

# REINHOLD PLATZ

BY EBERHARD SCHMIDT

*Eberhard Schmidt is a grandson of Reinhold Platz. He was born in 1938 and studied History and English at Hamburg University. He became a teacher and then Deputy Headmaster of a grammar school in Hamburg. Now retired, he lives in Ahrensburg in Schleswig-Holstein. This is an abbreviated version of a lecture that the author gave in October 2007, by invitation from the Technical Association of the Federal State Museum Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in the Schweriner Marstall. Some of the information is drawn from the memory of Platz's daughter Johanna Schmidt as well as his grandchildren:*

*Dr. Marianne Schnoor, Dip-Ing Joachim Schmidt and the author.*

*Photographs from the family collection unless otherwise stated*



*Reinhold Platz sitting at a desk in the accounts office of the Fokker company at Schwerin in 1916/17.*

*:Dr Ralf Wendt, Editor 'Stier und Greif', Mecklenburg-Vorpommern*

A FEW YEARS AGO, when I bought a model kit of the Fokker Dr.I triplane in England, I found under Remarks in the English text: *Designed by Reinhold Platz of the Fokker company...* in the French: *Conçu par Reinhold Platz de la Société Fokker...* but in the German version, the constructor's name was missing. It only recorded the names of the pilots who had flown the triplane. The name Reinhold Platz is frequently better known abroad than at home.

In the literature, Platz is recognized (by Henri Hegener, the factory journalist of the Fokker works, in the 1920s, as well as by A.R. Weyl, an aviation expert who had emigrated to England in 1933) as the person responsible for technical design from 1916.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he is only referred to as a master welder,<sup>2</sup> under whose direction, after the end of war, boats, bedsteads and balances were manufactured (according to the late Peter M. Grosz, likewise an emigrant from Germany, and an American aviation historian).<sup>3</sup>

In his autobiography, Fokker named Platz as his 'right hand man', who could construct the required airframe components down to the smallest detail.<sup>4</sup>

I should make a few comments here on what the aforementioned authors say: in Fokker's memoirs, *The Flying Dutchman*, he stresses his own achievement as a technical designer. That is frequently the case in such situations and cannot be taken as wholly accurate. Henri Hegener, in *Fokker: the Man and the Aircraft*, refers to both Fokker and Platz as technical designers. A.R. Weyl, in *Fokker - the Creative Years*, emphasises Platz's contribution to practical design, which is not so much problematic as under-appreciated, due to Fokker's self-presentation as entrepreneur. Peter M. Grosz dismisses Weyl as inaccurate, presumptive and deceptive, in a 2004 essay, *Fokker: The Early Years - The True Story*, asking who else could have designed the aeroplanes from 1916 onward.<sup>5</sup>

Who then was this Reinhold Platz?

Platz was born, on 16 January 1886, in Cottbus, in the then

Prussian province of Brandenburg, the youngest of seven children.

His father was a self-taught stonemason, but probably took on casual labour as opportunity arose. As usual for this social class, Platz attended elementary school; in Cottbus, from 1892, and then in Berlin. On leaving school he worked as an errand boy and auxiliary worker in different enterprises.

The family could not afford tuition fees. He was employed, in 1903, as an assistant in an oxygen factory in Berlin, where the Frenchman Edmond Fouché had introduced oxy-acetylene gas welding, which he had invented. Platz stuck close to him, so to speak, and tried out the technology during work breaks. Management probably recognized his interest and skill and promoted him. There's no equivalent in today's formal language – Weyl uses the English term 'apprenticeship'.<sup>6</sup> Platz was more akin to something like a trained worker, who soon mastered his profession so well that the company used him as one of its trained welders who gave demonstrations in that metalworking technique, both in Germany and in neighbouring countries. Thus he went, along with others, as he said, to 'Russland', meaning to Warsaw, which at that time belonged to the Tsarist Empire.

His military conscription was spent, from 1907 to 1909, in Potsdam with the 1st Guard Regiment, occasionally acting as a swimming instructor. Military service must have had a great influence on the rest of his life, as he put a high value on instruction, and obedience with little discussion. Order was particularly important to him. Duty served, he returned to work as a welder.

In 1911 he approached Fokker, at Johannisthal near Berlin, for work as a welder. Later he happily acknowledged that his first work for his new employer was to sweep out the workshop. Fokker welded steel tubing for the first time in 1912. At the end of 1913, following the move of the flying school and the recommendation of military authority, Fokker transferred his factory to Schweriner Lake, now

*Platz with his wife Elise and daughter Joanna at Gorries airfield, Schwerin about 1918.*

