Richard Hauptmann

The break occurred on September 18, 1934. The head teller of the Corn Exchange Bank in the Bronx was sorting bills and came across two $10 gold certificates. Both were listed as ransom bills. One of the bills had "4U-13-14 N.Y." penciled at the edge. It looked like a license plate number, and police had asked service station attendants and anyone associated with automobiles to record license numbers of cars whose drivers paid with gold notes. Three gas stations near the Corn Exchange cleared receipts through the bank. One of these was the Warren-Quinlan Service Station at 127th Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. When Detective James Finn came over to interview them, both the manager, Walter Lyle, and his assistant, John Lyons, recalled taking in the cash. It had come from a white male of average height, speaking with a German accent and driving a blue 1930 Dodge sedan. He had bought 98¢ worth of gas (remember, this was at 1934 prices!) and paid with the $10 bill, which he took from a white envelope in his pocket.

Lyle looked hard at the note. "What's wrong?" the man asked. "That's good money." The manager commented that one didn't see many of these around anymore and the man agreed. "I have only about one hundred left," he said.

Lyle's main concern at this point was that the bill was counterfeit, so he took down the license number and wrote it on the bill before putting it in his cash drawer.

From the New York Bureau of Motor Vehicles, Finn found out that the license number was assigned to a blue 1930 Dodge sedan that was registered to a thirty-five-year-old, German-born carpenter named Richard Hauptmann who lived at 1279 East 222nd Street, at the intersection with Needham Avenue, in the Williamsbridge section of the Bronx. This was close to Woodlawn Cemetery, ten blocks from National Lumber and Millwork, four miles from St. Raymond's Cemetery, and about ten miles from the Warren-Quinlan Service Station.

Instantly, all the mental lightbulbs started popping in the minds of Finn and his fellow detectives. They immediately put the two-story house where Hauptmann and his wife rented a five-room flat on the second floor under surveillance. A little before 9:00 in the morning on Wednesday, September 19, Hauptmann came out, walked back to the detached,

ramshackle single-car garage, unlocked a padlock, and went inside. Hauptmann had built the garage for his landlord in exchange for its exclusive use while he lived there. A few moments later his car emerged onto Needham Avenue. Hauptmann, of medium height, was a reasonable fit for the physical descriptions.

Within a few minutes the detectives had arrested Hauptmann, got him out of his car, frisked and handcuffed him. They looked in his wallet. Among the bills was a $20 gold note, folded into eight sections. He said he had several hundred more at home, which he was holding as a hedge against inflation. In Germany after the World War, inflation had run rampant.

They got some basic information from him. Hauptmann's first name was Bruno, though everyone in America, including his wife, knew him by his middle name, Richard. During the World War, he had served twenty months with the 103rd Infantry, drafted into the German army when he was only fourteen. The war had taken the lives of two of his older brothers. He had come to America initially as a twenty-three-year-old stowaway on the German liner *Hanover.* He was discovered when the ship docked in America, and he was sent back to Germany. A month later, he snuck aboard the same ship but was discovered before it pulled out to sea. He escaped arrest by diving overboard. Two months after that he stowed away on the S.S. *George Washington,* and this time he made it. Hauptmann was nothing if not determined. He got a job as a dishwasher, worked his way up to mechanic, and finally to carpenter. On October 10, 1925, he married a waitress named Anna Schoeffler. Eight years later she gave birth to a son, Manfred, nicknamed Bubi. Anna Hauptmann had worked at a bakery and restaurant on Dyre Avenue, but had left the job in December of 1932 to take care of Bubi and the house full-time.

When police searched Hauptmann's apartment, much to Anna's shock when she returned home, they were surprised by how nice and expen-

sive-looking his furniture was. Most impressive was a late-model floor radio that cost about $300, quite a sum in those days, particularly during the Depression. Anna had no idea why so many police officers and detectives were swarming through her place, and they didn't offer her an explanation. When she got to the master bedroom, she found her husband near the bed, handcuffed to a police officer. In German, Hauptmann told his wife they were here because of a gambling problem he'd had the other night.

The detectives asked him where he had hidden the ransom money from the Lindbergh case. He insisted he knew nothing about it. Pointing out the window to the garage, FBI special agent Thomas H. Sisk asked him if that was where he kept the money. Hauptmann replied that he had no money other than whatever was in his apartment. When asked if he had a police record in Germany, he said he did not.

Police seized seventeen notebooks that they intended to use as exemplars of his writing. In one, they found a sketch of a ladder detail similar to the kidnap ladder.

Bruno Richard Hauptmann was taken to the NYPD Second Precinct Station in lower Manhattan. He was printed and a crime scene team scoured his car for blood and hair and fibers. Nothing turned up, and his prints matched none on the ladder. In addition to the notebooks, police also made Hauptmann produce seemingly endless handwriting samples. Many of those displayed similar handwriting to the ransom notes.

During this initial incarceration, police roughed him up, slapped him around, and deprived him of food and sleep for many hours. That this was fairly common practice in those days makes it no less deplorable and a blatant abuse of the prisoner's rights.

During the long hours of interrogation, detectives got more personal details of Hauptmann's life. He had worked as a carpenter at the decent wage of a dollar an hour until April or May of 1932, at which time he'd given up most of his jobs to devote himself to the stock market, in which he said he'd begun successfully investing the previous year. Keep in mind that this was the depth of the Great Depression and Hauptmann was a poorly educated immigrant. At the time of the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, Hauptmann said he was doing carpentry for the Majestic Apartments in Manhattan. He also acknowledged that he had, in the past, purchased lumber from National Lumber and Millwork. He admitted to having saved $300 in gold certificates and had no explanation as to how he could have come in possession of Lindbergh ransom currency.

Police got Hauptmann into a rather perfunctory lineup. All the other men were tall, strong-looking police officers. Joseph Perrone, the cab-

driver, identified Hauptmann. John Condon, much to the annoyance of the police, said he could—or would—not at this time. They felt he was playing some more of his games.

On Thursday, September 20, while Hauptmann was still being interrogated, police went through the garage behind his house. Prying off a board that had been nailed between two joists, a detective uncovered a shelf of a hundred neatly wrapped $10 gold notes. Another package contained eighty-three more. A second detective found a hidden one-gallon shellac can containing twelve more packages of gold notes in tens and twenties. Altogether, police discovered $11,930 in the garage, all of it Lindbergh ransom money. This certainly explained why Hauptmann kept the garage locked up so tight.

When confronted by this evidence, Hauptmann admitted he had lied about having the cash but insisted he'd told the truth about everything else and still disavowed any knowledge of the Lindbergh kidnapping. The money, he said, had been left with him by his friend and partner in a fur import business, a fellow German immigrant named Isidor Fisch.

Fisch would quickly become the most mysterious name associated with the case. In December of 1933, suffering from tuberculosis, Fisch had left New York and set sail for Germany. He returned to his hometown of Leipzig, where he died on March 29, 1934. According to Hauptmann, Fisch left some of his possessions with his friend and partner for safekeeping, including several suitcases and trunks and a shoe box tied with string. Hauptmann was not particularly curious about the contents, and he placed the shoe box on the top shelf of the broom closet in his kitchen, where it remained until a strong rain leaked water into the closet. Removing the soaked items from the upper shelves, Hauptmann came upon the shoe box, opened it, and to his astonishment found fifteen grand in soggy gold certificates. Without saying anything to Anna, he dried out the money and hid it in the garage. He started using some of the money in August 1934. He felt entitled to spend $7,000 of it, because that's how much Isidor owed him from their partnership when he left America.

Fisch's German relatives described him as being penniless, and his American associates claimed he left the country owing them sizable debts. Interestingly, after Fisch died and Hauptmann wrote to the family to tell them about the belongings Isidor had left in his care, he made no mention of the shoe box.

Then some new information surfaced that made things even worse for Hauptmann. It turned out he'd lied about his past in Germany, too. Far from the clean police record of which he'd assured his interrogators, he'd been convicted of grand larceny, petty theft, armed robbery, and

receiving stolen property in 1919 when he was twenty. There were nine cases on the record of the County Court at Bautzen, according to a police memo dated November 2, 1934. In one case, he'd broken into the house of the mayor of Bernhbruch, Germany, by climbing a ladder to a second-story window! The armed robbery charge was for stealing groceries from two women at gunpoint. He'd ended up serving more than three years in Bentzin Prison in Seconsen, Germany. He'd tried to get to America because he was about to be arrested for another series of burglaries.

Hauptmann had also escaped from custody several times, once breaking out of jail and jumping out of a police van on another occasion.

During the summer of 1932, about four months after the kidnapping, Bruno had sent Anna on a visit back to Germany. The main purpose of this trip was to try to find out whether he was still wanted by the law over there, or if he could safely return. She was told that if he came back, he'd be thrown in the slammer as soon as they found him. So that ended that hope.

Despite the threats and rough treatment from New York police, Hauptmann wouldn't confess or admit that he knew anything.