht*.

gain an improper advantage by his relationship with Kühl. The reasons for the deferral of Stelzer in all cases are so considerable that he would have been able to achieve the deferral without any notice. The gifts do not exceed those normal kinds of tokens of friendship. It is a normal practice for actors to distribute free cinema tickets without thinking of it as a service in return. The purse, the flowers and the liquor were not conspicuous given the frequency of visits; and Kühl also brought along such provisions to consume on his visits. The arrangement for the telephone was in Stelzer's interest, the generous settlement of the cost can be attributed as a magnificent gesture to the financial circumstances of Stelzer; that cannot be viewed as providing grounds for any advantage. The allegation against the film actor Stelzer, that he had an unwillingness to serve, and thereby provided the defendant advantages, in order to be deferred, cannot be raised. Kühl stated, on the contrary, that Stelzer had repeated in 1940 a request to be inducted. The friendly relations of Stelzer to the Kühl family may appear to be striking because of the differences of societal standing, but through the statements of Stelzer are explained in a satisfactory manner. The allegations that the actor Stelzer took advantage of Wehrmacht official Kühl through gifts of other means in order to induce an official or breach of duty, through this investigation cannot be sustained.

The proceedings are thus halted.

The Judge (signed) Quade, General der Flieger

The Head of Investigation (signed) Dr. Möhring, War Court of the Luftwaffe¹⁸⁵

Not even two months had elapsed since the court-martial found the actor not guilty, when a second related incident came to pass. Stelzer rang the Ufa studio Head of Production, Otto Heinz Jahn, on 7 September and followed up with a letter to Jahn dated 8 Septem-

185 BAArch R9361-V/113126

ber 1941. Further insights into Stelzer's wartime film career and his military duties at this time provide an interesting window into life in the Third Reich.

Caputh, 8.9.42

Esteemed Herr Direktor Jahn!

In reference to our conversation on the 7th of this month, I would like to thank you again for having kindly taken up this unpleasant matter.

As I have already said, I cannot remain silent over the remarks which Fräulein Walter, an employee at Terra [Film studio], has made in public about me, as I have been appointed a War Officer Candidate and am counting on becoming an officer in the near future.

Fräulein Walter, with her completely out of the blue assertions, has not only harmed me personally, not only that of Ufa, but also most importantly, she damaged thereby the reputation of the Luftwaffe; to which I voluntarily reported as a airplane pilot.

On these grounds I feel duty-bound to get to the bottom of this slander and to stamp it out by all means available. The fact is, that a Leutnant in a Military District Command office was, through unsavory machinations, prosecuted. As I knew him coincidentally, I was under suspicion to have gained advantages from him. According to full investigations of the prosecutor, I was found completely innocent. The same case, at the time of my entry into the Luftwaffe, by the responsible military court was again carefully undertaken, and the result was the same.

If I were even the slightest bit guilty, there would exist no hope for me to become an officer in the German Wehrmacht.

With the German salute,

Heil Hitler

(signed) Hannes Stelzer¹⁸⁶

186 Ibid.

The same day, Ufa Director Jahn wrote the Head of the Office of Personnel, Dr. Hilleke, inside the Ministry where Fritz Hippler was the Reichsfilmintendant. The letter reads:

Esteemed Herr Dr. Hillecke! (*sic!*)

I am compelled to put the following events before you.

The actor Hannes Stelzer, who plays the role of a young Luftwaffe officer in the film *Besatzung Dora* with the permission of the Reichsfilmintendant, has complained to the Management of Ufa about an employee of Terra, Fräulein Walter, and asked them to protect him from ungrounded allegations. Fräulein Walter had told Assistant Director at Ufa, Herr von Molo, whose statement I attach, that Stelzer had served 10 months in a punishment battalion in the East, and that this shamed our Wehrmacht, when such a man played a uniformed officer in German films.

I enclose a declaration from Herr Stelzer about these unfounded utterances.

The Head of Production at Terra, Herr Teichs, has at our request spoken to Fräulein Walter. She declared to him that she stands by her allegations. Herr Teichs has demanded a written statement from her, which he will send to you in the near future.

I ask for further instructions.

Heil Hitler!

Jahn ¹⁸⁷

The declaration from Conrad von Molo, a colleague of Karl Ritter's and who had been the Editor for two of his previous films, *GPU* and *Stukas*, reads as follows:

187 Ibid.

Quite unexpectedly, I was informed on the suburban train by Fräulein Walter in an indignant voice of the fact that one could sometimes spit chips about the machinations that led to such a man as Hannes Stelzer wearing a uniform at all, let alone in a Ritter film; who may appear to us as a smiling lieutenant again.

When asked about the reasons for the indignation, I also learned that Hannes Stelzer had just returned from a 10-month commando at a penal company in the East (apparently after fulfilling a rehabilitation order, or only for a film itself). As reasons which led to this punishment, which had been kept secret by him and by every initiate, that is to say Ritter, she recalled a rumor, which had already come to my ears a year and a half ago: the bribery of a sergeant in the Wehrbezirkkommando Potsdam; who was apparently influential in call-ups, and that Hannes Stelzer was involved. I broke off the conversation. The next day, after I had inquired at the Ritters, I went on to Frln. Walter to tell her that she must have been mistaken, and at the same time to draw attention to the danger, the significance, of slander, etc. as far as I could, for so adamantly she assured me of the truth of what had just been said. You have read it yourself in the papers. Yes, she still had a ‚little side-job‘ with which she would then come into contact with such files. In the end, however, she admitted that she was wrong to talk to me about it and promised to keep her secret information from me in the future.

(signed) Conrad von Molo

7.9.42. ¹⁸⁸

Two days later, Herr Teichs at Terra film studios received a short letter from Frln. Walter, in which she stated that “ I retract my remarks of the said affair, and regret them.” She continued that she would also turn directly to Herr Stelzer to settle it. Her letter was sent by Teichs to Dr. Hilleke the same day.

188 Ibid.

Dr.Hilleke on the 14th of September wrote to Reichsfilmintendant Fritz Hippler to say:

Since this rumor is a particularly serious form of evil, because Stelzer's soldierly honor has been offended, it will have to be considered whether the case may be left to itself, or whether measures should be taken against Fräulein Walter.¹⁸⁹

Hippler wrote "ja" in the margin of Dr. Hilleke's letter in response to the last sentence.

On the same day, a lawyer representing Stelzer, Dr. Martin Andree, wrote to the Ufa management to repeat the story of Frln. Walter's slander and to say that "even now Frln. Walter maintains her position that it is correct that Herr Stelzer serve in a punishment batallion."¹⁹⁰ His letter states that he had refrained from an interim injunction in the hope of a more rapid implementation of protection [of Stelzer's honor] by Ufa-Film GmbH. However, he was mandated to take all steps to protect his client's honor. Clearly Dr. Andree had not yet been told that a letter from Walter retracting the remarks had been received by Terra's Alf Teichs a few days previously.

On 15 September 1941 a file note by Secretary Bruno Pfennig in Dr. Hilleke's office stated that it be recommended that the summary dismissal of Frau Walter not be made, and instead to put her in the service of either the Ukraine-Film-GmbH or the Kaukasus Film GmbH for 6 or 12 months. Through this means " I can imagine that the rumor-making will be effectively combated."¹⁹¹ The two film companies were located in the Occupied Soviet Union, with the purpose of making anti-Bolshevik propaganda films for the local populations; hundreds of kilometers east of Greater Germany.

189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid.

On the 19th Dr. Hilleke wrote to Hannes Stelzer at his home in Caputh, relaying the hope that Frln. Walter would be contacting Stelzer to come to an amicable settlement, and that Hilleke would be pleased if Stelzer could do so.

On the 23rd Dr. Andree wrote to Dr. Hilleke suggesting that a donation be made by Frln. Walter to the NSV (Peoples' Welfare Organization) as settlement of the case, and that Andree would speak to Stelzer about whether he wished to have Walter pay to have a Notice in the *Film-Kurier Tageszeitung* repudiating her remarks.

The next day, Hilleke wrote on his file copy of the letter that Frln. Walter had agreed to donate RM200- to the NSV as settlement, after having spoken with Dr. Andree.

On September 30th, Dr. Andree wrote to Frln. Walter to state that her donation to the NSV should be made and a receipt proving her payment be sent to Dr. Andree no later than 1 November. He warned that it was only due to her youthfulness and circumstances, "that one does not want to annihilate your existence, and this time still gives grace before right."¹⁹²

Karl Ritter and Hannes Stelzer shared both a love of film-making and being pilots. They made five feature films together within seven year's time. There is little doubt that they bonded through these activities, further enhanced by their wartime camaraderie. Both were exuberant about flying airplanes. Ritter's lifelong obsession with flying and his work at Ufa studios brought forth the war films his name is associated with today. Stelzer played the role of a Luftwaffe Lieutenant or First Lieutenant in three of these films and his characters crash-land their planes in all of them, and twice in the last film.

Stelzer's first film for Karl Ritter was the WWI epic *Unternehmen Michael* (1937), in which he played the role of Lt. Prinz Erxburg,¹⁹³

192 Ibid.

193 Stelzer's contract dated 21 May 1937 stated that his wages were RM10,000- for seven days' film work, a staggering sum at the time, given that German male annual wages were under RM2,400- per year. By this fifth film contract, he was becoming a rich young man. BArch R9361-V/124631. In

and three years later he appeared in Ritter's musical comedy *Bal Paré*, co-starring with Ilse Werner and Paul Hartmann. In 1941 Stelzer starred in *Stukas*, playing the key role of Oberleutnant Hans Wilde, whose plane crash-lands at home base after a sortie against the French, and who following rehabilitation in a military hospital is sent to the Wagner opera festival in Bayreuth for spiritual healing. In the same year he appeared as Hans Wiegand in Ritter's *Über alles in der Welt*. Hans Wiegand is described in the film script as 'a Lieutenant in the Luftwaffe in a reconnaissance squadron,' whose plane crashes in a forest deep in enemy territory.¹⁹⁴



Illustration 53 – A shared meal between a uniformed Ritter and actor Stelzer (on right) during *Über alles in der Welt*. (Courtesy Dr. Michael Ritter)

On June 6, 1941, after completing *Stukas*, Stelzer was called up for duty in Potsdam as a pilot of a Luftwaffe war correspondent company and received many awards.¹⁹⁵

1936, 83% of German workers earned less than RM 2,400– annually. Trooze, A; *The Wages of Destruction* (New York, Viking, 2006) pp.142–143. See also <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durchschnittsentgelt>, which reports the 1942 average annual wage of RM 2,310–.

194 *Über alles in der Welt*, Ufafilm nr. 1013, 22.März 1940 film script.

195 *CineGraph*, D2 Hannes Stelzer, Lg.47.

In 1942 his wife Maria Bard appeared as the strident Chair of the Bolshevik front organization 'Women's League' in Ritter's *GPU*, which was her last appearance on the screen.

Stelzer's active duty and pilot school training were interrupted by his work on *Besatzung Dora*, his final film role, as Lt. Joachim Krane, again in an air reconnaissance squadron. The Ufa promotional material presented him as 'The first of the Dora ...powerful, upright, open to life...Hannes Stelzer's new role in *Besatzung Dora*.' In the film, his plane crash-lands due to defective landing gear but he and his crew survive, after which he comments: 'We certainly cheated death today.' Later in the film, he pilots a Luftwaffe plane in North Africa which has an emergency landing in the desert after running out of fuel. He and his comrades are rescued by Italian flyers just in time.

At the time of *Besatzung Dora*, his film salary was RM 20,000– for the first twenty days of a film shoot, and RM 700– per day thereafter, earning him a very respectable income.¹⁹⁶ The production finished in late December 1942.

If Stelzer and his lawyer and the film studios thought that the result of the Ruth Walter defamation case in late September 1942 marked the end of this long, sad series of rumors, slander, indictment, court-martial and vindication, they were wrong. Fourteen months later, it erupted yet again.

Enter Dr. Wilhelm Schrader–Rottmers, who wrote Dr. Goebbels from his Berlin Lazarett 101 military hospital bed on 18 December '42 about Stelzer. Oblt. Schrader–Rottmers had been severely wounded in the head and upper body in the Battle for Stalingrad in October that year, having been Commander of the 1st Battery of the 244th Assault Gun Battalion. He was discharged from the Army after recovery.¹⁹⁷

196 Stelzer's Ufa payroll record sheet in BArch N2241/19.

197 Wijers, Hans; Winter Storm: *The Battle for Stalingrad and the Operation to Rescue 6th Army*, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA; 2012

His letter, which is not in the Bundesarchiv–Filmarchiv files, must have challenged the innocence of the actor, for it prompted a note on the 22nd December to Dr. Hilleke from Dr. Werner Naumann, Undersecretary and Chief of the Minister’s Office in the Ministry of Propaganda. Dr. Naumann requested that a ‘speedy opinion and submission’¹⁹⁸ on the letter from Dr. Schrader–Rittmers be made to the Minister no later than 10 January 1943.

The same day, Dr. Hilleke fired off a letter to Dr. Schrader–Rittmers, in which he reiterated the bribery charges against Stelzer made by Kühl and Stelzer’s court–martial then finding him innocent of all charges. His letter continued:

I would be grateful if you would tell me, at the beginning of January, whether you still have documents, which nevertheless make reproaches against Stelzer. The Secretary of the Wehrbezirks is called Kühl, the film actress mentioned by you, the actress Maria Bard, who in the meantime was married to Stelzer. Heil Hitler! (signed) Dr. Hilleke.¹⁹⁹

That same day, Dr. Hilleke wrote a letter to State Secretary Leopold Gutterer in The Propaganda Ministry as follows:

On the input of the Government Counciller Dr. Schrader–Rottmers I give the following interim report:

The mentioned allegations are known here. By order of the military court of the Higher Aviation Training Commander 3 in Berlin, General der Flieger Quade, and War Court Dr. Möhring as Investigator, the prosecution against Hannes Stelzer has been suspended, namely, because the accusation against Stelzer could not be held after the investigator’s opinion. So we have no reason to do anything against Stelzer. I will deal with

198 BArch R9361–V/113126

199 Ibid.

Government Councilor Dr. Schrader-Rottmers.

Heil Hitler!

Hilleke²⁰⁰

On the 9th of January 1943, Dr. Hilleke sent to Dr. Goebbels via Gutterer a letter in which he wrote about his correspondence with Dr. Schrader–Rittmers :

Although I had submitted to him the decision of the field court, he could not make any further statement, only the opinion that Stelzer had shown a certain unreliability by being concerned about his position in the military deferment office and the postponement of military exercises himself. He admitted, however, that these facts were not necessarily so, and could be tied to disciplinary measures. He merely argued that Stelzer would have to be given an extensive service at the Front after the end of his current film work.²⁰¹

We can surmise that no immediate further action against Hannes was taken, as he became a Luftwaffe pilot and was stationed, after the completion of his final *Besatzung Dora* post–production synchronization on 5 February 1943,²⁰² at the Fliegerhorst Schönwalde/Mark. That airfield was located 26 km from Berlin Tegel airport.

A file note from Oberregierungsrat Hamel, a senior civil servant and expert in the Film Department of the Propaganda Ministry, dated May 7, 1943, advised Dr. Goebbels’ personal assistant, Kurt Frowein, of Stelzer’s current service at Schönwalde/Mark. There are handwritten remarks in the margin of the file note which indicate that Hamel had called Stelzer’s Commander and spoken to him about Stelzer, and that he was told that the actor was “gifted with

200 Ibid.

201 Ibid.

202 Karl Ritter’s Tagebuch of that date.

very dynamic flying skills.”²⁰³ A second file note by Hamel dated May 11th, stated that:

The Minister has decided to review the Stelzer matter again after completion of the fighter pilot school course. You are requested to report again in about a quarter year.²⁰⁴

In the February 19, 1943 issue of the *Film-Kurier Tageszeitung* an article on Stelzer appeared in which his film career was recapped, and his close association with Karl Ritter in both military and ‘civilian’ films. The article stated:

In the new Ufa film *Besatzung Dora* Hannes Stalzer sits once again at the joystick of an airplane.²⁰⁵



Illustration 54 – Stelzer and Wolfgang Preiß share the *Besatzung Dora* film script in France, 1 September, 1942 (ullstein bild)

203 Barch-FA R9361-V/124631

204 Ibid.

205 *Film-Kurier Tageszeitung*, February 19, 1945, Heft # 42, S.3 "Porträt eines Schauspielers – Hannes Stelzer," -- G.H.



Illustration 55 – “Hannes Stelzer, who is going through his course of training as military pilot and has been granted leave to play the part of the pilot in *Dora*, in conversation with an officer who visited the school of aviation at the same time as he did.” (*Der Adler*, #19, 22 September 1942)

Stelzer was now 32 years old, a very experienced pilot, and his film work with *Dora* had come to an end. He was listed in the 1943 *Almanach of German Film-makers*, published by the Reichsfilmin-tendanten, but no further film roles were offered.²⁰⁶ It was inevitable that he would be called up for duty again sometime in 1943.

The then Head of Casting at Ufa, Jobst von Reiht-Zentier, whom Ritter had saved from a false Gestapo denunciation in 1936, recalled about Maria Bard:

In an effort to keep Stelzer for herself, she had made friends with the District Sergeant and constantly bribed him to leave Stelzer's call-up order alone. That had gone well for a while, but then suddenly became known. To avoid complications that threatened her, Maria Bard left the life that to her no longer appeared worth living without Stelzer.²⁰⁷

206 *Almanach der Deutschen Filmschaffenden (Filmdarsteller und Filmdarstellerin)* 1943. (Berlin, Max Hesses Verlag, 1943) S.274.

207 Reiht-Zanthier, J.von; *Sie Machten uns glücklich*, S.297.

According to Reihl–Zentier, Bard committed suicide in Potsdam after being found out, and Stelzer was ‘placed in an infamous punishment battalion and sent to the Front.’²⁰⁸ But as Stelzer (and by implication, Bard) had been found not guilty of having bribed his recruiting officer Kühl from various call–up notices between July 1939 and early 1941, we can only surmise that either a further police action against Bard took place because of new evidence (‘but then suddenly became known’) or, that she took her life from being deeply depressed by separation from her husband.

In early 1944 Stelzer’s war service placed him at the Luftwaffe observation airfield at Gross–Stein, Silesia (now in Poland) where he had an opportunity to rekindle his relationship with a former girlfriend in the nearby castle of the same name. The young woman had performed stunt work for the 1941 Tobis circus film *Die drei Codonas*, not far removed from the genre of Stelzer’s earlier *Truxa*.

The young woman had met Hannes in 1940, after his first marriage had ended and before he married Maria Bard. The girl’s family name must remain anonymous but her daughter, Delia Pacheco, stated that Stelzer had proposed marriage to her mother at that time, but had been turned down. Ms. Pacheco has very kindly provided a translation of two letters her mother received from Stelzer in October and December 1944, of which excerpts are published here for the first time, as well as one of the last photographs, if not the very last photo, taken of Stelzer, reproduced below. In October ’44 Stelzer’s Night Attack Group 5 Luftwaffe squadron was located in Felso–Abrany, Hungary, from where he wrote these letters.

208 Ibid, S.297. Maria Bard’s death is given as 6 April 1944 in the *CineGraph* encyclopedia, and it was reported in the 11 April 1944 issue #29 of the *Film–Kurier Tageszeitung* without an exact date of her death stated. More recently, it was given as 24 January 1944 in the *Das Kulturlexikon zum Dritten Reiches*, which is a more recent publication. Bard is buried in the Caputher Waldfriedhof.

In the East, 27 October 1944 Feldpost L.G.P.A. Wien Nr.
L53195

Dearest You,

I am resting on my cot – in a horse stable – on straw. A candle provides its flickering light – outside the front rumbles and booms! We are having a bit of rest between two sorties. Then it goes on without interruption.

From day to day one becomes more and more numb. One loses any facility to think between bugs and lice and all these people. One lives from one sortie to the next – thinks of food – otherwise nothing. A long time ago one forgot to have longings, hopes. Not even does one long for a nice bed or a warm bath merely for quiet, for being alone with oneself, with one's thoughts – to know one is not an animal, is still something like a human! Crammed together with 30 men, one is never alone. The most beautiful moments are still in the airplane, flying through the night!

We live like a band of robbers, in a palace one day, in a horse stable the next, then again in a tent – or we sleep a few hours in the airplane. Iwan is always after us. We're never at the same place for more than 2 or 3 days. They have been all around us, but thus far have not nabbed us.

Even if all turns out all right, I don't believe in any sort of future. After the war there will be no life for any of us.

Alas, I cannot give you any encouragement. I believe that if we do not get killed first, we will all die as resistance fighters, because from this existence I'll never find my way back into another life!

Say hello to Spatz,²⁰⁹ if she were here I would have an awful lot of chocolate, candy and cookies for her. Farewell, a thousand dear thoughts! H.

²⁰⁹ Spatz is the nickname of Delia Pacheco, the daughter of Stelzer's girlfriend at Gross-Stein. Ms. Delia Pacheco is the copyright holder of the two Stelzer letter excerpts and the 1944 photograph – Illustration #57 – reproduced in this Chapter. One of Ms. Pacheco's middle names is Hansi, and she believes that Hannes Stelzer was her godfather.

Then a letter written just two weeks before his death:

12 December 1944 Feldpost L.G.P.A. Wien Nr. L53195

Dearest Being –

Quietly, ever so quietly millions of white flakes are falling from the sky and cover the earth and all of its human debris – clothing the earth in a wondrous new gown. And how long before the white is covered with blood and dirt?

A yearning arises, to be going through deeply snowed-in, dark pine forests! Each fir tree with its load of snow is a miracle. To walk deeply snow-covered paths on which no human foot has yet trodden. Walk and walk and walk – and like a child, one marvels at the miracle “Nature.”

How often I have spent Christmas festivities – the New Year – all by myself in remote huts high up in the mountains. It was wonderful, to be far from the hustle and bustle of opeople! Was I happy! Great, great longings were inside me! Yes, it is not good that man is alone – thus it is said! Each soul needs its second half – to be alone with it, as a twosome!

If the weather is fairly good, I shall experience a new kind of Christmas and New Year’s Eve, at least new for me. We will be flying all those nights. How I will let it fill me to the fullest (as the saying goes here). And, if possible I will be far away from all the people here!

Dearest You – do I have to tell you that my thoughts will be with you? It has to be like that so as to see the candlelight in the eyes of your two little ones and Uncle Hannes has sent no dolls! But he no longer knows what a city looks like. Chocolates, candy, he has in abundance, but no way to send them to Gross-Stein.

Dearest You – thoughts are wonderful – reality [for them to come true] is better — to be allowed to take you in my arms — to be able to begin a New Year with you — it would be beautiful —.

New Year’s Eve at 12 o’clock I shall drink a glass – with you –

and doing so, shall dream that you are with me!

Farewell beloved ... Hannes

On 27 December 1944, Stelzer died in a plane crash near the small village of Zemné (today in southern Slovakia) some 24 kilometers northwest of Komáron, Hungary, due to either Soviet flak or being shot down by an enemy pilot during a snowstorm, according to a Wehrmacht report.²¹⁰ He was 34 years old. Although he made no written remarks about Stelzer's death, Karl Ritter glued the young actor's death notice prominently onto the very front page of his 1945 diary.²¹¹



Illustration 56 – A typical Zemké cornfield in July 2017. Author's photo.

In a letter to Dr. Goebbels from Dr. Hans–Eric Schrade, Geschäftsführer der Reichstheaterkammer dated 27 January 1945 a report on the current military status of seven artists is provided. Under the section on Hannes Stelzer, it is stated that “an Oberfeldwebel

210 A Corporal (Ogfr). Philipp Fischer was also named as having died with Stelzer.

211 Ritter, K; Tagebuch, 1945.

in Stelzer's fighter squadron reported today that Stelzer, upon returning from a successful enemy sortie, for which he has been awarded an Iron Cross 1st Class, flew into a high voltage line in a snowstorm, crashed and found a hero's death."²¹²

The *Film-Nachrichten* newspaper dated the same day had a front page Eulogy to Hannes Stelzer, written by Editor and journalist Felix Henseleit, which is truncated here:

The news of Hannes Stelzers' heroic death has deeply shaken all in the greater community where the achievements of this young actor had long made him a household name.

Before Hannes Stelzer took the field as a pilot a few years ago, we saw him, even during the war, in some great roles that have defined his artistic character in a particularly crucial way. These were the roles in films by Karl Ritter, in the critical years as a young actor, anxious to find his artistic expression, style and form. We saw him for the last time in the film work Professor Ritter created from the field of air reconnaissance,²¹³ and particularly memorable to us is the image that Hannes Stelzer imprinted on the film *Stukas*, in which he was a young officer under Professor Ritter's direction.

In the films that have been mentioned here, Hannes Stelzer had become a household name for the film audience. That he had the attitude that said film roles demanded in real life, as evidenced by the service to his country, his heroic death is now witness, which will always keep alive the memory of him by his film roles.

A life came to an end, which leaves traces in the memories of thousands that cannot be obliterated with the day and also not with the years.²¹⁴

212 Barch-FA R9361-V/124934

213 *Besatzung Dora* is obviously meant here, although the film was never shown publicly.

214 *Film-Nachrichten*, Mittelungsblatt für den Gesamtbereich des deutschen Filmschaffens, Berlin, Sonnabend, 27. Januar 1945, #4.



Illustration 57 – The war-weary actor in 1944, in his real Luftwaffe uniform, in a previously unpublished photograph. (Courtesy Ms. Delia Pacheco, © Delia Pacheco and reprinted with permission.)

Maria Bard had been buried at the Caputher Waldfriedhof not far from the house at Potsdamerstraße 24 in which she and Hannes had lived since 1941. Her grave still exists and to the left of it lies a large stone marker which states ‘In Memory of Hannes Stelzer, Fallen, 1944.’ It is not known when this marker was placed there, although it is very weather-beaten, or by whom, but undoubtedly by either his Ufa film colleagues or comrades he befriended in the Luftwaffe during the war.

The young actor’s own life thus ended in the heroic death portrayed so memorably in the aviation films in which he starred – the apotheosis of Zeitfilms as ‘living history’ having proven to be all too sadly true.