

Leica, Jews and Germans

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As a study of both corporate and individual behaviour in the context of Nazi Germany, my research concerning Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar –the manufacturer of the Leica camera-- is situated and seeks to build on the insights of scholars within two main spheres of academic activity. The histories of businesses during this period that were non-explicitly governmental corporate entities are vital to this project. An understanding of the actions of the so-called ‘rescuer’ or ‘righteous gentile’, as initiated within the discipline of sociology, is additionally relevant.

In 1920, Ernst Leitz II (1871-1956) became sole owner of the firm, Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar, an internationally renowned manufacturer of microscopes and measuring instruments used in scientific and industrial settings. The most significant commercial highlight of the following twenty-nine years of his leadership was the introduction in 1925 and subsequent development of the first successful thirty-five millimetre camera, known as the Leica. An even greater achievement, however, was the survival of this firm through the years of economic turmoil and the rule of the Nazi regime, especially given Ernst Leitz II’s known active political support for the Weimar Republic based on his democratic and humanitarian values.

Until this present study, the subject of the activities of the firm Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar and its sole owner Ernst Leitz II during the period of the Third Reich appeared primarily in the form of investigative journalism. I have been a participant as an author and as the subject of interviews as well as further comment. Within this arena, controversy has emerged with regard to the actual numbers of persecuted people helped or rescued by Ernst Leitz II and whether or not he may be regarded as another Oskar Schindler in terms of

behaving audaciously in opposition to the regime. Another area of contention is how to regard the usage of forced labour by Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar during the time of the mobilized economy in Nazi Germany. Questions have arisen as to whether Ernst Leitz II was 'courageous', 'altruistic' or merely 'decent'. These varying labels have proliferated without sufficient engagement with an academic discourse so as to offer a genuinely helpful and illuminating contribution to understanding the complexities of human behaviour within the context of the relationships between business and the Nazi dictatorship. There remain temptations and pressures, in both German and Jewish settings, to view actions in black and white terms as either that of a 'saint' or 'sinner'. Such controversy, as well as the current academic interest in complex 'gray characters', inspired me to delve into this topic in depth, as a PhD researcher, in order to evaluate the evidence critically and to place it into an historical framework.

Upon assuming power on 30th January 1933, the Nazi regime wasted no time in launching its official drive to exclude Jews from the Volksgemeinde. Within three months, sustained boycotts were officially organized against large and small 'Jewish' businesses as well as the campaign to dismiss Jews employed as professionals in the legal, medical, educational and commercial fields. Such marginalizing measures, accompanied by the rapid and violent consolidation of Nazi political power together with a relentless and terrorizing anti-Jewish propaganda programme, helped the regime to achieve effectively its early aim of displacing Jews as competitive or equal participants in German economic life.

In response, Ernst Leitz not only helped Jews to leave Germany --in a humane manner but, at the same time, not in overall opposition to Nazi emigration policy-- but, unusually, kept commitments to Jews remaining in Germany for further long-term employment. For example, Paul Rosenthal who was suffering from anti-Semitic abuse committed by a teacher in school, was hired as an apprentice at the factory in early 1933. After having completed three years of training, Rosenthal was sent, passage paid by Leitz, on 3rd December 1936 to New York in order to work for the American agency, E. Leitz Inc. Meanwhile, Paul's sister Gertrude had already left for America in 1935 and was also working at E. Leitz Inc. as the secretary to President Wolfgang Zieler. In 1937, Paul and Gertrude were reunited with their parents Nathan and Else. For this Jewish family,

Nathan Rosenthal's long standing political and social association with Ernst Leitz II –both had been active in the Deutsche Demokratische Partei as well as the Reichsbanner Schwarz Rot Gold not to mention the local rowing club--- proved to be a basis for receiving much needed help to endure staying in Nazi Germany long enough to be sufficiently enabled to make a successful transition to life in the United States.

A particularly well documented example –contract, workbook and many letters have survived-- of another young Jewish apprentice-refugee is that of Paul Rosenthal's friend, Kurt Rosenberg. Rosenberg's family lived in Wetzlar where his father Georg served as a bank manager at the local Commerzbank branch, working closely with corporate clients such as Leitz, until his forced dismissal by the Nazis in July 1934 at the age of fifty-five. On 4th April 1933, shortly after Paul Rosenthal began his training, Kurt Rosenberg began a four year apprenticeship at the Leitz factory and, highly unusual in Nazi Germany at that time, his official workbook indicates that he was promoted to the role of Feinmechanik. On 30th January 1938, he went to the United States on the Hansa with passage paid for by Ernst Leitz and a guaranteed job at the company's New York agency.

Ernst Leitz II also sustained a mixed-faith family through long term employment in his factory, beginning in 1933 and continuing throughout the reign of the Nazis. Christine Jessel, together with her Jewish husband Moritz Jessel, owned a grocer's shop in Wetzlar. After the Nazis came to power, the shop had to be closed after falling prey to the anti-Jewish boycotts. From August 1933, Christine Jessel was employed by the Leitz factory and she remained in her position throughout the war. Thus, she was able to earn a livelihood to support her husband and her daughter, Lore.

Sadly, Moritz Jessel was deported to his death from Wetzlar on 2 June 1943 but Lore Jessel, the half-Jewish child of Moritz and Christine, began working at Leitz in May 1939 as a teenager and remained employed there until the end of the war. According to their post war testimony, the income that the mother and daughter earned together at Leitz from 1940-1944 was up to 2,800 Reichsmarks annually, sufficient to maintain full financial independence.

A subsequent major stage in the Nazi persecution of Jews was the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 which defined Jewish status, stripped German Jews of their citizenship and prohibited marriage between those termed 'Jews' or 'Germans'. One 'mixed' family, that included members who remained in Germany and who were helped in a variety of ways by Ernst Leitz II, was that of Kaethe Steiner and her four children. For example, elder daughter Elsa Magdalena Steiner was married on 5th October 1937 to Catholic-born Julius Huisgen who was a Leitz employee working in the Leica Schule darkroom.

What is unusual is that this union between a half-Jew and a Catholic, expressly forbidden by the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935, was made possible through the efforts of Ernst Leitz II. To this end, Leitz contacted Landrat (District Commissioner) Wilhelm Heinrich Grillo, whom he knew as a fellow game hunter, and asked him to try to convince Gauleiter Jakob Sprenger in Frankfurt to grant an exceptional approval for the planned marriage. Against all expectations, the marriage was permitted by Sprenger under the condition that it was not to be announced in public and especially not in a newspaper. In November 1937, the American agency, Ernst Leitz Inc., applied to the United States State Department for an immigration visa and work permit for Julius Huisgen and in March 1938 the couple left Germany for New York.

Later, on 9-10 November 1938, a nationwide and government-sponsored campaign of violence against Jews was unleashed by the Nazis. In the aftermath of the so-called Kristallnacht, Ernst Leitz II additionally helped Jews who were not previously connected with the photographic industry. A significant example is that of Aron Strauss, a well-regarded physician in Wetzlar as he treated poor people without seeking payment. Under the Nazis, he was eventually forbidden, as a Jew, from practicing his profession.

Aron Strauss was arrested after Reichskristallnacht on 9/10 November 1938 but then released due to his age. He and his wife then decided to emigrate to New Jersey, where their son Dr Fritz Strauss, a radiologist, had settled in 1934 as a refugee from Germany. It was at this point that Ernst Leitz II intervened in order to help. According to Professor Helen Strauss, the daughter-in-law of Dr and Mrs Strauss, Leitz bought the property owned by them. As the money could not be transferred abroad personally by Dr Strauss,

the funds were sent illegally via the accounts of the Leitz company to the United States. Leitz also paid for the passage of Dr Strauss and his wife and, when they reached the United States, the funds were paid out fully in dollars. Notarised documents from the time of the sale indicate that the property was purchased by Leitz on 23 December 1938 at a price significantly above its market value. This transaction took place at a time when Jewish-owned property was being Aryanised and usually sold under duress at prices well below the fair market value and when Jews leaving Germany were allowed to retain only between 4-10% of their assets.

During this time of rapidly accelerated persecution, the example of Hans Heinrich Ehrenfeld and his family indicates that helping Jews was potentially dangerous to the senior management at Leitz. Ehrenfeld owned, together with his elder brother Gustav and his mother Jeanette, a shop in Frankfurt-am-Main known as Haus der Geschenke ('House of Gifts'). This business sold jewellery, leather goods, radios and record players as well as Leica cameras. In addition, the Ehrenfelds owned shops selling Leicas in Cologne, Essen, Mainz and Worms and were early adopters of the Leica and its system of accessories.

In August 1938, Hans Heinrich Ehrenfeld visited Ernst Leitz II, who was then ill in hospital, and asked for advice concerning the liquidation of his business and re-establishing himself profitably in the United States. Dr Leitz agreed readily to help and referred him to Alfred Türk, Director of Sales (Verkaufsleiter) at Leitz. Unfortunately, during the events of 9-10 November 1938, Ehrenfeld's shop in Frankfurt was looted and destroyed. He and his brother Gustav were both imprisoned at Buchenwald on 11th November 1938 but both were then freed due to having visa processing appointments at the US Consulate in Stuttgart.

Just before leaving Germany on 30th December 1938, Hans Heinrich Ehrenfeld received a registered letter of introduction for him to deliver by hand to Wolfgang Zieler and Alfred Boch, who were in charge of the New York agency of Leitz, requesting that support and business connections [Geschäftsverbindung] be offered to him upon his arrival in America. This letter of recommendation for a Jewish businessman, at this point in time, posed a significant risk to the senior management of Leitz. Because of the actions of a Gestapo spy, Alfred Tuerk was arrested in January 1939 for his involvement. He was

jailed for three weeks until Ernst Leitz II was able to have him freed through the intervention of Hans Humbert, a senior official (Oberregierungsrat) at the Ministry of Economics who negotiated successfully with representatives of the Gestapo, Nazi party, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Vice-Chancellor Rudolf Hess's office.

After the outbreak of war, the Nazis made vast conquests throughout 1940-41. Despite an early denunciation of Leitz, by the head of the Hessen Chamber of Commerce Carl Luer made to the war department and the regime's awareness of Ernst Leitz's non-compliance with Nazi racial views, the firm had been supplying the military with in-house designed binoculars, cameras and lenses (especially for the Luftwaffe and the propaganda units attached to the military), aiming devices for long distance artillery guns and the V2 rockets ('Richtkreis-Kollimator 12m K12'), gunsights for Panzer tanks ('Turmzielfernrohr'). Later, Leitz worked closely with AEG to develop active infrared night vision equipment for tanks which became especially important after Allied domination of Germany's airspace made such vehicles vulnerable targets during daytime.

The equipment that was fully developed by in-house experts obviously made the Leitz factory strategically very important to the government. Even so, Ernst Leitz II felt acute pressure to join the NSDAP during this period of seeming Nazi invincibility. First, he persuaded his son Ludwig to apply in 1939 after the Ehrenfeld-Tuerk affair and the beginning of the war. Realizing this was apparently insufficient to prevent the authorities installing committed Nazis to direct his company, he submitted his own application which was accepted in 1941.

A photograph appearing in a self-published book commemorating the 70th birthday of Ernst Leitz II on 1st March 1941, shows him standing just above the lower set of steps at the Deutsche Eck, right arm raised giving a Hitler salute. According to a 1936 guide to the programme of the Nazi era version of the long held annual company tradition of a rail journey from Wetzlar to Koblenz followed by a Rhine River cruise, he could well have been standing just prior to giving a speech to the assembled employees. At that point in the proceedings, all present would have sung the 'Horst Wessel Lied' and such a salute was mandated to accompany the first and forth verses, according to a law instituted in 1934. In the photograph, a marching band is standing directly behind him and three men, not

actually engaged at that moment with playing their instruments, also have raised their right arms and hands in salute. The text describing the context for this photograph refers to the annual trip as, 'The nicest expression of the fostering of communal spirit in the Leitz firm may be found in the yearly Rhine River trip for the entire staff, including pensioners' ('Die schönste Pflege des Gemeinschaftsgedankens in der Firma Leitz findet in der alljährlich stattfindenden Rheinfahrt der gesamten Belegschaft, einschliesslich der Pensionäre, ihren Ausdruck'). Unlike the official Nazi 'Strength Through Joy' ('Kraft durch Freude') trips in which companies would generally purchase places to reward selected employees with holidays, the Leitz firm provided this one-day excursion for all its employees and retirees.

A 26th October 1942 NSDAP character assessment of Ernst Leitz II, while praising his devotion to the welfare and working conditions of his employees, emphasizes his unyielding opposition to Nazi racial doctrine and his retained democratic political attitudes. It is expressed, however, that he is not a significant threat to the regime due to his advanced age and lessened day-to-day leadership role in his company. This may have been accurate as Leitz's appointment diaries do indicate that he spent much more time away hunting than in earlier years. Nevertheless, he and his daughter, Elsie Kuehn-Leitz, soon became involved in a risky attempt to help a Jewish woman escape deportation by helping her to cross into Switzerland.

Hedwig Palm, a former Leitz employee and the Jewish wife of Hermann Palm, operated together with her husband a dispensing optician's shop in the centre of Wetzlar. In May of 1943, as part of a Nazi crackdown on Jewish partners in mixed marriages in Hessen-Nassau, Hedwig Palm was summoned by the Gestapo for deportation. The daughter of Ernst Leitz II, Elsie Kuehn-Leitz, was then told by her masseuse Julie Gerke that Hedwig Palm was in imminent danger. Kuehn-Leitz helped both women to flee by night to the home of Ella Bocks, Ernst Leitz's sister, in Munich. The aim was for Hedwig Palm to eventually slip across the Swiss border near Schaffhausen. For the purpose, Kuehn-Leitz supplied Swiss Francs, maps and a pair of binoculars. Unfortunately, both Hedwig Palm and Julie Gerke were arrested as they approached the border.

It is likely that Julie Gerke, a member of the Nazi Party, came under pressure from the authorities and informed on Elsie Kuehn-Leitz. After interrogating both Kuehn-Leitz and her father, the Gestapo then arrested her on 10 September 1943. She was taken to the prison on Klapperfeld Strasse in Frankfurt and it was only through the payment of a massive 'ransom' by her father (negotiated by Dr Willi Hof, an early advocate of the Autobahn and family friend), that she was released from custody on 28 November 1943. Considerable medical care was required to heal her head injuries and, meanwhile, her father had suffered a mental breakdown during her imprisonment. Elsie Kühn-Leitz was the victim of Gestapo harassment until the end of the war as she and her father nursed each other. Meanwhile, Hedwig Palm was deported to the Ravensbrück where she later died.

Another outcome of the Hedwig Palm affair was that Elsie Kuehn-Leitz was expressly forbidden by the Gestapo from further visiting the camp set up for some 800 Ukrainian female forced labourers attached to the company since the summer of 1942. In the past, she had frequently joined the women for meals and had bettered their living and working conditions. The company was later warned angrily by the authorities for permitting these female workers to stay in the shelters reserved for German citizens during bombing raids.

In conclusion, my study of the behaviour of Ernst Leitz II, his family and his company indicates that this astute and paternal international businessman desired to maintain existing relationships through the offering of compassionate practical help, throughout the duration of the Nazi regime. In contrast to Peter Hayes' landmark study of the senior executives at IG Farben, Ernst Leitz II, due to his strongly held democratic outlook and relative autonomy as a sole owner, acted compassionately towards the persecuted. On the other hand, his company was an important supplier of equipment to the German military and Leica cameras were employed not only for producing countless propaganda photographs but also utilized for propagating racist concepts and perpetrators' notorious souvenir photographs. Nor can the persecuted people who were helped by Leitz be viewed merely as victims, for many, in turn, contributed to these ongoing relationships through their personal loyalty as well as working skills. Fortunately for this researcher, friendships continue even today between the descendents of Ernst Leitz and these families.