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THE BIG PONDER

Airlines

By Florenz Gilly and Leon Ginzel

[AMBIENT SOUNDS]

Leon Ginzel: Ok. Florenz, do you remember your first transatlantic flight?

Florenz Gilly: That must have been in 2000, I believe. A continental flight from Frankfurt to either Tampa, Florida, or Fort Lauderdale. I am not sure. On our way to Frankfurt, we actually hit an air pocket.

Leon Ginzel: An air pocket?!

Florenz Gilly: Yes. Dropped some couple hundred meters down in free fall. You know, red wine and tomato juice spilling everywhere. And when the pilot finally regained control over the aircraft, everyone sighed, you know, in relief.

Leon Ginzel: For me, it sounds like a nightmare.

Florenz Gilly: Kind of, but, you know, I was too small to realize the stakes. For me, flying was still one big adventure. This feeling you get in your stomach the second the airplane takes off and accelerates – like in a roller coaster – there is still nothing that could beat that!

Leon Ginzel: Mm-hmm.

Florenz Gilly: What about you, Leon? When did you first fly overseas?

Leon Ginzel: Well, my first transatlantic crossing was ten years ago, from Brussels to Canada. Thing was that the flight was so early in the morning that we have [SIC] to go to Brussels the day before. Then, we slept on the bench at the airport near like a snack bar. With neon lights flashing the whole night.

Florenz Gilly: Comfy!

Leon Ginzel: And at 5 a.m, in the morning, and – exactly – there was a cleaning machine starting right next to us. But the flight itself was really, really nice. Lot of space, it was an older plane. Very nice crew. Nice food and so on. And it felt really like a new way to travel to also a new world.

Florenz Gilly: Exciting!

Leon Ginzel: Fun story: On our way to the exit, we were stopped at the baggage claim by the police because the search dog had sniffed something.

Florenz Gilly: What? Why?

Leon Ginzel: You don't believe it! It was because of an apple! Deep inside my bag. And the clever dog smelled the apple, and it's forbidden to import them. And then our whole luggage was double-checked.

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: Oh, wow! An apple.

Leon Ginzel: [AMBIENT SOUNDS] Dear passengers, welcome aboard this BIG PONDER flight from Berlin city to Washington, D.C., with stops in Berlin-Tempelhof and Frankfurt am Main. My name is Leon Ginzel and sitting next to me is my co-host Florenz Gilly. In the next 28 minutes or so, we will take a deep dive into the history of aviation and highlight the importance of air travel between Germany and the U.S. We will meet an incredible young German woman, which looped around the Statue of Liberty, and we will learn how the work of pilots and stewardesses have [SIC] changed during the last couple of years. And we will discuss how the climate crisis will change the way we travel with planes. So, please fasten your seat belt and leave your earbuds in at all times. And now, sit back and enjoy the flight.

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: The 1930s mark the beginning of commercial air traffic across the big pond.

Leon Ginzel: Apart from propeller-driven aircrafts, there was a different kind of flying objects occupying the air space: humongous 'airships.' Big hydrogen-filled vehicles, which looked like gigantic cigars.

[AMBIENT SOUNDS]

Florenz Gilly: The so-called Zeppelin took up to three days to fly from Frankfurt to New York ...

Leon Ginzel: I mean, still quite short if you consider that going overseas by ship took several weeks.

Florenz Gilly: ... And it was a real technical sensation at the time.

Leon: Probably the most famous of all airships was the Hindenburg, which completed several roundtrips between Germany and the U.S. in the 1930s.

Florenz Gilly: Until this one day in the spring of 1937, May 6th. A rainy day.

[AMBIENT SOUNDS]

Herbert Morrison: It's starting to rain again. The rain has slacked up a little bit.

Florenz Gilly: That's the voice of Herbert Morrison. A 31-year-old radio producer from Pennsylvania who worked for WLS in Chicago at the time. Morrison became a pioneer of live broadcasting.

[MUSIC]

Herbert Morrison: It's starting to rain again. The rain has slacked up a little bit. The back motors of the ship are just holding it just enough to keep it from – It burst into flames! Get this, Charlie! Get this, Charlie! It's fire and it's crashing! It's crashing terrible! Oh my! Get out of the way, please! It's burning and bursting into flames and it's falling on the mooring mast and all the folks between it. This is terrible; this is one of the worst of the worst catastrophes in the world. Oh it's ... it's flames ... Crashing ... Oh! Oh, four or five hundred feet into the sky, and it's a terrific crash, ladies and gentlemen. There's smoke, and there's flames now, and the frame is crashing to the ground, not quite to the mooring mast. Oh the humanity! And all the passengers screaming around here! I told them ... [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

Leon Ginzell: The Hindenburg was on its way from Frankfurt to New York. It already had a massive delay due to strong headwinds over the Atlantic. At the airport in Lakehurst, the weather conditions were also poor that day.

Florenz Gilly: We're talking thunderstorms and heavy rainfall.

Leon Ginzell: So, the captain decided to change the course and flew over to Jersey Shore. People in Manhattan rushed out into the streets to watch this spectacular appearance up in the sky.

Florenz Gilly: On the second approach to land in Lakehurst, the Hindenburg tried to tie the air vessel with ropes to a high mooring mast. That's when things started to go wrong.

Herbert Morrison: Oh the humanity! All the passengers screaming around here! I told them I can't even talk to people. [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

Florenz Gilly: 35 people died in the explosion. It was the end of an era. The Hindenburg disaster was one of many catastrophes that changed the route that aviation would take forever.

Leon Ginzell: I mean the history of air travel is full of that: firsts and lasts. Maiden flights, records, tragedies ...

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: What many of us don't know though is that from day one, there have been female pilots. But they aren't as well-known as their male counterparts.

[MUSIC]

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Ich erinnere mich auch, dass ich in Chicago eine junge Pilotin gesehen habe. Das tut dann tatsächlich gut, wenn man sieht, es gibt welche!

[VOICEOVER] I remember that one time in Chicago when I saw a young female pilot. Seeing that women pilots do exist just felt so good.

Leon Ginzel: So, Florenz, you talked to Sabine Kalff, literary scholar from Berlin, about the role women played in aviation.

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Ich glaube das kann man heutzutage gar nicht mehr so nachvollziehen, diese Flugbegeisterung, die da am Anfang des Jahrhunderts herrscht.

[VOICEOVER] Today, it's so hard to imagine the flight enthusiasm in the beginning of the 20th century.

Florenz Gilly: Here and abroad, all female pilots had to overcome barriers.

Leon Ginzel: Women weren't allowed to fly commercially until certain years.

Florenz Gilly: And that, according to Sabine Kalff, is mostly because men were scared of female competition.

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Dahinter steht wirklich die Verteidigung der Pfründe, kann man nicht anders sagen. Man sieht da ist Geld zu verdienen und das wird [Frauen] verwehrt.

Florenz: Thea Rasche, a strong, cheerful person from North Rhine-Westphalia, became the country's first woman to obtain a flying license after the First World War.

Leon Ginzel: And she could have become the first woman to cross the Atlantic Ocean by plane, if the American Amelia Earhart wasn't faster.

Florenz Gilly: Against the will of her father, Rasche learned to fly and got an offer to take a shot at crossing the Atlantic.

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: And so one day, she took her Flamingo, that's what her propeller aircraft was called, brought it to Southampton, England, and shipped it to the U.S.

Leon Ginzel: Wait. She took a ship?

Florenz Gilly: Yeah, that was also my reaction when Sabine Kalff told me. Apparently, even bigger aircraft needed tailwind.

Leon Ginzel: Same reason why today, flying from the U.S. to Germany takes less time than the other way around.

Florenz: Exactly. So, Rasche took the ship and arrived in New York, where she received a warm welcome and was ensnared by journalists and showered with flowers.

[AMBIENT SOUNDS]

Leon Ginzel: And U.S. media, who just called her the 'Flying Fräulein,' loved Thea Rasche:
[READING HEADLINES ALOUD] "Thea Rasche Goes Silent after Bruchlanding in the Hudson River! Aircraft destroyed," "Thousands Watch the Flying Fräulein Looping Around the Statue of Liberty," "German Pilot Comes Second in All-female Flight Race Powder Puff Derby!"

Florenz Gilly: The headline "German Thea Rasche First Woman to Cross the Atlantic Ocean by Plane," however, was never printed. Bad weather and technical issues prevented her from setting a world record.

Leon Ginzel: I wonder what flying meant to those women. Was it some sort of vehicle of emancipation?

Florenz Gilly: Well, Melitta Schiller, for example, another German pilot, summed up her position in a catchphrase:

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Melitta Schiller sagt in einer Rede auch den schönen Satz: Wir Fliegerinnen sind keine Suffragettes.

Florenz Gilly: We are pilots, not suffragettes.

Leon Ginzel: Do we believe that?

Florenz Gilly: Well, say, there is justified cause to doubt that.

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Also ich glaub ihnen das immer nicht so ganz, dass sie keine emanzipatorische Absicht haben, weil ich glaube die Lage ist schon kompliziert genug.

Florenz Gilly: Thea Rasche, for example, relied on her father's money who would cut her short after her failed attempt to cross the Atlantic.

Leon Ginzel: Sounds like tough business being a woman in aviation in those days.

Florenz Gilly: Yes, very tough. However, they knew how to help each other.

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Von ihr hat man eher das Gefühl, dass sie bereit völlig mit anderen Fliegerinnen kooperiert hat.

Florenz Gilly: Rasche really cooperated with her American colleagues. That sense of camaraderie is typical for U.S. aviation.

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] ... Überhaupt Organisationen für Fliegerinnen einfach gegründet wurden ...

Florenz Gilly: In Germany, on the contrary, women were struggling more by themselves.

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Aber in jedem Fall ist es nicht so 'n Einzelkampf, was in Deutschland denk ich mal verbreiteter war.

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: Inspired by her trip to the U.S., Thea Rasche saw flying not only as a means to cross boundaries and push limits but also to overcome national trenches that would soon get deeper and deeper.

Leon Ginzel: What a shame that, only a couple of years later, German and American pilots would fight each other to the bones during World War II.

Florenz Gilly: True.

[MUSIC]

Leon Ginzel: It's 1948. Since the end of June, the Soviets block every transport route to the western part of the city. Two million people are isolated. It's a power game in the beginning of the Cold War, and the Allies are starting an unprecedented operation: supplying West Berlin – from the air. For 15 months, every three minutes, the Allies sent an airplane to Berlin to supply the German capital with essential goods of all sorts.

Apart from coal, those planes brought all sorts of dried foods. That's why they were called 'Raisin Bombers.' Florenz, your grandparents grew up in Berlin, and they actually still have kept some of those care packages at their house.

Florenz Gilly: Yes. When grandpa and I went down to the basement, this is what we found.

Hans Joachim Gilly: [IN GERMAN] Ah! Hier is ... Wat is dit hier?

Florenz Gilly: [READING] Elbow macaroni.

Hans Joachim Gilly: [IN GERMAN] Siehste: Nudeln! Gestiftet von den Bürgern der Vereinigten Staaten, unverkäuflich und nicht austauschbar. Ma sehen, ob wa noch wat finden. Guck mal hier: *Non-fat dry milk* – Trockenmilch!

Florenz Gilly: *Trockenmilch*. Donated by the people of the United States of America. Not to be sold or exchanged. Weight: 4 and a half pounds. October–December 1960.
Neunzehnhundertsechzig. Ganz schön alt.

Hans Joachim Gilly: [IN GERMAN] So lange isset haltbar! Achso.

Leon Ginzel: Expired in 1960 – I wonder if that's still edible.

Florenz Gilly: Honestly, I wouldn't dare to try.

Leon Ginzel: Anything else your grandfather remembers?

Florenz Gilly: Well, first, he didn't make a secret of the taste. Not so great.

Hans Joachim Gilly: [IN GERMAN] Jeschmeckt hat dit allet nicht so dolle, aber du hattest ja Hunger.

Florenz Gilly: And second, he rhapsodized about one particular item: chocolate.

Hans Joachim Gilly: [IN GERMAN] Und natürlich wir Kinder haben natürlich geguckt, ob Schokolade dabei ist. Da war Hershey-Schokolade – dit war natürlich was ganz Besonderes.

Florenz Gilly: Those Hershey bars have kind of become the symbol of the airlift. And all that thanks to the very American pilot, who one day, had the ingenious idea of tying a chocolate bar to a little napkin and let those sweet paratroopers rain from the sky.

Leon Ginzel: His name is Gail Halverson. Mormon. Soldier. Benefactor. And a key figure in the common history of Germany and the U.S. Their long way from enemies to friends during the postwar period.

Florenz Gilly: Gail Halverson, who everyone just called Uncle Wiggly Wings, because he would wiggle with the wings of his airplane when he came flying over Berlin's rooftops with his Douglas C-54 Skymaster.

Leon Ginzel: On his 100th birthday, Halverson, who survived a COVID infection by the way, sent a video message to all Berliners:

Gail Halverson: *Berlin is meine zweite Heimat* – the history of the people, the geography, Germany and Berlin are a part of me. When I saw all these children at the fence of Tempelhof Airport in 1948, they did not beg for candy. All they said was: We want our freedom. We can live

on slim rations, but if we lose our freedom, we'll never get it back. Please keep flying to bring us flour and keep us free. These were the words of the young people of Berlin.

Christian Suchomski: [IN GERMAN] USA und Berlin werden immer irgendwie zusammen gehören durch die gemeinsame Geschichte und deswegen finde ich schon schade, dass es die Strecke nicht mehr gibt momentan. Vielleicht kommt es noch mal wieder. Irgendwann.

Leon Ginzel: This is Christian Suchomski. He is a pilot. For four years, he worked for Air Berlin. Until its bankruptcy in 2017, the airline company connected Germany's capital with the U.S. nonstop.

Florenz Gilly: So Leon, you talked to Christian. As a radio person, I am always interested in soundscapes. Is there a particular sound associated with sitting in a cockpit?

Leon Ginzel: Actually, nothing but wind and white noise.

Christian Suchomski: [IN GERMAN] Um ehrlich zu sein, es ist der Flugwind. Das Rauschen. Das Rauschen an sich.

[GUST OF WIND]

Florenz Gilly: What did Christian tell you about his work as a pilot – how was it for him to fly to the U.S.?

Leon Ginzel: Impressive is what he said. But listen yourself.

Christian Suchomski: [IN GERMAN] Ich find's immer noch beeindruckend mit einem über 200 Tonnen schweren Flieger über den Atlantik zu fliegen und auf einem anderen Kontinent anzukommen, das finde ich selbst als Pilot noch beeindruckend. Drei Stunden Flugzeit um dich rum ist nichts außer Wasser.

[VOICEOVER] I am still impressed to cross the Atlantic with a 200-ton heavy airplane and arrive at another continent. Even as a pilot. For three hours there is nothing but water around you.

Florenz Gilly: Kind of scary, if you asked me. But honestly, *Hand aufs Herz*. Do pilots actually do more than just pushing buttons?

Leon Ginzel: Yes! I mean of course there is a lot of automation on a flight. Sure. And time for reading and chatting. But someone has to set the computer program. And in New York, for example, they approach the 'Big Bird' by a visual maneuver:

Christian Suchomski: [IN GERMAN] Der Canarsie-Approach, da ist ein Anflug, den du teilweise per Sicht machst, zum Ende ganz per Sicht. Da sind bei der Stadt, auf Long Island, auf Jamaica, Lichter auf den Häusern montiert, die in einer Kurve verlaufen, das heißt an diesen Lichtern

orientierst du dich und drehst relativ eng zur Bahn ein über dem Highway, der 1000 Spuren hat, wie es in Amerika gern so ist. Der ist schön, der ist anspruchsvoll.

[VOICEOVER] The Canarsie approach, that's an approach that you make partly by sight. There are lights mounted on the houses in the city, on Long Island, on Jamaica, which run in a curve and help you orient yourself and then you turn relatively closely to the runway above a highway, which has 1,000 lanes, as it likes to be in America. It's beautiful, it's challenging.

Florenz Gilly: Okay, last question. Ahem, how do I put this? Did you ask him about the rumors?

Leon Ginzel: Ah, you mean all the wild stories during layovers? Well, he told me, believe it or not, these stories are all just legends. Well, yeah. However, there used to be a close connection between the cockpit and the cabin crew, Christian says. But that has changed a lot.

Christian Suchomski: [IN GERMAN] Die Tür ist dicker geworden zwischen Cockpit und Kabine.

Florenz Gilly: So, the cockpit's door got thicker.

Leon Ginzel: Yeah, Christian says there is not much exchange anymore. You see, colleagues have to check-in and that's it for the whole day. Until you exit the plane and do it all over again.

Florenz Gilly: Wow. Interesting.

[MUSIC]

Leon Ginzel: [IN GERMAN] So es ist sechs Uhr in der Früh am Berliner Hauptbahnhof. An einem schönen Sommermorgen. Florenz und ich nehmen jetzt hier gleich den ICE in Richtung Frankfurt Airport.

[VOICEOVER] Alright, it's 6 a.m. on a sunny Thursday morning. We're at Berlin main station to catch the train to Frankfurt Airport.

Florenz Gilly: Four hours.

Leon Ginzel: ... and a lot of coffee later.

Florenz Gilly: ... we arrived at Frankfurt and changed to the connecting train to the airport. And that's where we met Lan.

Leon Ginzel: [IN GERMAN] Wo geht's heute hin?

Lan: [IN GERMAN] Heute fliege ich nach New York.

Leon Ginzel: [IN GERMAN] JFK?

Lan: [IN GERMAN] Ne, EWR. New Jersey. Also einmal übern Fluss.

Leon Ginzel: Since five years, she works as a flight attendant and studies at the same time.

Florenz Gilly: Which means that when she has a layover, she also has to do something for university.

Leon Ginzel: Lan prefers to work business class because it's more personal, she says. More time to take care of only a few passengers she gets assigned to.

Lan: [IN GERMAN] Man hat halt so seine zugewiesenen Gäste und ist halt ein bisschen persönlicher an den Gästen dran, statt immer schnell durchzuhuschen und das Essen und die Getränke zu verteilen.

Florenz Gilly: The 27-year-old also told us this inside joke about the dinner options on airplanes. 'Cause apparently, the alternative between pasta or chicken never feeds all passengers.

Lan: [IN GERMAN] Man fragt die Leute möchten Sie Pasta oder Hähnchen und dann sagen sie: Fisch! Ich so: Ja, aber ich hab nur die zwei Sachen.

Leon: And when it comes to culinary desires, Lan frequently hears a special wish that a lot of American passengers have and that is not offered on German flights.

Lan: [IN GERMAN] Was alle Amerikaner komischerweise immer wollen, und was wir leider nicht an Bord haben, ist Cranberry-Juice.

[MUSIC]

Leon Ginzel: We arrived at Germany's biggest air hub. Walking around the busy aisles and through the terminals of Frankfurt Airport, we began to wonder, what type of place an airport really is.

Florenz Gilly: This nervous mélange of bodies and baggage, numbers and sounds and vehicles. An orchestra that is directed by flight schedules and technology.

Leon Ginzel: Highly paradoxical. Allowing people to move freely between countries and continents. And being like a prison's high-security wing at the same time.

Florenz Gilly: Places of arrival and departure – of new beginnings, farewells, and reunions.

[MUSIC]

Flight Attendant: And ladies and gentlemen, we are shortly going to start pre-boarding for United Flight 988 to Washington.

Leon: In order for one single flight to be on schedule, a lot of different actors have to work together and do their job right.

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: First, you need an aircraft.

Leon Ginzel: Well maintained, in the best case.

Florenz Gilly: Then you need a tug that does the pushbacks.

Leon Ginzel: Meaning tugging the aircraft to and from the gates.

Florenz Gilly: Then, we need the ground crew.

Leon Ginzel: And a cabin crew.

Florenz Gilly: And at least two pilots.

Leon Ginzel: Not to forget a crew bus that takes the crew to the gate.

Florenz Gilly: Then, of course, fuel.

Leon Ginzel: You don't want your aircraft to run short on kerosene during an eleven-hour flight.

Florenz Gilly: And then, finally, the aircraft can take off!

[FLIGHT SOUND]

Leon Ginzel: We both talked to the staff responsible for all those things to happen at the right time, so there is no delays and people get their connecting flights.

Florenz Gilly: Me, I went to the Lufthansa hub at Frankfurt's international airport. And I was welcomed by Dirk Dewald who runs Lufthansa's Integrated Operations Control Center, which he compared to the heart vessel of the whole company.

Dirk Dewald: [IN GERMAN] Also da sind wir schon wirklich in der Schaltzentrale. Wenn hier der Strom ausfällt, dann wird's spannend.

Leon Ginzel: While Florenz was talking to Dirk Dewald I went to meet Thorsten Lettnin who has been working for United Airlines for decades and helped to build up the base in Frankfurt.

Thorsten Lettnin: [IN GERMAN] Woran man gerade bei son'er Reise in die USA glaube ich denkt, diese Vielzahl an Stunden, die ich im Flugzeug verbringe. Ich erinnere mich an die Zeiten, da gab

es immer so zwei Monitore im Gang und man hat sich dann seinen Sitzplatz überlegt, wie kann ich am besten auf diesen kleinen Monitor gucken. Vollkommen inakzeptabel, das macht heute kein Mensch mehr. Wir tun das was am komfortabelsten ist. Wir streamen Content, jeder kann sich selber seine Filme angucken, wie er oder sie das möchte.

Leon Ginzel: He remembered the old days where you were sitting and trying to reach a place, where you have a good angle to two monitors, where they're showing movies.

Florenz Gilly: I remember that. You could barely see anything. And what else did he tell you about like cargo?

Leon Ginzel: Cargo? There is nothing that they did not transport.

Florenz Gilly: So, they transported everything basically.

Thorsten Lettnin: [IN GERMAN] Auf der Fracht-Seite gibt es keine Grenzen, was wir noch nicht befördert haben. Immer interessant ist, wenn es um teure Autos geht, die dann zum Beispiel nach Nevada zu irgendwelchen Test-Strecken rüber geflogen werden. Das sind dann auch mal Werte von einer Million

Leon Ginzel: Very interesting when there are like expensive cars. Like Ferraris, for example, that go to Nevada because they do like their test-drivings over there.

Florenz Gilly: Funny. Lufthansa's Dirk Dewald mentioned high-value carriages as well.

Dirk Dewald: [IN GERMAN] Sportboote, Surfbretter, Fahrräder – alles Mögliche, was man sich vorstellen kann, wird in der Welt hin und hergeflogen. Die verschiedensten Sachen bis hin zu Werttransporten im hohen Wertbereich.

Leon Ginzel: Okay. So, next time you fly with an ordinary aircraft, think about that you might be sitting on a treasure without even know [SIC] it.

Florenz Gilly: Or a coffin, that also happens.

Leon Ginzel: Florenz!

Florenz Gilly: I'm sorry. So, talking about revelations: I think the biggest one for me was that the sky is by no means this free, tabula rasa like open space that I imagine it to be. It rather compares to a gridded land, ruled by airlines and nation states.

Leon Ginzel: Copy that. Former Air Berlin Pilot Christian compared the Atlantic route to a multi-lane highway, where space is limited, and aircrafts are flying cramped tightly together.

Christian Suchomski: [IN GERMAN] Gerade auch auf der Atlantikroute. Das ist ja im Prinzip wie ne Autobahn, die jeden Tag neu festgelegt wird. Da hast du teilweise ein, zwei unter dir. Hinter dir noch welche, links und rechts.

Florenz Gilly: And remember Thea Rasche who was doing loopings above Manhattan? I asked Sabine Kalff about it, and here is what she said.

Sabine Kalff: [IN GERMAN] Also ich muss sagen, bei dieser Szene da kamen mir eigentlich ganz unsymbolische Gedanken. Versuchen Sie das heute mal, irgendwelche Loopings über New York zu drehen.

Florenz Gilly: Truly impossible since 9/11. Besides the Hindenburg disaster, one of the many deep cuts in the history of aviation that changed the business of flying completely.

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: So, towards the end of our flight, we wanted to make space for the agents of aviation.

Leon Ginzel: Those who work the check-in desks.

Florenz Gilly: Or at the gates.

Leon Ginzel: Or who take care of us passengers. Take Antje, for instance, who works for a major German airline. She is a purser, which means she oversees the cabin crew.

Antje: I have always been a very, very big fan of the Pacific Northwest. This is my America. Definitely.

Leon Ginzel: We asked her: What is unique about long-range flights to the U.S.?

Antje: The passengers flying come from extremely different continents, countries, cultural backgrounds. As an example, people from India, it's very popular to travel via Germany to the U.S. So yes, it is this little melting pot in an aircraft.

Florenz Gilly: Being stuck on an airplane for six or eight or 12 hours straight, presents its own challenges. But Antje knows how to handle even tough situations.

Antje: Well, there are not a lot of doors you can open and hide behind on an aircraft unfortunately, but there must always be time to take that step aside and drink a glass of water and take a deep breath.

Leon Ginzel: And nowadays, taking a step aside has become even harder since some airlines got rid of their crew zones to make space for cargo. Where do you go if you don't have any room for your own?

[AIRPORT ANNOUNCEMENT]

Leon Ginzel: Even if there is no direct flight from Berlin to the U.S., there are a lot of tourists.

Florenz Gilly: At least in non-COVID times.

Leon Ginzel: So, we went to Berlin's newly built airport BER.

Florenz Gilly: Yes, the one that took ten years and a gazillion dollars of tax money to be completed.

Leon Ginzel: Yeah, finding someone going to the U.S. wasn't easy, by the way.

Florenz Gilly: Excuse me, do you fly to the U.S. No?!

Florenz Gilly: Sorry, sir, do you fly to the U.S.?

Leon Ginzel: [IN GERMAN] Tschuldigung, darf ich Sie kurz was fragen? Wir machen einen Podcast für das Goethe-Institut.

Leon Ginzel: Finally, we found Jessica. Where are you from?

Jessica: San Francisco.

Leon Ginzel: San Francisco! Where the sun is always shining. Great. What are you doing here in Berlin?

Jessica: Just travelling through Europe. I did France, Spain, Italy, Estonia, Finland, here, and I am going back to Italy and then Greece.

Leon Ginzel: Jessica took first class on her transatlantic crossing. What is the most significant difference?

Jessica: Having a bed!

Florenz Gilly: Of course, we also asked her about her experience traveling Germany. And well, what do we say ... Not her favorite.

Jessica: You want me to be a 100% honest? It was my least favorite of the trip.

Leon Ginzel: Why that?

Jessica: I am not a rule person. If you do something that's not exactly right, it's like I got yelled at a couple of times. And I don't know, it felt a little less welcoming.

[AMBIENT SOUNDS]

Florenz Gilly: We also found this family from Philadelphia.

Family: Bill, Emily, Kai.

Florenz Gilly: They came to visit their son who is doing an exchange year in Berlin.

Leon Ginzel: Talking to them about the way air travel has changed since they first flew as kids, Emily, the mother, pins down the dilemma of flying in times of climate change and growing social injustice.

Emily: I remember it felt so special as a kid to fly. You got a really nice meal, it was like a special treat to take a long trip, but now it's really easy, like casual, to do it. Which is great that people have opportunities to travel around. But then we can't sustain the levels of the population travel – it's just a tricky situation we're in, I think.

Bill: Well, there's a social class thing. I didn't get on an airplane till I was 22 because I came from a working class family. And, you know, five kids, no way my parents were paying for ... And it was a lot more expensive 30 years ago.

Florenz Gilly: Will we still be able to fly? How can we keep our standard of flying without ruining the planet? I guess if it didn't exclude those who already don't have a lot of privilege, making tickets more expensive could be one way.

Leon Ginzel: Surprisingly enough, this is also what pilot Christian said.

Christian Suchomski: [IN GERMAN] Wenn man die Luftfahrt wieder teurer machen würde, dann würden sich die Leute drei Mal überlegen, ob sie da wirklich hinfliegen müssen, oder nicht. Und wenn sie es machen, dann gibt es auch ein besseres Produkt. und das Geld wird als Ausgleich verwendet.

Florenz Gilly: If flying is becoming more expensive, Christian says, the people would consider longer if they really have to go there by plane. And if yes, they get a better product or the money is taken for CO2 compensation.

Florenz Gilly: Antje, the flight attendant, believes that there will be drastic steps to be more efficient.

Antje: There's gonna be a lot of cost cutting. For my workplace, I will probably have to do more work with a smaller crew in the future.

[MUSIC]

Florenz Gilly: Whatever path aviation will take in the near future. Whether it be supersonic flights ...

Leon Ginzel: Which will reinforce the 'higher faster further' mentality. Or airplanes driven by solar power.

Florenz Gilly: Or maybe even e-planes.

Leon Ginzel: We do hope ...

Florenz Gilly: Yes, we do.

Leon Ginzel: ... that it will still be possible to fly to and from to the U.S. ...

Florenz Gilly: ... to continue a bilateral history ...

Leon Ginzel: ... that began in the early 20th century ...

Florenz Gilly: And is still being written ...

Both: Today.

[MUSIC]

Flight Attendant: This is the final call for THE BIG PONDER.

THE BIG PONDER is a transatlantic podcast by the Goethe-Institut that explores abstract concepts and phenomena through personal radio essays. Every other week, one of our producers transforms a broad topic into a captivating story told from a U.S.-German perspective.

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