

Reinhold Platz & The Fokker Aircraft Company¹

by Eberhard Schmidt

This text replaces that published in Vol 40/4



Reinhold Platz.

A few years ago when I bought a model kit of the Fokker Dri triplane in England I found under 'Remarks' in the English text, 'Designed by Reinhold Platz of the Fokker company...'; in the French Remarques: Conçu par Reinhold Platz de la Société Fokker. In the German version the designer's name was missing. Here only the names of the pilots who had flown the triplane were recorded.

The name Reinhold Platz seems to be better known abroad than at home. In aviation literature Platz is called the person responsible for technical design since 1916 (so Henri Hegener, the 'court journalist' of the Fokker works in the 1920s, and A.R.Weyl, an aviation expert who emigrated to England in 1935,² whereas elsewhere he is only referred to as 'master welder'³ or later as 'simply a welder' under whose direction boats, bedsteads and scales were manufactured (so Peter M. Grosz, an American aviation historian who had also emigrated from Germany).⁴ In his autobiography *The Flying Dutchman* according to which he wants to have made all constructions down to the smallest detail on his own, Fokker calls Platz his 'right-hand man'.⁵

I should make a few comments here on the authors mentioned above. Fokker's memoirs *The Flying Dutchman* were meant to stress his own achievement as a technical designer. That is frequently the case in this literary genre and cannot be taken as reliable. Henri Hegener, *Fokker – The Man and the Aircraft* refers to both Fokker and Platz as technical designers. Hegener knew both men personally. A.R.Weyl, *Fokker: The Creative Years* emphasizes Platz's role as a technical designer but is problematic in so far as he does not mention his sources nor does he sufficiently acknowledge Fokker's entrepreneur function. Peter M.Grosz, in an essay entitled *Fokker: The Early Years: The True Story* (written in 2004), accuses Weyl of forgery, insinuation and deception without proving who else should have designed the airplanes since 1916.⁶ Besides, my hair always stands on end if, in historiography, someone claims to know the truth. Every historian knows that the truth does not exist but, at best, truths or, rather, positions.

Who then was this Reinhold Platz?

Platz was born in Cottbus in the then Prussian province of Brandenburg on January 16th, 1886 as the youngest of seven children. His father was a stonemason but seems to have earned his living as a casual worker. As usual in this social class, Platz attended elementary school in Cottbus and then in Berlin. On leaving school he worked as an errand boy and auxiliary worker in different firms. The family could not afford an apprenticeship or professional training.

In 1903 he was employed as an unskilled labourer in an oxygen factory in Berlin where the Frenchman Fouché introduced oxy-acetylene welding that he had invented. Platz watched him at his work and tried out the new technology at break time. The management had probably recognized his interest and skill and promoted him. Nevertheless, there can be no question of an apprenticeship as a locksmith in a formal sense, as Weyl suggests.⁷ He had never acquired any certificate of that kind. Platz was something like a semi-skilled worker, but soon acquired such a command in this field that his firm sent him to teach welding in metal industry in Germany, Switzerland and Russia (i.e. Warsaw that then belonged to the Russian Empire).

Military service, which he spent in Potsdam in the First Guard Infantry Regiment from 1907 to 1909, partly as a swimming instructor, seems to have had a lasting influence on him. For all his life command and obedience meant much to him, discussion little. He left the army as a sergeant and subsequently worked again as a welder.

As a welder he joined the small aircraft factory of Anthony Fokker at Johannisthal near Berlin in 1911. Later he liked to tell people that in the beginning one of his duties was to sweep out the workshop. In 1912 the first steel tube fuselages were welded at Fokker's. In 1913 Fokker's flying school moved to Görries near Schwerin in Mecklenburg (North Germany), as through the expanding aircraft industry the Johannisthal airfield had become too small. Towards the end of that year, on recommendation of the army administration, Fokker also moved his

aeroplane production to Mecklenburg's capital where he had been offered a site at Lake Schwerin.⁸ To the water sport enthusiasts Fokker and Platz this change may have been also personally very welcome.

In Schwerin Platz was soon entrusted with taking over the fitting and welding shop, a position that corresponded to that of a master craftsman. The quality of the welding performed in Schwerin under Platz was acknowledged by the German authorities when, in 1914, the Fokker company was expressly excluded after aircraft welding had been generally forbidden because of some crashes.

One year later Platz took over the management of the experimental department. In this capacity he was approached by chief designer Martin Kreutzer to co-operate with constructions.⁹ Kreutzer died in June 1916 as a result of an aircraft crash. Later Platz described, as I can remember, the takeover of Kreutzer's responsibilities as follows: Fokker came running across the works premises where he met Platz and lamented who should now design his aeroplanes. Platz, who despite all modesty had a safe feeling for his own abilities, let him know that he would do it. He was not easily to be scared by a new job. Fokker answered that that was what he thought.

Fokker himself apparently would not have been able to do the job. He was an excellent pilot with a feel for what was good in an aeroplane and what should be improved. He could convey his ideas to his designers, implementing them was not within his range, and this is, after all, not the task of a businessman. Platz described Fokker as a man who liked to do things with his hands but would not methodically follow an idea¹⁰, and this impression is also conveyed in his above-mentioned autobiography. Apart from this Fokker constantly had to commute from Schwerin to Berlin and to the front to see what aeroplanes the allies had, what German pilots wanted and what the demands of the military authorities were. To ask Platz to occasionally accompany him on these journeys did not come into Fokker's mind. Did he fear that his image as a great aircraft designer could suffer? On the other hand Platz did not attach importance to appearing in public, even avoided it if possible. Nevertheless he knew the most important pilots of his machines personally because they visited the factory, among them von Richthofen, Boelcke, Immelman and Udet (whom he would later meet again as his superior in the aircraft ministry).

The question who exactly did what in the Fokker factory cannot easily be answered. The English aviation historian Paul Leaman gave me some clues. In a letter he wrote,

'First, the team needs an "ideas man" ... The person concerned will have a shrewd idea of what is needed or (even) possible. He will describe this to his team.... Somewhere in the team will be the people who can translate the 'dream' to a (fairly) practical drawing... Next in the team will be somebody who can look at the drawings and comment on their practicality ... In my mind Fokker was the 'ideas man' with a shrewd idea of what was feasible and what wasn't but lacking the training to apply science to his ideas. I am sure that Platz's role initially incorporated that of the draughtsman with that of the practical man. ... The practical man was Platz. ... As time went on he would have become more remote from the shop floor but would have retained his knowledge and ability to communicate what was feasible both upwards (to Fokker) and downwards (to the draughtsmen and work force)'.¹⁰

Platz's first own design was a biplane with cantilevered wooden wings. It had the designation V1. Yet in April 1917 Fokker returned from a front visit on which he had been shown a captured British Sopwith triplane that was obviously superior to the German aeroplanes. Actually at that time Platz already wanted to build an un-braced monoplane that fitted better in with his idea of simplicity.¹¹ But he was ordered to design a triplane. Thus the famous Fokker Dr.I came into existence.