

Phil Laplante

plaplante@psu.edu

Heaven, Hell or Hoboken by Christmas

Manager's office, Lipton Tea Factory and Warehouse, intersection of 1500 Washington Street and 1500 Hudson Street, July 30, 1918.

Robert Smithers, Lipton Tea general manager, is worried. He is worried because many production and delivery deadlines are being missed with demand for the famous tea bags that his company produces at historic highs. Smithers, a tall thin man with greased back black hair and a thin mustache is writing in a ledger. He wears a light blue three-piece suit, with a white celluloid collar and wire frame glasses.

Smithers' office is large and messy. His desk is strewn with piles of papers – with more on the floor. Wooden file cabinets are also bursting with documents. There are several shelving units in the room, filled with ledgers, tea samples in various jars, and bottles of chemicals. A candlestick telephone is on the desk along with an open ledger book, a stoppered bottle of clear liquid and an electric contraption about the size of a picnic basket. Nearby, a wire waste can overflows with crumpled paper.

The large office overlooks the adjacent pier where he can see crates of product being loaded onto a large steamship. It is very hot day -- it's been hot and dry for weeks, but a soft breeze through the open window and an electric overhead fan provide some relief.

Smithers writes thoughtfully in his ledger. Then his pencil breaks.

“Oh my, not again.”

He turns to a metal box-like contraption on a stand near his desk. The device is one of the new Farnham electric pencil sharpeners – a gift from a recent acquaintance, some professor who is friends with his boss, Sir Thomas Lipton. Smithers flips a switch on the device, places the pencil in the opening, and smiles, pleased that the device quickly creates a reasonable point at the tip of the pencil.

“Ah, that’s better.”

He returns to his writing, but the pencil breaks again.

“Darn.”

He opens his desk draw, opens a box of ‘Venus’ pencils, manufactured by the American Lead Pencil Company, located only a few blocks away from the Lipton Tea factory. These are the best pencils America has to offer, not as good as the German Faber or Stadler pencils, but these have been embargoed due to the war. He withdraws a Venus pencil, and using the newfangled electric machine, sharpens it. He returns to his writing, then, the pencil breaks yet again.

“Tarnation!”

The phone rings.

Smithers turns to answer the telephone, picks up the receiver in his left hand and brings it to his left ear. He holds the mouthpiece in his right hand to speak.

“Hello.”

Some garbled speaking can be heard.

“Hello....I am sorry I cannot hear you... what did you say? I am afraid this is a very bad connection.”

There is more garbled speech. The Farnham sharpener machine suddenly expels a spark.

“Can you please speak louder ? I cannot understand what you are saying.”

The Farnham emits another spark, then another, then more as smoke begins to waft from the device. A spark lands in the wastebasket, and it smolders, then the paper in the basket catches fire. Smithers sees the flames and double takes.

“Oh my, oh my!”

He drops the mouthpiece and receiver and snatches the water bottle, unstoppers it with his teeth, and douses the contents on the bottle on the fire. But rather than extinguishing the fire the wastebasket erupts like a volcano sending flames out in all directions. Immediately the many pages on and around Smithers’ desk ignite, then the books, ledgers, tea samples and chemicals bottles. Some of the bottles burst. A spark leaps and ignites Smithers’ shirt collar. He wails in terror. Within moments Smithers’ office is an inferno, and he is completely enveloped in smoke and then flames. Smithers can be heard coughing and crying for help, but these are his last utterances.

Berlin, Germany, September 11, 1952, office of the Chancellor of Germany

Chancellor Heinrich Gutman an overweight, grey bearded, blue-eyed man sits in a grand chair in large Mahogany appointed office. He is meticulous and distinguished in both dress and bearing. His black pinstripe three-piece suit and thin metal glasses embellish his appearance as some distinguished professor. There is a knock at the door.

“Please come in.”

A small, thin and much younger, man with slicked back blonde hair, Hans Kreuger, is standing at the open door holding a large black notebook in the crook of his left arm, a black valise at his right side. He is wearing a neat but slightly worn two-piece black suit.

“Ah, please take a seat Herr Kreuger, it is nice to see you again.”

Kreuger sits down on a chair in front of Gutman’s desk and places his valise on the floor. He clutches the notebook.

“Thank you, Herr Chancellor, thank you for agreeing to continue this interview.” The young man takes a seat in front of the desk.

“Of course, Herr Kreuger, ... would you like some tea?”

“Yes, thank you Herr Chancellor.”

Chancellor Gutman pours some tea “it’s American, not Lipton’s famous tea, of course. Sadly, I knew Sir Thomas Lipton before his premature death.”

“I’m afraid I do not know anything about this Lipton, Herr Chancellor.”

Gutman takes a sip of his tea.

“Ah, I see. My dear Herr Kreuger, Lipton Tea was once one of the leading manufacturers of tea and tea products, including teabags, and it had its main factory and warehouse in Hoboken New Jersey. I assume you know from your research that I was a professor at the University there before and during the Great War.

“I did. Stevens Institute of Technology is across the river from Manhattan, New York, correct, Herr Chancellor?”

“Yes, in Hoboken, New Jersey – they called it the ‘Mile Square City,’ which was precisely its dimensions. I was introduced to Lipton there at a party. Sir Thomas and I became friends, so when I asked him for a tour of his tea warehouse and factory, he was extremely happy to accommodate me. In fact, we became regular lunch or tea-time companions at the plant. What a terrible shame that the factory burned down all those years ago. I was very sorry to hear that he died in that conflagration. Did you know that the Great Hoboken Fire started at Lipton’s factory?”

“I have heard of that fire, Herr Gutman, but the details of that disaster and its aftermath are still very unclear to me, and to the public at large, to be frank. Since you were there at the time, I wonder how you escaped – I understand several thousands died. Would you be willing to include some of your own reflections on that event in your biography, Herr Chancellor?”

Gutman adjusts his bow tie.

“Yes, I would, in fact one of my main purposes in inviting you to write my biography was so that I could share those experiences, to purge my demons, so to say, as this event deeply affected me. In fact, I must admit I would not have entered politics and experienced such an, ahem, meteoric political ascendancy if it were not for that vignette in history. “

“Please tell, then Herr Chancellor, I am your faithful servant in recording every detail.”

Kreuger withdraws a Mont Blanc pen from the valise and opens his notebook.

“Very well, let us begin. It is early 1913. As you probably know, after completing my doctoral studies in Electrical Engineering at Goettingen, through certain connections, I was offered a position as Assistant Professor at the prestigious Stevens Institute in Hoboken, New Jersey. I was eager to accept this post for many reasons. Hoboken was a major hub for our

shipping lines – the Hamburg-American Line and North German Lloyd Steamship Company owned slips there, so there were many people passing through from Germany and easy access to anything I wanted from home. Hoboken had a dominant ethnic German population – about 26% of its citizens. With so many compatriots and many German stores, restaurants and biergartens in the city, it would not feel so foreign to me.

The college was immediately across the Hudson River from Manhattan, and I sensed that there were many opportunities there – both personal and professional. One of my colleagues at Stevens would be Professor Hazeltine, who was then working on the most advanced radio receiver technology, which was of great interest to me and my sponsors here.”

“So, you assimilated very quickly then, Herr Chancellor?”

“Oh yes, I quickly made friends with many Germans – so I was made to feel immediately welcome. It was glorious for the first few years, much fraternization and celebration and enjoyment of the American culture, while preserving our own. I made many friends and important connections in the community.

There were several manufacturing businesses in that mile square city including zipper, slide rule, and pencil factories, and of course, Lipton’s Tea plant. At the time, Hoboken was also famous for originating some of the world’s favorite treats including the Wonder Bread, waffle ice cream cone and that curious Oreo cookie. It is a shame that the Oreo became extinct due to the fire as I loved them. But I digress.”

Gutman takes another sip of tea.

“How did the situation change when America entered the war, Herr Chancellor?”

“Oh, it changed dramatically, my young friend. Soon after war was declared by America, Hoboken swelled with arriving soldiers or ‘doughboys’ as they came to be known. Hoboken became the primary port of embarkation for these doughboys to Europe. The choice of Hoboken was no surprise to me. You see the city’s strategic location across from Manhattan, with established piers and rail connections, made it ideal for this role.

The Americans were quite cavalier in their entry into the war, and the choice of Hoboken with its Elysian Park highlighted the irony – it was where the first official game of American Baseball was played in 1846. They thought the war was going to be fun and games.

The American commanding General, John Pershing, even came up with a quaint slogan: “Heaven, Hell, or Hoboken... by Christmas,” reflecting his belief that American soldiers would return home quickly via Hoboken, by rapid destruction of our beloved fatherland.”

“The American entry into the war must have made things difficult for our compatriots living there.”

“Indeed, it was a challenge. With anti-German sentiment and American soldiers everywhere, it was a dangerous time for us.”

Gutman closes his eyes, and pauses, then continues.

“By late 1914 the situation for us in Hoboken started changing. When the Great War began, American sentiment began to slowly turn against Germans, Austrians, Hungarians and even those who were born in America but of Germanic blood. We were quietly ignored, then mocked, then, eventually, openly discriminated against.

This was bad enough, but when Wilson declared war on the fatherland on April 1917, things got much worse. Many of us were designated “enemy aliens,” with some, like my friend Rev. Dr. Bruckner of St. Matthew’s German Lutheran Church, arrested and interned at Ellis Island. Other of our compatriots were forcibly relocated, though some were wise enough to leave voluntarily.

The city was placed under martial law and my favorite biergartens and restaurants were closed. Our ports and ships were seized and every German owned business suffered as the government took control of the port and city.”

Kreuger is scribbling furiously, then looks up at Gutman.

“But you stayed, Herr Chancellor?”

Gutman closes his eyes, pauses, takes a deep breath and a longer exhalation. He opened tired eyes.

“Yes, I stayed. I was somewhat protected due to my position and reputation. I loved my German friends in Hoboken, whom I wanted to help, and I still had much work to do.”

“You said you were going to talk about the Great Fire, Herr Chancellor?”

“Oh yes, I was momentarily lost in the past. More tea? Yes, good.”

Gutman pours more tea.

“I mentioned that the fire started at Lipton’s factory. It was located at 500 Washington Street and 1500 Hudson Street, along the city’s waterfront and right next to the piers. The cause of the fire was quite curious. Apparently, an overworked manager was having trouble with constantly breaking pencils and that caused an unfortunate distraction, which led to the fire.”

Kreuger looks up, surprised.

“Pencils, Herr Chancellor?”

“Yes, pencils. You see, due to the embargo of German manufactured goods to America after the declaration of war, pencils became in short supply. As you know the finest pencils have always been manufactured by Faber and also Staedtler. With those prohibited to Americans, it placed a great strain on their own, inferior manufacturing capacity. As it so happened Hoboken’s American Lead Pencil Company on 5th and Willow, was the leading American source. Under increased demand the quality of their pencils declined rapidly. Something must have happened with their manufacturing processes because inferior pencils were shipped across American, including to the Lipton factory. It was unfortunate that Herr Taylor, I mean, Frederick W. Taylor, was unavailable to help the Americans. He was a famous graduate of Stevens -- the father of scientific management in fact. He advocated for increased quality control measures and sampled manufacturing output, techniques that our engineers have been using for decades. Had the pencil factory management been able to engage him I suspect the quality situation would have been resolved. But he was quite busy with other projects far away.

In any case, apparently, this Lipton Tea manager was preoccupied trying to sharpen some pencils with an electric sharpening machine, when a phone call distracted him. He did not notice a spark from the device igniting paper in a wastebasket next to his desk. By the time he noticed the fire, he panicked and reached for what appeared to be a bottle of water on his desk. It was, in fact, a fire accelerant, left accidentally by one of the cleaning matrons.

The fire spread quickly from the office to the rest of the factory and warehouse, which was loaded with dried teas, wood for the drying kilns, paper for the teabags, and various chemicals used for cleaning and preparation of the tea.”

Kreuger nods as he writes furiously. He pauses.

Now Gutman reaches for a walnut box on his desk. Opens it and withdraws a cigar and shows it to Kreuger.

“Cigar, Herr Kreuger?”

“No, thank you Herr Chancellor.”

Gutman withdraws a cutter and book of matches from the cigar box, delicately cuts the tip off the cigar and then places the cigar in his mouth, strikes the match and begins puffing as he puts the match to the cigar. Delicate and fragrant smoke emits from the cigar as Gutman puffs like a fish.

Kreuger, somewhat bothered by the smoke, blinks and fidgets.

“Herr Chancellor, did they not have some way to put out the fire in the factory?”

“The factory had a water sprinkler system in a few places, but there was no master control valve. Only a couple of the systems were activated in the panic, and the buildings had to be quickly evacuated. Also, an investigation showed that some of the areas had had their systems disabled, whether by mischief or accident was not determined. But these systems probably would have been insufficient even if fully activated. You see, it had been a very hot and dry spring and summer, and there had been many fires in the city. The reservoirs were low so that there was probably insufficient water pressure to extinguish the flames.”

“What about the fire department, Herr Gutman?”

Gutman is puffing on the cigar, clearly enjoying it.

“ The Hoboken Fire Department was exhausted from fighting fires all spring and summer, personnel were depleted due to injuries and conscription, and much equipment was unavailable due to damage and overuse. With the dry heat, all the city’s trees and bushes were kindling, and though many of the buildings were brick, there were still wooden features and canvas awnings so that the fire ravaged the city very quickly.

Another American city, Salem Massachusetts, had experienced a terrible fire in 1914. Salem was about half the population of Hoboken and also a hub for manufacturing. About one quarter of the city was destroyed leaving many homeless and jobless. Fortunately, there were relatively few casualties. Yet the Americans had learned nothing about fire prevention, inspection, and suppression from that experience. So, Hoboken suffered.”

“What was the fire like, Herr Chancellor?”

“The fire spread rapidly from the Tea factory, accelerated by the creosote-soaked piers and widespread fuel tanks, causing explosions and issuing huge plumes of acrid and poisonous smoke. The fire continued along the piers from 15th to First streets all the way to the railroad terminal at Hudson place and it also spread West across much of the city from River, Hudson, Washington, and Bloomfield Streets, all the way to Monroe Street, leaving a band of destruction and terror. It destroyed homes, schools, businesses – including that pencil factory, and the train station.”

“Mine Gott, Herr Chancellor, what about the people?”

“This is the most unfortunate aspect of this story, Herr Kreuger, most of the population was trapped. With the train station and piers destroyed there were few options for escape. There were a few minor roads out, but with no buses, and few automobiles, those who could escape did so mostly by foot to Jersey City – only a couple of kilometers away.”

Gutman pauses and closes his eyes, which are slightly moist. He opens his eyes.

“In a city of more than 70,000 with at least another 10,000 soldiers present, many died. More than 5,000 people – citizens, including Germans, students and faculty at the college, soldiers, perished with many thousands more injured.

These were mostly ordinary citizens, nameless statistics. But they all had names, and I know many of them. I mourn for all the Germans lost, but also for the Americans that I knew. For example, I was acquainted with a charming young city Democratic Ward Captain named Dolly Sinatra -- she died along with her husband and young son, Francis. Smoke inhalation I am told.

I had a promising young student with a talent for art, named Alexander Calder – he volunteered to help evacuate citizens on Washington street, but was incinerated. Lipton, of course, and my dear friend Professor Hazeltine also died.” Germans died, of course, but not as many as you might think. Many of them had exited the city for various vacations and family visits prior to the fire. It was almost as if they had some premonition of danger.”

Kreuger looks up, teary eyed.

“That is terrible. Herr Gutman. I am sorry. But what happened to the city, I mean, I assume they tried to rebuild it, but it could no longer be an embarkation point for troops, correct?”

“That is correct, Herr Kreuger. The city was effectively destroyed. Only some of the stone buildings withstood the fire, but Hoboken was not the same. It is now more of an extension of Manhattan than a unique destination.

Of course, it was impossible to use it further as an embarkation port – or any other kind of port for many years. Much of Hoboken was uninhabitable for many months due to the poisonous smoke and rubble. The embarkation of the surviving troops was delayed by many months as they were needed for rescue, cleanup, and rebuilding operations.

The Americans had to come up with a new plan for embarking their troops. Rallying to the city of his alma mater, famous Engineer Henry Gantt, who invented the planning chart technique which we use, offered his assistance to develop new embarkation plans. However, despite best efforts, the dispersed embarkation strategy was far less efficient than one using the port at Hoboken.”

Gutman puffs on the cigar and blows out a ring of smoke.

“Herr Chancellor, would you say this delay in embarking troops had a significant effect on the war’s outcome?”

Gutman explodes with laughter.

“But of course, Herr Kreuger! The German High Command knew the Allies were trying to gather for a strong push through the Meuse–Argonne region sometime in late September of that year. The Allies needed a large American force to make the plan work. But with the American force delayed this push never happened. Had it occurred, who knows what the outcome would have been? But I think that offensive would have broken our back and destroyed our will to fight.

But as you know the significant delay in embarking more American troops allowed time for reflection. As the former governor of NJ and president of Princeton University, Wilson was shaken and lost his nerve for war. The American taste for war also soured. The death toll from the fire caused the Americans to rethink their participation. The event also helped highlight some of the discrimination problems against Germans in Hoboken. American opinion began changing from pro-Ally to neutral again.

You know the rest of the history – with public opinion changed, the United States Congress undeclared war on the Central Powers to focus on its internal problems. With Russia and the Americans out of the War, and all sides exhausted, it was inevitable that a just peace could be reached in a few months.”

“Yes, I understand all that Herr Gutman. Being only 30, I have been lucky to know only worldwide peace and prosperity. The League of Nations, as Wilson envisioned, has truly ensured a harmonious existence for all but those who resist.

But I wonder what would have happened if the Americans had stayed in the war, and had been able to bring their forces here on schedule and in significant numbers?”

Gutman puffs furiously on the cigar.

“Herr Kreuger, we can only speculate. But as I mentioned, I feel certain if that had happened, if American had been able to fully turn her might on us, Germany would have had to eventually sue for peace – and under very unfavorable terms for us. Having lived in America and scene their capabilities and knowing their people, I fear what a fully mobilized and committed American nation would have posed to Germany.

Thank God we never had to experience that eventuality. But I do lament the destruction of a city and its people, which were very dear to me. Many had to die, and a city had to die, but it is likely that many hundreds of thousands more lived because of their sacrifice.

Indeed, Pershing was right – the choices were Heaven, Hell or Hoboken. We got to Heaven, unfortunately we had to go through Hell and lose Hoboken to get there.”

Kreuger finishes scribbling. He pauses and then looks at the ceiling quizzically, then looks at Gutman.

“This is an amazing story Herr Chancellor. But it occurs to me – how do you know all these details about the causes of the fire. Was the investigation that thorough? Did you undertake research on this event? I would think that many of the players in this melodrama had died in that fire– the manager, the cleaning matron, other important officials who could have shed light on its causes.”

A broad smile crosses Gutman’s face.

“Yes, Herr Kreuger, it difficult to imagine how anyone could know all these details, aside from mere speculation. Yes, those people you mentioned died in the fire, and many others who probably knew some element of this story. But I am certain that I am the only one who knows everything about the fire.”

The chancellor draws heavily on the cigar and emits a large plume of smoke, which causes Kreuger to blink furiously.

“I mentioned that I stayed in Hoboken after the declaration of war because I had work to do. You see, I was recruited by the Abteilung – the secret service as it was called then -- before my

graduation from Goettingen. My mission was to be an embedded agent, to collect information, identify friends and foes, and to disrupt the functioning the American war machine should America declare war on Germany.

My assignment to Hoboken was no accident. We knew that many important tipping points could be created there. I thought about sabotaging the slide rule factory, but then I realized more information could be had by following the trail of large orders for slide rules, which are quite important for ballistic and engineered military structure calculations.

Then I had the idea of disrupting the supply of pencils. It seems improbable, but they are so important, in many ways, to a military effort. It was upon my recommendation that Germany embargoed pencils. I then took it upon myself to bribe workers to perform a soft sabotage at the pencil factory by introducing impurities into the clay/lead mixtures.

I arranged for Frederick W. Taylor, who would have been drawn back to his roots in Hoboken, to be otherwise occupied with lucrative contracts in remote parts of the country.

I even thought about sabotaging the Wonder Bread, Oreo and waffle cone operations to affect morale, but my handlers thought this petty and that it would give an indication that there was a functional enemy cell in the area. I agreed with their assessment. Besides, I loved those goodies too much to interfere with their production. It is unfortunate that all those plants burned, and those products have been long unavailable.

But then as the dry hot spring continued into the summer, the idea of a great fire came to me. I paid local hooligans to start small fires and to disable fire protection mechanisms throughout the city. I used my occasional visits to Sir Thomas at his plant to reconnoiter and to disable fire protection there.

I realized the manager's office was the perfect location to start a fire as it was packed with documents, dried teas samples, chemicals and it was very close to the main warehouse. I need a way to get the manager at his desk and cause him to spark a fire at a time of my choosing. The breaking pencils were the key. So, after an introduction by Lipton, and upon hearing about his troubles with constantly breaking pencils, I presented the manager with the new electric Farnham pencil sharpener as gift to ease his burden. Of course, I had booby-trapped the sharpener with a hidden watch-timer so that it would spark at my selected time. And on that day, I bribed the matron to leave a bottle of acetone, which I supplied, on the manager's desk, convincing her that he had asked me for it. It was I who made the call to the manager later that day, to make sure he was near the pencil sharpener and the desk."

"Astounding, Herr Chancellor, simply astounding. So, the breaking pencils and phone call were the reason that he was at the sharpener, near the wastebasket and acetone when the timer went off."

"Astute observation my young friend."

Kreuger smiles proudly.

"And it was you who advised the German citizens to be away that week, Herr Chancellor?"

Gutman smiles again.

"Very good. It was I and several of my paid subordinates who made those quiet recommendations."

"Did you know, Herr Chancellor, that the spiking of the pencils and the tea plant fire would be so disruptive to the American war effort that they would withdraw?"

“No, Herr Kreuger, I had hoped to cause considerable damage, but I did not think that the event would so deter the Americans. I suppose it was the significant loss of life and destruction of the city. Nor could I know that my role in reversing the Americans would give me the honors and awards, of which you are aware, that launched my political career and led me to the office of Chancellor.

During the Great War, I had hoped that the tainted pencils would cause much mischief, large and small. I knew it was possible that one event might even lead to a great victory, as it did in Hoboken. But in fact, there are other interesting examples – but those are stories for another day.”

Gutman puts out the cigar in an ashtray on his desk.

Author’s Note: I was an undergraduate student at Stevens from 1979 through 1983. During that period dozens of fires destroyed many of the city’s low-rent apartment complexes, killing 56 people. These fires were all determined to be arson. I commuted to the school for two years via train, making the near mile long walk from the station to Stevens every day. I then converted to a resident status for my last two years, living in a dorm for one year then in my fraternity house – an historic brownstone designed and owned by a well-known German architect. During this time I explored much of the mile square city on foot. The idea that a German spy-cell might have been operating in Hoboken during World War I had occurred to me during these walks.

I continued my graduate studies at Stevens, part-time, through 1990, earning my PhD and eventually teaching as an adjunct professor there for a few years. During this period Hoboken experienced a Renaissance with luxury apartments, townhouses, high-end restaurants and

boutique stores being built regularly. The nearly three-quarter mile long section of docks along River Street (renamed Frank Sinatra Drive) was converted into a beautiful waterfront park.

After a 15-year absence I visited Hoboken in 2023. I had difficulty recognizing much of the city and even the Stevens Campus, which had also experienced tremendous change. Linking the fire and destruction of Hoboken to an alternate future occurred to me during my most recent visit to this transformed city.