

Scene

In Helgoland: The Last Lighthouse Keeper

A short, stocky man in a green parka and black fisherman's cap walks briskly along a concrete path cut through dunes overgrown with coarse brown grass and scraggly thorn bushes. His destination, dimly outlined in the fog swirling in off the chill North Sea, is a 38-ft.-high red-and-white range light, resembling an enormous chess piece abandoned in the dunes of West Germany's Helgoland island. As he does twice a month in weather fair and foul, Lighthouse Keeper Wilhelm Krüss grasps the rusted iron rungs set in the base of the metal tower, climbs up to unlock a side door and mounts a spiral staircase on the inner wall to the viewing platform at the top. As he sets to work polishing an enormous glass drum lens and wipes off two 250-watt bulbs inside the beacon, daylight filters—as if through stained glass—past transparent red and green direction markers set in the north and south windows, leaving a subdued glow in the turret chamber.

Next Krüss climbs out to the narrow balcony encircling the beacon to scrub down the outer windows so that the light beam illuminating the red and green panels every two seconds will be distinctly visible for voyagers at sea. The tide is low, exposing vast stretches of sand, streaked at regular intervals by dark pebbles. The dank smell of the ocean hangs heavy in the humid air. In the distance, sea birds are keening.

During the three decades in which Krüss has served as the lighthouse keeper for Helgoland, a red-cliffed dot of land 40 miles off the North German coast, he has never grown tired of making the trek from the main lighthouse to service seven jetty and two range lights, as well as a flashing red-and-white change-of-course marker on the northern dunes. "People say that my job must be boring," says Krüss, whose father was also a North Sea lighthouse keeper. "But when I look out from on high, I always see a different picture. The sea, the sky and the island are never the same. Where else can you get such an unhindered view of a sunset? You see things people seldom see. It can turn you into a poet."

Not that Krüss lets his mind wander too much while he is attending to his bulbs, lenses and cables. "When something becomes a routine," he says, "you have to pay particular attention to the small details, or you can get careless."

Still, in those solitary moments, Krüss reflects on the changes that will take place on the island and in his life when he turns 65 next July 26. Retirement will begin at the end of that month for the man who is jokingly known as Helgoland's "highest civil servant" because he spends so much of his time 250-odd ft. above sea level in the island's red-brick central lighthouse. Its tip is visible from the sea, rising above rows of modern, gray-roofed dwellings

only structure on the island to survive an Allied bombing raid in April 1945.

What time and war could not do, progress is achieving. The appearance of the tower will be altered by radar antennas that will meet the needs of modern navigation. A campaign by Helgoland's close-knit population of almost 2,000 to have the tower declared a memorial was turned down by federal authorities on the grounds that safety was more important. Krüss,

who has spent most of his life making sure that the beacon's distinctive recognition signal, a flash every five seconds moving counterclockwise, can be seen from as far away as 36 sea miles, does not fault the decision. But he admits that it will be difficult to leave the lighthouse, where he used to eat Christmas dinner in the turret room until the installation of a modern alarm system allowed him to remain below with his family. He is particularly concerned that once he has to give up his comfortable little apartment, full of nautical souvenirs, the family will have trouble finding another place to live on an island where real estate values have skyrocketed in recent years.

To move to the mainland would be even more wrenching for the native-born Helgolander. Says Krüss: "We islanders grow up with the sea and live from it. Our lives are linked with nature. We have more of a feeling for our environment and, as a result, more concern for other people. Here everyone greets each other. We have a different way of living together. When you are used to this, you don't even think about big cities."

Not that Helgoland's last lighthouse keeper would mind a little travel. Krüss had reached middle age when one of his two sons, now in their 20s, developed ear problems that necessitated spending holidays in the Alps; as a result, Krüss developed a passion for skiing. Now he thinks he may get himself a driver's license—for use off the auto-free island—and make a grand European tour. He would like to visit old lighthouses, of course. To point out destinations, he pulls out a glossy calendar of lighthouses around the world and turns to a picture of one along a rocky coastline in Brittany. Says Krüss: "For me, keeping a lighthouse has been a vocation. I would like to remain in this milieu. I can't close the door behind me and forget it all."

—By John Kohan



Wilhelm Krüss on his island: a life linked with nature

like a turret above a castle wall. In August, this last human-operated lighthouse system on West Germany's North Sea coast will become fully automated. "A new era is coming, but who knows if it will be an improvement," says Krüss. "Things that are old are not always worse. Automation is good as long as it helps people but not when it takes their place."

When Krüss yields his post, a chapter will have ended in the history of the island, which is only 1 mile long and one-third of a mile wide. Pointing to a series of pictures in his apartment at the base of the lighthouse, Krüss explains that the island's first beacon was a coal-burning marker set up in 1530 by the Hanseatic League, which forced ships anchored off Helgoland to pay a toll to keep the fire burning. After the British took control of Helgoland during the Napoleonic Wars, they built a round-towered lighthouse, in which paraffin candles and mercury mirrors were used. Germany obtained the island in 1890 (by ceding Zanzibar to Britain) and put up the first electric-powered beacon eleven years later. The present lighthouse was installed in what was once a Luftwaffe anti-aircraft signal tower, the