Polish Zeppelin Mail from the Free City of Danzig in the Zygmunt Kopel Collection

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Figure 1. The Zig Kopel Collection. Part One, *Cherrystone Philatelic Auctioneers, 29 October 2025, Teaneck, New Jersey* .

On 29 October 2025, Cherrystone Philatelic Auctioneers in New Jersey offered the first part of an extraordinary collection formed by the late Zygmunt Kopel from London (Figure 1). Although we never met in person, our relationship thrived through years of telephone conversations, as Mr. Zygmunt preferred to steer clear of computers and emails. A notable figure within the Polish community in the UK, he amassed an impressive aerophilately collection, bolstered by his associations with esteemed philatelists such as Wojciech Grabowski and Zbigniew Mikulski.

The auction featured 15 Polish Zeppelin covers from the Free City of Danzig (Gdansk), offering valuable insights into intercontinental air communication in the 1930s. Among these, thirteen items were carried on the *Graf Zeppelin* (LZ 127), while two were despatched on the *Hindenburg* (LZ 129). The entire set of Gdansk Zeppelin mail was sold at prices ranging from $1,400 to $3,500, (approx. £1,060 to £2,650) plus a 15% buyer's premium.

Polish postal services from Danzig remain relatively obscure within elite Zeppelin mail collector circles, likely due to their legendary rarity, limited availability, and philatelic origins. The airship mail from the Polish Post Office in Gdansk was dispatched in violation of existing regulations, as such dispatches were officially prohibited. Firstly, the Gdansk 1 post office had restricted powers, as it was only authorized to handle domestic mail and was not permitted to manage local or international shipments. Secondly, the 'PORT GDANSK' overprinted stamps were exclusively valid for correspondence with mainland Poland (since 5 January 1925), rendering their use for foreign mail, including Zeppelin dispatches, illegal. Lastly, a 1932 decree from the *Reichspostministerium* allowed airship mail transport only to select South American countries, explicitly excluding Poland. Despite these strict regulations, the story of Polish airmail from Gdansk, carried by the *Graf Zeppelin* and *Hindenburg* to the Americas, remains a fascinating chapter in the world's postal history.

Table 1. A Survey of Airmail Dispatches from Polish P.O. in the Free City of Danzig Carried by *Graf Zeppelin* (LZ 127) and *Hindenburg* (LZ 129) to the Americas (1932–1936)

Flight no. / date	Through Poland		Direct from Gdansk		Total items		*Comments.* Posted date(s) / Postal rate(s) / Registration no(s).
	Sent	Exist	Sent	Exist	Sent	Exist	
G282 8SAF1932 9-13 October	?	1	?	0	?	1	5.X.1932 / 3.35 zł / No registration
G286 9SAF1932 24-27 October	8	3	?	0	8	3	18.X.1932 / 3.10 zł, 3.40 zł, 3.60 zł / No registration
G294 1SAF1933 6-9 May	9	4	6	3	15	7	27.IV.1933 / 4.00 zł (x6); 4.45 zł (x1) / R-13466–13471, R-003102
G305 2SAF1933 3-6 June	10	0	0	0	10	0	*None recorded*
G315 3SAF1933 1-4 July	13	7	11	8	24	15	23.VI.1933 or 29.VI.1933 / 3.95 zl (x11); 3.85 zł (x3); 4.80 zł (x1) / No R (x2); R-002449s–002453s, R-002455s, R-002458s–R-002464s (Buenos Aires: R-002449s)
G323 4SAF1933 5-8 August	12	3	6	5	18	8	28.VII.1933 / 3.95 zł (x8) / R-014936e, R-014938e–014942e, R-014944e, R-014945e
G327 5SAF1933 19-22 August	12	3	7	6	19	9	10.VIII.1933 or 11.VIII.1933 / 4.00 zł (x9) / R-11414–11422
G333 6SAF1933 2-5 September	15	4	6	6	21	10	25.VIII.1933 / 4.00 zł (x10) / R-label lost (x1); R-002710s–002712s, R-002714s–002717s, R-002719s, R-002721s
G337 7SAF1933 16-19 September	16	6	5	3	21	9	7.IX.1933 or 8.IX.1933 / lost postage (x1); 4.00 zł (x7); 3.95 zł (x1) / R-749, R-750, R-753, R-754, R-756–758, R-760, R-000714s
G343 8SAF1933 30 Sept.- 3 Oct.	15	8	5	2	20	10	23.IX.1933; 4.00 zl (x8 – Brazil) / 5.00 zł (x2; Argentina/ Peru) / R-002299s, R-002301s-002302s, R-002304s-002310s. (Buenos Aires: R-002299s), (Lima: R-002307s)
G347-G355 9 SAF1933 14 Oct.-2 Nov.	59	16	14	11	73	27	7.X.1933 or 10.X.1933 / 4.20 zł (x10); 4.80 zł (x2); 7.20 zł (x11); 10.20 zł (x4) / R-000451s–000457s, R-000460s, R-000461s, R-000463s–000469s, R-000471s–000476s, R-000479s, R-000480s, R-12122, R-12123 (Buenos Aires: R-000463s), (Lima: R-000462s)
Brazil/BA/Li*	18	9	3	3	21	12	
Miami	8	0	0	0	0	0	
Chicago	17	3	8	6	25	9	
Akron	8	2	0	0	8	2	
Seville	4	1	1	1	5	2	
Friedrichshafen	4	1	2	1	6	2	
H22** 3NAF1936 19-22 June	?	0	?	2	?	2	13.VI.1936 / 3.00 zł (x2) / R-000708s-000709s (both to Detroit)
Total	**>169**	**55**	**>61**	**46**	**>230**	**101**	

Key: zł - abbreviation of złoty, the Polish currency. *Recife/Rio de Janeiro and one each to Buenos Aires/Lima. **Hindenburg (LZ 129) flight.
Note: Not included are 6SAF1932 and 1NAF1936 – referred to by Pilarzy & Sieger, but no recorded examples are available.

An informal survey by the author and by expert Hans Vogels, based on auction data and insights from collectors, has identified at least 101 Zeppelin mail pieces from the Gdansk 1 post office (Table 1). Most of them are easily recognisable, as with the exception of four, all were sent as registered. Notably, 46 of these items were dispatched directly by air from Danzig via Berlin to Friedrichshafen, from where the *Graf Zeppelin* embarked on its South Atlantic crossing. While this practice violated Polish postal regulations, it adhered to the guidelines of the German postal service and *Luftschiffbau Zeppelin*. The remaining 55 items from Gdansk 1 post office were transited via Poland to Germany before being carried by the airship to the Americas. After 90 years, they became highly sought-after collectors' items.



Figure 2. One of the three recorded ordinary (not registered) dispatches from the Polish Post in the Free City of Danzig on the 9SAF1932 by Graf Zeppelin to Pernambuco, Brazil, transited via the Polish city Łódź (Type 2).

Figure 2 illustrates one of three recorded ordinary (non-registered) letters despatched from Gdansk 1 post office on the ninth *Graf Zeppelin* flight to South America in 1932 (9SAF1932). Posted on 18 October 1932, it was first sent to a 'temporary' address of Walter Riether in Łódź, who had already 'moved to Pernambuco, Brazil'. The sender complied with postal regulations by sending the letter, albeit excessively overfranked, to mainland Poland. Upon arrival, Riether's new address in Brazil replaced the temporary Polish one, and the cover bearing a 'Mit Luftschiff / Graf Zeppelin' private directional label was redirected to Berlin. According to Vogels' classification, this is a Type 2 Zeppelin mail from Danzig, as it has passed through a transit address in mainland Poland. Although the use of 'PORT GDANSK' overprints violated postal regulations, the postage of 3.10 złoty (hereafter 'zł', consisting of 100 groszy, hereafter 'gr'), affixed in Gdansk) corresponded to the airship surcharge from Poland to Brazil (3.00 zł for 25g, valid from 29 August to 24 October 1932) and the foreign basic printed matter rate (10 gr for 50g). This item was then sent from Warsaw via Poznan (TPO on train no. 1303). It was transit-postmarked in Berlin C2 post office (23 October 1932) and received special cachets from Deutsche Luft Hansa (DLH) for the connecting (feeder) flight (*Anschlussflug*), and the transatlantic service from Friedrichshafen (LZ 127). Flight G286, which carried 130 kg of mail, departed from Friedrichshafen on 24 April 1932, and after travelling 7,769 km in 76 hours and 35 minutes, it landed in Recife, as confirmed by the receipt postmark, dated 27 October 1932.

Alfons Pilarzy (?-1993), a philatelist and dealer from the village of Paruszowice, was a former postal and municipal employee in Rybnik, Polish Upper Silesia. He emerged as one of the most prolific creators of Polish Zeppelin mail, including those sent from the Free City of Danzig. Pilarzy collaborated with Felix Buchal, a German collector based in Bad Salzelmen, and Hermann Stoltz in Recife, who was the recipient of numerous philatelic letters from various countries. After World War II, he settled in Coburg, Germany, where he maintained business correspondence with auction houses throughout the 1970s and 1980s. His creative works are prominently featured in the Zygmunt Kopel collection, with many pieces considered 'gems' of Zeppelin mail.



Figure 3. One of the eight recorded covers from the Gdansk 1 P.O. on the 4SAF1933: Sent directly from Danzig via Berlin to Friedrichshafen (Type 1).

Figure 3 depicts one of the eight items from Danzig transported on the fourth flight of LZ 127 to Brazil in 1933 (4SAF1933). The flight G323, carrying 160 kg of mail, departed from Friedrichshafen on 5 August and arrived in Recife on 8 August, covering a distance of 8,050 km in 72 hours and 53 minutes. The cover, sent as registered (No. 014945) from Gdansk 1 post office on 28 July 1933, features distinctive yellow-brown private directional labels. The postage of 3.95 zł corresponds to the Polish foreign printed matter rate, which included 10 gr (for 50g), 60 gr for registration, and 3.25 zł for air service to Brazil (for 25g, effective 6 May–17 October 1933). Transit postmarks from Berlin C2 Post office (1 August 1933) and a receiving backstamp from Pernambuco (9 August 1933) confirm that the letter was sent from Danzig via Berlin and Friedrichshafen, where it received the connecting (DLH) and the transatlantic (LZ 127) special flight cachets. According to Vogels' classification, this is a Type 1 Zeppelin item, dispatched directly from Danzig to Berlin. Pilarzy likely sought assistance from postal workers at Gdansk 1 post office to send his letters through the Danzig mail system, which would allow for their delivery to Berlin. Although this violated Polish postal regulations, it conformed to German practices. During the summer of 1933 (1 May-31 August), DLH operated two daily flights from Danzig-Langfuhr, with departures at 12:50 and 15:45, arriving in Berlin at 16:10 and 18:35.

It is noteworthy that three of the eight letters from Gdansk reached Brazil on 4SAF1933, routed through a transit address in Poland. Pilarzy's decision to send his Zeppelin mail from both the Polish post office in Danzig and mainland Poland may stem from his concerns about the operational reliability of the Free City's postal service, as he could ensure timely delivery to Friedrichshafen from Poland. By mid-1933, Polish postal authorities likely recognized the irregularities associated with Zeppelin shipments, prompting Pilarzy to devise more ingenious methods for airmail operations.

Thus, the 'PORT GDANSK' overprints were applied to an unaddressed envelope, which was then cancelled at the Gdansk 1 post office The envelope was subsequently placed inside another envelope and sent as a registered letter to Rybnik, thereby complying with Polish postal regulations. Upon arrival in Rybnik, the registry label and receipt postmark were removed from the outer envelope and attached to the previously unaddressed inner envelope, which had cancelled 'PORT GDANSK' postage. After affixing private directional labels or writing the South American address by hand, such a 'new' letter was dispatched in the usual manner via Berlin to Friedrichshafen.

Hans Vogels, an expert in the Polish postal history in the Free City of Danzig, questions whether registered labels were exclusively used in Rybnik and suggests they might have also been used in Gdansk. When multiple registered letters were sent, postal employees provided registration labels on a separate sheet, which the sender would then cut out and affix to his mail. Consequently, if the registration labels and transit cancellations from Rybnik are printed on the same paper, it indicates that the registration was applied in Rybnik; otherwise, it could have originated in Gdansk. Dieter Leder, an airship mail authority, asserts that Type 4 mail, paid for with 'PORT GDANSK' stamps, should be classified under the Polish postal service as it was ultimately dispatched from Rybnik.

Furthermore, Andrzej Klosinski, a Polish airmail expert, questions whether such a 'handicraft' can be considered legitimate. This type of philatelic manipulation with non-airmail items raises concerns and casts doubt on the postal legitimacy of these items. Despite these issues, collectors on both sides of the Atlantic are eager to invest substantial sums, often in the thousands, for these rare items, as they affirm the characteristics of postal circulation and airship services.



Figure 4. One of the ten known Polish postal items from Port Gdansk on the 8SAF1933: Prepared in Gdansk but expedited from Poland (Type 4).

Figure 4 illustrates a Type 4 Zeppelin cover that originated in Gdansk and was dispatched from Poland. It is one of ten documented Polish examples from the Free City aboard 8SAF1933. Flight G343, which carried 120 kg of mail, took off from Friedrichshafen on 30 September and reached Recife on 3 October, covering a distance of 8,148 km in 73 hours and 34 minutes. The cover, featuring stamps cancelled at the Gdansk 1 post office on 23 September 1933, was sent via registered mail within another envelope to Rybnik. The Gdansk registration label (No. 002304) and the Rybnik postmark (dated 24 September 1933) were later removed from the outer envelope and attached to an internal letter. Notably, one of the private directional labels had the Rybnik address crossed out and replaced with a Brazilian destination, mistakenly indicating the Graf Zeppelin's departure date to South America.

The front of the cover displays a DLH feeder flight cachet from Berlin and a transatlantic *Graf Zeppelin* cachet from Friedrichshafen, while the reverse shows a Pernambuco receipt postmark, dated 4 October 1933. The convenience postage, using four 1 zł adhesives, not only fulfils the prevailing rate, but also enhances the visual appeal of this philatelically glorious Gdansk Zeppelin cover. According to the Polish foreign tariff, the postal fee for the printed matter should have totalled 3.95 zł, mirroring the previous shipment's costs (10 gr for basic service, 60 gr for registration, and 3.25 zł for the flight to Brazil).

Figure 5 depicts one of the two existing covers, which were prepared in Gdansk and dispatched from Poland aboard the *Graf Zeppelin* airship to Akron, Ohio. After receiving a courtesy cancellation in Gdansk on 7 October 1933, the letter was forwarded to Rybnik, where the original registry label (No. 000457) and a transit date stamp (9 October 1933) were transferred from the outer envelope to the inner one. It then acquired new directional labels indicating 'Bis Akron (Ohio)' and a destination address in New York, and continued its journey through Berlin to Friedrichshafen. There, it received commemorative cachets for the DLH flight and the LZ 127 flight, celebrating the 50th transatlantic crossing. After arriving in Akron on 25 October 1933, as indicated by the transit backstamp, the letter was ultimately delivered to its recipient in New York via standard surface mail, in accordance with *Luftschiffbau Zeppelin* regulations, with a receiving backstamp dated 27 October 1933.

For a postal fee of 7.20 zł to Akron, using a block of seven 1 zł 'PORT GDANSK 'stamps, the breakdown included the standard international letter rate from Poland at 60 gr, a registration fee of 60 gr, and the airship surcharge of 6 zł. However, the stamps were cancelled at the Gdansk 1 post office, which was not authorized to handle international mail. Alternatively, under the domestic postal tariff (Gdansk to Poland), the franking would have been 25 gr for a standard letter, 30 gr for registration, plus the 6 zł airship fee, resulting in an overpayment of 65 gr. The motivations behind Pilarzy's actions remain unclear.

On 28 October 1933, the *Graf Zeppelin* departed from Akron, completing a journey of 8,509 km in 80 hours and 31 minutes, ultimately arriving in Seville on 31 October (Flight G354; 383 kg of mail). The airship resumed its voyage on 2 November, covering an additional 2,039 kilometers in 22 hours and 16 minutes to reach Friedrichshafen (Flight G355; 353 kg of mail). Among the rarest items in the Kopel collection are two letters from the 'Triangle Flight,' which traversed Germany, South America, and North America before returning to Seville and Friedrichshafen (Figures 6 and 7, respectively).

Each is known to exist in two copies, making them the rarest Zeppelin items (Table). Both covers were affixed with a notably high postage of 10.20 zł, prominently displayed on both sides. This accounted for the international letter rate (60 gr per 20g), registration fee (60 gr), and an airmail surcharge for the round-trip Zeppelin service (9.00 zł per 5g). The 10.20 zł postage must have been quite high for collectors in 1933, equivalent to approximately $1.90



Figure 5. One of the two covers sent from Gdansk 1 P.O. to Akron, Ohio, on the Chicago World's Fair Flight (9SAF1933): Prepared in Gdansk, transmitted via Rybnik to Germany (Type 4), flown on Graf Zeppelin via South America to Akron, and surface mail to New York.



Figure 6. One of the two despatches from the Polish Post in Danzig carried by LZ 127 on the 'Triangle Flight' to Seville, Spain (9SAF1933): Prepared in Gdansk, transmitted via Rybnik to Germany (Type 4 variety), and flown via South and North America back to Europe. Then surface mail from Seville via Bad Salzelmen (Germany) to Rybnik (Poland). Unusual 10.20 zl Port Gdansk postage paid. The back of the cover shows signatures of personalities of the zeppelin era.

USD at the time, or approximately $50 today (adjusted for a 3.5% annual inflation rate). The cover in Figure 6 warrants a thorough examination, having been sent on 10 October 1933, merely three days after other known Zeppelin mail was dispatched from Gdansk 1 post office for the Chicago World's Fair. It is noteworthy for its registration stamp, which features a manually inscribed number (No. 12122), unlike the standard Gdansk preprinted registration labels. The sender, Alfons Pilarzy, addressed this massively overpaid letter (10.20 zł; the domestic rate was 0.55 zł!) to himself. Upon reaching Rybnik, the cover was adorned with a distinctive yellow-brown private 'Bis Sevilla' directional Zeppelin label and an address label, likely intended for Feliks Buchal in Bad Salzelmen, Germany. After being dispatched from Rybnik (12.X.33-8), it arrived at Warszawa 2 post office the same evening and was subsequently sent to Berlin by a postal ambulance. It was stamped with connecting (DLH) and a transatlantic (LZ 127) flight cachets, before *Graf Zeppelin* departed from Friedrichshafen on 14 October 1933. Upon returning to Europe, the airship docked in Seville late on 31 October 1933. The letter was unloaded and cancelled on 1 November 1933, before being sent by regular mail to Bad Salzelmen.

The receiving postmark (4.X.33) aligns with the timing of the German Zeppelin mail transmission from Seville. After the temporary address label was removed, the despatch was forwarded to Alfons Pilarzy the following day (RYBNIK 2 / b / 5.XI.33-8). Adding to its uniqueness, the cover (illustrated on the Cherrystone auction catalogue cover) features autographs from prominent figures of the Zeppelin era, i.e. Wilhelm Ernst Dörr, the designer of LZ 127 and director of *Luftschiffbau Zeppelin*, Hugo Eckener, the commander of LZ 127, Ernst Lehmann, the captain who perished in the *Hindenburg* disaster (6 May 1937), Max Pruss, captain of the LZ 129, who survived the catastrophe and Knut Eckener, son of Hugo Eckener.

In contrast to the Zeppelin cover in Figure 6, which is categorised as a Type 4 variety (originating from Poland and franked in Gdansk), the accompanying cover from the Gdansk 1 post office, dated 7 October 1933, has been altered (Figure 7). It includes a typical registration label (No. 000461) and a transit postmark from Rybnik (9.X.33-9), which originated from another postally used cover. The franking of 10.20 zł, along with the directional label, and the Friedrichshafen receiving backstamp (2.XI.33-8) verifies that the item completed the 'Triangle Flight'. The last leg of about 650 kilometres to Schönebeck-Bad Salzelmen was carried out by surface mail (3.XI.33-12).

A circular issued by the Polish Ministry of Industry and Trade on 29 September 1933 sought to halt the dispatch of Zeppelin mail from the Free City of Danzig. Although the details of the document are not entirely clear, it likely stated that these services were intended exclusively for domestic mail. However, between 7 and 10 October 1933, over 70 covers were still despatched from the Gdansk 1 post office to the World's Fair in Chicago by *Graf Zeppelin*, indicating an unofficial expansion of airship services. This incident reflects a broader pattern in which postal authorities did not consistently enforce regulations strictly, as seen later with the shipments from Gdansk on the *Hindenburg's* third flight to North America in 1936.

Figure 8 depicts one of the two recorded Gdansk dispatches on the *Hindenburg*'s 3NAF1936 (Table 1). Sent as registered (handstamp No. 000709) on 13 June 1936, the letter is addressed to Detroit, Michigan. The convenience franking of 3.00 zł comprised 25 gr for the domestic letter rate, 30 gr for registration, and 1.90 zł for airship transport, resulting in an overpayment of 55 gr. However, if the sender had calculated the postal fees from Poland (55 gr for the letter, 45 gr for registration, and 1.90 zł for the air service), totaling 2.90 zł, the overpayment would have been reduced to just 10 gr. The item was routed through Frankfurt, where it received a red staging cachet from the German airmail service (Deutsche Luftpost Europa – Nordamerika), featuring a lower-case 'd' on the right side of the double outer ring, indicating the start of transatlantic service.



Figure 7. One of the two dispatches from Gdansk 1 p. o. carried on the entire 'Triangle Flight' by Graf Zeppelin *to Friedrichshafen, Germany (9SAF1933): Prepared in Gdansk, transmitted via Rybnik to Germany (Type 4), and flown via the Americas back to Germany, then surface mail from Friedrichshafen to Bad Salzelmen (Germany). Unusual 10.20 zl Port Gdansk postage.*



Figure 8. One of the two existing dispatches from Gdansk addressed to Detroit, MI, carried on the Hindenburg airship to North America (3NAF1936): Flown via Frankfurt to Lakehurst, NJ (LZ 129), and then via New York to Detroit.

In 1936, both the airship and DLH airmail utilized the same generic airmail cachets. Flight H22 departed from Frankfurt on 19 June 1936, and after covering 6,837 km in 61 hours and 30 minutes, it landed on 22 June in Lakehurst, New Jersey. Processed in New York (6.22/1936), the cover was delivered in Detroit the following day (JUN/23/1936). The New York - Detroit route may have been serviced by United Air Lines, connecting through Cleveland with Pennsylvania Airlines, or by American Airways from New York via Buffalo to Detroit.

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