As a lone airplane buzzed out of a hot August sky in 1933, dropping leaflets designed to drive a wedge between New Jersey’s German-American community, few yet appreciated the madness to come.
If someone wants to equate a person or a group with pure evil, they describe them as being as bad as Hitler or akin to Nazis. The Third Reich and its leaders have indeed gone down in history as among the worst examples of man’s inhumanity to man—and for good reason. The Nazi regime exemplified fascist totalitarianism and spawned an ethnic bigotry virulent enough that it descended into history’s quintessential example of genocide. That such a cancer could grow so malignant under the gaze of the civilized world is disturbing, making the pre-war period of the 1930s a historically important time.

With the gathering of years between us and the events of that era, however, it has grown increasingly more abstract. Hitler and his goose-stepping thugs seem almost cartoonish now—particularly as the generation still haunted by the reality is passing from the scene every day. Hyperbolic accusations of Hitler-like behavior get tossed out with ease by generations who know nothing of the true fear and horrors the Nazi regime unleashed.

How did we miss the signs that the blustering man with the funny mustache was going to be more than a temporary, if nasty, period of instability in Germany? Some sense of impending doom leaked out into the German-American and Jewish communities in the West, including the United States—and, including here in New Jersey. In at least one early instance in 1933, the clash between the emerging pro- and anti-Nazi sides would take a curious form in the Garden State.

The Rise of Hitler

Between the end of the First World War and the early 1930s, a perfect storm was brewing in Germany. Bowed by the humiliations of the Treaty of Versailles, the subsequent Weimar Republic labored under demands for reparations at a time when their economy was collapsing, attended by a period of stunning historic hyperinflation. For a little while, however, between 1923 and 1929, things seemed to at last stabilize. The so-called Dawes Plan of 1924 had arranged for Germany to borrow money from American banks against German assets, such as their railway and the National Bank, along with other industries.

The period was known in Germany as the “Golden Twenties” and saw a
cultural revival, albeit one that was strongly influenced by American fashions. Conservative Germans lamented what they saw as a betrayal of their proud Germanic roots embodied in young people, dressed in American styles, dissipating their nights at decadent jazz clubs or watching American movies. Seizing on this disaffection, extreme conservative political movements emerged, including in 1920 the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP), the new name for what had been called the German Worker’s Party. By 1924, the NSDAP would attempt to seize power from the Weimar Republic in a failed coup at Munich. Their chairman was imprisoned, where he used his time to write his manifesto. His name was Adolph Hitler and his book was *Mein Kampf*.

Any hopes of extending the “Golden Twenties” into a “Golden Thirties” was ended by the shockwaves of the Great Depression. Once again, Germany was plunged into economic chaos. Hitler and his NSDAP—known as the Nazi Party—exploited the situation, with their candidates making respectable showings in enough key local elections that they became a force not to be ignored. Through a series of political machinations, Hitler had positioned himself to vie for the post of Chancellor. President von Hindenburg didn’t trust Hitler or his Nazis, but was convinced by advisors to take a gamble. The theory held that the Nazi influence was actually on the wane and a Chancellor Hitler, inside the government, would be easier to control than as a loose cannon outside. He was sworn in on January 30, 1933.
It was, of course, a bet that would be lost, as Hitler moved to consolidate increasing power. The Reichstag fire of the following month would give him an excuse to exercise emergency powers in the face of what he claimed was a Communist threat. Personal freedoms were to be limited and opposition squashed.

The rest of the world looked on with varying degrees of concern. Many had a hard time taking the blustering, arrogant man with the Charlie Chaplin mustache seriously and dismissed his jackbooted thugs as an unpleasant episode that would soon burn itself out. American financiers were reluctant to be hasty, lest it jeopardize Germany’s ability to pay on its loans.

Hitler may not have had any love for the United States, but he understood the necessity of placating us until his schemes could be more fully-formed. That would be a recurring strategy—lull the enemy into a false sense of security and then strike when it was too late. Nazi strategists looked at the sizeable number of German immigrants as a propaganda beachhead on American soil—people who could spread the word of the Nazi’s greatness for Germany’s prosperity and feign friendship towards the U.S.

**Friends of New Germany**

Germans have been part of the American scene since colonial days. Benjamin Franklin, for example, owned a German language newspaper *Philadelphische Zeitung* in the 1730s. Germans in Pennsylvania had grown so great in number that by 1751 Franklin was lamenting “in a few Years [Pennsylvania would] become a German Colony: Instead of their Learning our Language, we must learn their’s, or live as in a foreign Country...How good Subjects they may make, and how faithful to the British Interest, is a Question worth considering.” And, of course, it was the Prussian General, Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand von Steuben, whose drilling regimen is credited with whipping the raw American militias into disciplined soldiers.

When America entered the First World War against “the Huns,” the fealty of German immigrants was eyed with suspicion. Anti-German sentiment ran hot and anyone with a Germanic-sounding accent or name was shunned as a possible spy. Orchestras refused to perform anything by Wagner, streets named after German citizens were renamed, and German-language newspapers and books removed from libraries. The German community withdrew into itself, and many “Americanized” their names—Schmidt became Smith; Muller became Miller.

After the war, there would always be lingering prejudices to deal with. But with each passing year the fury subsided and by the start of the 1930s, Germans were again feeling comfortable asserting their place in the American cultural landscape. This was an era where local newspapers were stuffed with announcements and reports on the goings on of a wide variety...
of social, civic, ethnic, patriotic, charitable, religious, and other clubs, associations, leagues, and so on. German-American groups also began popping up. But just as they were reestablishing themselves, news from the Old Country yet again challenged the German place in America.

Reactions in German-American communities to the rise of Hitler ran the gambit from apathy to celebration. Those born in America knew no other “homeland,” and Deutschland was an abstract idea talked about by parents or grandparents with varying degrees of nostalgia. But many first-generation immigrants also loved America. They enjoyed the fruits of capitalism and appreciated democracy. The shadow of militarism over Germany’s culture couldn’t compete with what American popular culture was offering. They would turn their backs on the old life and embrace the new. They paid scant attention to a place that represented for them the past.

Then there were those who retained an obvious affection for the land of their birth. Not only did they have a foot in two worlds, but many had relatives and friends in Germany to worry over when the news was scary. Those dual emotions would be all the more acute for German Jews in America. Berlin had yet to hand down the overt legislative edicts of systemic anti-Semitism. In 1933, Kristallnacht was still five years away. Incidents of discrimination and outright physical intimidation reported to the U.S. Ambassador were dismissed as aberrations by the Nazi government, and orders were issued to leave Americans alone. Yet German Jews and others deemed enemies of the state communicated the reality to friends and relatives in the outside world. Seeing the proverbial handwriting on the wall, many began seeking escape, bringing firsthand accounts.

Regardless of how seriously the U.S. Government was or wasn’t taking this, most of the German-Americans who were paying attention were concerned. The negative press the Nazis were getting would no doubt rub off on their communities—and they were only just recovering from the stereotype of brutish Huns from the late war. Those who disavowed Nazi ideology were in a difficult place. They wanted to affirm their American identity—and loyalty—while at the same not abandoning their German culture to the Nazis.

Nevertheless, of course, there were also those who witnessed the embarrassment of Versailles and the failures of Weimar—many had fled to America because of it. They were ready to believe Hitler’s assertion that it was the Jewish bankers and Communists that were to blame for Germany’s fall from grace. The proud vision of Germanic greatness he offered them was certainly alluring. And, he did seem to be delivering on his promises of employment and a better future. Some immigrants returned to Germany or sent their children to be educated.

Among them was a German citizen living in Detroit, by the name of Heinz Spanknobel. A shadowy figure, Spanknobel had fully embraced the Nazi ideology, and headed up an organization called Gau-USA—an
American branch of Hitler’s NSDAP. With Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, the grandiose Spanknobel entertained visions of becoming the American Fuhrer.

In May of 1933, he went back to Germany and managed to secure an audience with the Nazi Deputy Fuhrer, Rudolph Hess. He laid out a plan for creating a pro-Nazi group in America with the non-threatening sounding name of Freunden von Neue Deutschland—“Friends of New Germany.” It would be a propaganda machine, intent on convincing German-Americans that, like Germany itself, whatever social and economic ills afflicted America could be blamed on the Jews and the Communists—and that Hitler and the Nazi vision was the only solution.

Obviously, he could tap into the already disaffected. He wasn’t the first pro-Nazi to open shop in America, after all. The Freigemeinschaft von Teutonia—Free Society of Teutonia—had been founded by German immigrants in Chicago as early as 1924. In 1932, Swastika League of America had spun off from New York’s branch of the Teutonia group.

But these other organizations didn’t receive what Spanknobel’s Friends of New Germany had—the official blessings of Hess, and, by extension, der Fuhrer himself. By July of 1933, he had leveraged that authorization to absorb the other organizations—and was a step nearer to his goal of becoming the American Fuhrer.

While he may have styled himself on Hitler when it came to a ruthless approach to power, Spanknobel’s ultimately fatal flaw was not also having his political shrewdness. Where Hitler understood the value of showing a non-threatening face to America for the time being, Spanknobel would dive headlong into the tactics of the bully.

One of his first stumbles was to openly and personally threaten a pair of well-respected German-Americans in New York. The influential brothers, Victor and Bernard Ritter, published the city’s leading German-language newspaper, New Yorker Staats-Zeitung (New York Public News)—and they were not sympathetic to the Nazi ideology. Spanknobel paid a visit to their office to personally threaten the Ritters with the wrath of his New York Nazis. Victor Ritter called the police and had him thrown out of their offices.

The effect was polarizing in the German-American community. Most were offended by Spankbobel’s audacity, earning him their strong enmity. Others, however, mistook his strong-arm bullying for noble strength, and joined the Friends of New Germany in response. This represented a cultural difference between those who maintained a connection with the traditional German value of militarism and those immersed in American ideals. The nobility of toughness was celebrated as a virtue in Richard Wagner’s operas, such as Götterdämmerung, which was a favorite of Hitler’s.

It is difficult to gauge the group’s influence, but it doesn’t seem to have ever been very strong. Branches opened in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Newark—all cities with sizeable German
populations. Yet their total numbers were probably never more than 10,000. If we use Newark, New Jersey as an example, we find that out of the around 150,000 residents of German ancestry (per the 1930 U.S. Census) only around 500 had joined Friends of New Germany. What makes solid numbers hard to come by is that it isn’t clear how many German-Americans might have privately sympathized but were reluctant to be open about it.

Such difficulties did not dissuade Spanknobel or his faithful. It was understood that their cause was going to be a struggle—reaching the already disaffected was the easy part. Preying upon any latent frustrations and bigotries in the rest of the German-American community was going to be harder. The first step was to start infiltrating and agitating in all those apolitical and even anti-Nazi groups.

**Leagues and Singers**

Perhaps the toughest group to crack would be the German-American Leagues that were to be found throughout the country. By their very name, they were representing themselves as loyal Americans who were also proud of their German heritage. One of the larger Leagues was that of Essex County, New Jersey, encompassing the large and longstanding German neighborhoods of Newark.

German names could also be found in neighboring Union County and perusing through *The Union Register* newspaper for 1933, German names appear in all arenas of public and civic life.

Every culture, it seems, came up with some form of fermented alcoholic beverage, but Germany in particular became renowned for its beers. Bavaria passed its *Reinheitsgebot*—“purity order”—for the governing of the brewing of beer back in 1516. So it isn’t surprising to find in the June 2, 1933 issue of *The Union Register* two large ads for German-owned businesses under the headline “Where To Get Your Favorite Beer.” Both were in Springfield, New Jersey, next to Union Township. A dime would buy you a glass of lager, wurtzburger, or pilsner on draught at the Orchard Inn, Hans Deh Proprietor. Forty-five cents would get you a “half broiler on toast,” and there was an orchestra every night. “Make this your headquarters,” the ad suggests. “Meet your friends here and drop in anytime. You will always find here a congenial atmosphere.”

Above the Orchard Inn’s ad was one announcing United Singers’ Park
was “now open.” That this was a German concern isn’t immediately apparent to modern eyes. But anyone in 1933 would have recognized the name as German. In addition to their beer, Germans (along with the Austrians) have an equally-long folk music heritage. As is to be expected, these musical traditions accompanied immigrants to America. As early as 1789, for example, Dr. Benjamin Rush, reported that “Germans of both sexes [in Pennsylvania] have a strong predilection for song as well as instrumental music. They excel all other religious groups in Pennsylvania in the singing of Psalms.”

While they had instrumental music, it was the communal nature of their choral traditions that were especially conducive to organizing more formal social groups. On January 15, 1835, Phillip Matthias Wohlseiffer founded The Philadelphia Männerchor—a male choir. It would last until 1962 and is credited with starting the German-American “singing society” phenomenon. Other groups began popping up and soon female voices were part of their sounds. Groups visited each other, and held concerts together, combining their members’ voices into one huge choral event. As more of these singing societies were being founded, such events grew into annual regional singing festivals—Sängerfests. Sacred music was avoided, being viewed more properly the domain of church groups, and the jovial secular selections proved quite popular with the general public. As transportation between regions became more practical, regional groups merged into the national Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund—the North American Choral Society.

The virulent anti-German attitudes attending the First World War made any celebrations of German culture unpopular—if not downright dangerous. There was no national Sängerfest between 1914 and 1924. By the start of the 1930s, however, their popularity was again on the rise. So when readers saw that ad in 1933, they understood this was a park run by and for the benefit of the United Singers of Newark, a German-American choral society.

With the memories of the difficult days of the war years still fresh, such apolitical or loyal organizations as the German-American League of Essex County and United Singers of Newark were particularly resistant to Nazi ideology. But this is also what made them targets for the Friends of New Germany.

**German Day 1933**

Perusing the weekly issues of *The Union Register* for the opening months of 1933 is a curious experience when armed with the benefit of hindsight.
The disastrously-flawed experiment in the prohibition of alcohol of the Eighteenth Amendment was in its death throes. That March, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Cullen-Harrison Act, legalizing spirits containing a timid 3.2% alcohol by volume, as a first step toward the Twenty-First Amendment that December, which would repeal the Eighteenth. Scattered stories of people fined for the almost playful sounding offense of “tipsy driving” reflect how ineffectual Prohibition really had been.

Reports also raised an alarm over the increasing numbers of elm trees succumbing to *Ophiostoma ulmi*—better known as Dutch elm disease. The fungus, introduced to America on timber imported from The Netherlands in 1928, would go on to almost completely decimate the species in North America.

Perhaps most poignant in retrospect was a resolve of the Jewish Institute of Union, appearing in the March 31, 1933 edition. “We, the Jewish Institute of Union, all loyal citizens of the United States,” it said, called for a formal protest by the U.S. government against how the new Nazi regime was treating German Jews—treatment they characterized as “outrages...contrary to the basic principles of our great democracy.”

Names sprinkled throughout the papers reflected on how those of German descent were integrated into all aspects of life in Union and Springfield Townships—political figures, local government officials, businesses, schools, etc. Yet, within the numerous announcements and notices for every manner of social club could be found no mention of any activities of any German-American organizations. Why is hard to say now. It isn’t that there wasn’t anything to report, either. In fact, there was a big event coming up, planned by the German-American League of Essex County along with the United Singers of Newark, to be held at their park in Springfield.

Most people today will have at least heard of Oktoberfest, the Bavarian festival that’s been held at the end of September into early October since 1810. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan and the Congress declared October 6th to henceforth be officially “German-American Day.” Yet individual German-American groups have long-held their own local “German Day” events at various times during the year outside of October.

This was what the German-American League and United Singers were planning for August 6th in Springfield. Groups in other states scheduled similar events throughout 1933 as well, just as they had in years before.

But this time would be different. This time, the Friends of New Germany would be around to insinuate themselves into these otherwise apolitical celebrations. What should have been a fun day of beer, food, music, and dancing, would pit pro- and anti-Nazi Germans against one another.

When the Newark branch of Friends of New Germany approached the organizers of the Springfield event about participating, they were rebuffed. Alfred F. Frosch, President of the United Singers, and John Koerber,
President of the German-American League, both asserted that their groups were not interested in the politics of the Old Country. If they had any political concerns, they were about American politics as American citizens—and they certainly were not affiliated with the Nazis. They were not going to allow Friends of New Germany to march in their parade or hand out their flyers. So, the day before the event, the group appealed to the Springfield police department for permits to hand out flyers, but were again turned down, being told they would be arrested if they interfered with the festival. Knowing that the group likely wouldn’t take no for an answer—not to mention their penchant for starting trouble—the police department detailed seven officers to keep an eye on things. At first, everything went well. Some 7,000 people packed Singers’ grove for the festivities.

Then, around 4:15 in the afternoon, there came a droning sound out of the hot August sky. An aircraft appeared—some said so low that the tree tops could be heard scratching its underside. Bursts of paper came from the cockpit, sending showers of leaflets fluttering down onto the crowds. Not content with praising Hitler and the Nazis, the German text primarily railed against the two organizations for refusing them participation, calling the organizers cowards, and urging everyone to abandon them and join the Friends of New Germany.

After a couple of swooping low passes, the plane disappeared again over the horizon, leaving the police to try and gather up the mess of paper they left in their wake. According to the Union Register report, “those that were picked up by the crowds resulted in more merriment than [the] disorder than had been expected.”

In retrospect, there is something telling in that description—specifically the use of the word “merriment.” On the one hand, if Friends of New Germany had hoped their disruption would agitate in favor of their cause, they would be disappointed to learn their self-important message had been met with anything that could be described as “merriment.” Yet while the word connotes a dismissive attitude, it doesn’t convey any anxiety or anger. It isn’t clear that anyone necessarily apprehended the serious dangers posed. Friends of New Germany were certainly disliked by a majority in the German-American community, yet most had chosen to simply ignore them rather than become actively outraged—perhaps because that was just what the group wanted to have them do. The more divided these groups could be made, the better would be the chance of exploiting any weakness. Yet by ignoring them, despite representing a minority view, Friends of New Germany was permitted to, in effect, yell loudest, becoming a strong voice within the community.

This mild initial reaction in early- and mid-1933 was, however, beginning to shift. Like the Ritter threats, antics like that at Springfield served to push opponents into stronger and more open expressions of anti-Nazi sentiments. Frosch and Koerber publicly defended their decision to bar...
the Friends of New Germany, threatening legal action against them for the libelous accusations in their leaflet.

**Pushing Back**

Being among the main targets of Nazi blame for everything wrong with the world, Jewish communities would be among the first to sound the alarms. Indeed, they would be the most outspoken when it came to the Springfield incident. The August 11th *Jewish Chronicle* out of Newark called the Friends of New Germany “that peerless group of American defenders of Hitler’s maniacal terror” and characterized their over-the-top protestations as being “in typical Hitler viperish fashion.” They lauded Frosch for steadfastly refusing to permit his organization to become a tool of the propaganda “of the madman type now prevailing in deranged Hitlerland.”

It was beginning to dawn on local, state, and federal authorities that such pro-Nazi groups had seriously seditious aims. Public and government resistance would take different forms. With the Springfield incident, there were applicable aviation regulations that had been violated. The officer in command of police protection for the German Day event—Albert Sorge—noted the registration number on the aircraft and by nightfall it had been located at the nearby Pine Book Airport over in Caldwell, New Jersey. The field was owned by the brothers Chet and Roland Newman, and it was Chet at the stick of the plane over German Day. He pled ignorance as to who the two men were that had hired him to take them aloft. As far as he was concerned, he was just doing what he was paid to do. They told him they had permission to drop the leaflets. He claimed to not even remember their names and disavowed any association with their organization. While he was absolved of any responsibility for the fliers themselves, George Reems, the local inspector for the Department of Commerce fined Newman $25 and grounded him for two weeks for low-flying over a crowd in violation of aviation rules and not having the proper permits to drop the leaflets.

Sorge and his men were also called upon to provide intelligence on pro-Nazi activities in Springfield for New York’s Congressman, Samuel Dickstein. He, along with Massachusetts Representative John W. McCormack, established the McCormack-Dickstein Committee from 1934 to 1937. This was a precursor to the later House Committee on Un-American Activities. The irony, however, only became apparent in the 1990s when documents in the defunct Soviet Union proved Dickstein had been in the pay of their *Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, or NKVD—the precursor to the KGB.

The strong-arm tactics employed by Friends of New Germany actually gave the federal government the grounds they needed for legal challenges. Just within the twelve months since their creation, there were enough acts of violence or intimidation that there were calls for investigating them as a terrorist organization akin to the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan had been
disassembled by the 1870 Force Act, had never quite completely gone away. A series of constitutional challenges in the Supreme Court and the popularity of the heroic image promoted by the hit movie “The Birth of a Nation” had given rise to a “Second Klan” in 1915. Finding kindred racist spirits, pro-Nazi groups recruited supporters from this new Klan.

As odious as the Nazi message may have been to many, like that of the Klan, there were constitutional principles in question. Where did these groups cross from First Amendment protected speech and into a realm where the government could suppress it? Where did a government drift from legitimate self-defense to something no better than what the Nazi regime was guilty of? Berlin officials would express surprise and annoyance when told the U.S. government could not interfere with Jewish anti-Nazi rallies.

The same ethical dilemmas can be seen at street level. Nazi thugs in Germany used mob violence as a tool to crush dissent. In October of 1933, Friends of New Germany held their first public rally in Newark. Anti-Nazi protestors breached the police barricades, hurling rock and “stench bombs” through the windows into the swastika-festooned hall. Around a dozen were arrested, including an anti-Nazi protestor for threatening a pro-Nazi sympathizer with a lead pipe. Following the riot, Newark banned the group from meeting within the city limits, pushing them into Irvington. This was but one of several clashes that would take place both in New Jersey and elsewhere in the country.

They had worn out the tolerance on the other side of the Hudson at the same time too. That same month, New York’s Attorney General convened a grand jury to investigate allegations Friends of New Germany’s activities put them in violation of their corporate charter in the state. Heinz Spanknobel went into hiding when a warrant was issued over his allegedly misrepresenting himself as a German diplomat. Much of this had been inspired by Julius Hochfelder, counsel for the Jewish War Veterans of the United States. He asserted he had evidence enough of the seditious nature of Spanknobel’s group. Pro-Nazis accused New York City’s Mayor, John O’Brien, of being part of the “Jewish conspiracy,” bringing the Irishman to retort, “There will be no gang rule while I am mayor.”

Spanknobel’s heart must have sunk when he read the newspapers from October 29, 1933. der Fuhrer himself was repudiating him, claiming “There is no authorized representative of myself of the German National Socialist Party active in America...I have given the strictest orders that not even lectures or speeches on National Socialism are to be given in America by members of my party.”

And that was just for starters. He went on to declare it would be absurd for him to spend party funds and resources in America when Germany faced so many challenges. If private citizens wanted to talk about National Socialism, that was one thing—which was no doubt the true goal he saw for
Friends of New Germany—but he disavowed any official effort to propagandize in the United States.

It was, of course, all a lie. But Heinz Spanknobel had overplayed his hand. Hitler couldn’t afford to be seen openly antagonizing the Americans, lest they interfere with his schemes for Europe. And here was Spanknobel under investigation, starting riots, threatening respected Germans in America, and generally making enemies.

On October 29, 1933, Philip Slomowitz became the first Jewish reporter to interview Spanknobel for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. He titled his piece: “Heinz Spanknoebel No Desperado, Only Ridiculous German.” He gave a detailed account of the man with a dismissive disdain. “Heinz Spanknoebel came to this country about four years ago and was admitted as a minister,” Slomowitz wrote. “He was ordained as a minister in the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Wurtzenburg, Germany, in 1920. But was his entry in the United States legal? Did he ever have a church here? He claimed at one time that his church broke up shortly after his arrival here. But there is no record of the church having ever existed.”

Slomowitz discovered that Spanknobel’s sister, Martha, had also come to the U.S. to be with their brother, Karl, in 1925. She was deported the following year on account of dementia praecox—a chronic, deteriorating psychotic disorder characterized by rapid cognitive disintegration. The writer took glee in reporting, “So there you have another act in the Spanknoebel family comedy: this one pointing to the existence of insanity in this family group, one of whom is the upholder of the superiority theory for the Aryans!”

“Let the United States government do the investigating,” he concluded. “Let the Jews ignore and ridicule him.” Were only that indeed the end of the story.

The irritating Spanknobel was deported for having failed to register as a foreign agent. Hitler continued to funnel resources to Friends of New Germany, trying to salvage it as a tool. But the damage had been done. There were just too many links between it and the Nazi party for plausible deniability. By December of 1935, Hess ordered German citizens in America to abandon the Friends of New Germany, and recalled its remaining leadership to The Fatherland. In some respects, the whole episode was almost comical in its absurdity. And yet, the buffoonery of Spanknobel masked the more virulent threat that inspired it. Fritz Kuhn’s German-American Bund would fill the vacuum left by Friends of New Germany until the Second World War. And that absurd man with the funny mustache in Germany would unleash his brand of hell upon the world.

With the gift of hindsight, the threat might seem more obvious. Yet could you have foreseen the calamities ahead had you watched the shower of leaflets fluttering out of the skies over Springfield, New Jersey on that hot August afternoon in 1933?