

The Fight for Historical Justice

The Basler Rolf Stürm keeps alive the memory of his grand-father, who was expropriated by the Nazis.

By Jonas Hoskyn

Basel. Rolf Stürm digs in old family documents. “Here, that is what I mean” he says and puts a yellowed photograph on his desk. About 60 festively dressed persons are smiling into the camera. The picture shows the 50th birthday of Rolf Stürm’s grand-father Ernst Vogel on July 7th 1935 in Frankfurt, surrounded by the employees of the Vogel Brothers Ltd. However, the nice appearances are deceitful. “At that time, the situation was already seething”, says Stürm. Two years before, Ernst Vogel and his brother Kurt had nominated two stooge Germans into the management board, in order to face the increasing pressure exerted on Jewish companies after the take over by the national-socialists. In World War I, the Vogel brothers yet served in the German Army, now the German State threatened them to take away their company. “Aryanization” was the term in that time.

Some seats aside of Ernst Vogel are sitting the supposed stooge Germans and future aryanizers Heinrich Elsen und Georg Hemer. Two years later, they took over the company, after the Vogel brothers had fled to America and Switzerland. “Today I think, that the expropriation was planned from the very beginning”, says Stürm.

For a long time the former member of the City Parliament (liberal-democratic party) knew hardly anything of this part of the family history. He did not know consciously his two grand-fathers, he cannot tell a lot about them. But his grand-mother on his mother’s side did not speak Swiss-German, but purest Standard German – a curiosity of the familial setting, the reason of which little Rolf wanted to find out.

Furthermore, there were these occasional trips to Germany. The family made luxury holidays on the Titisee in the Black Forest. In Frankfurt, they went into the Palm Garden and the five years old boy was asked to easily order a second and third piece of cake. His mother called it “devouring and rendering the Germans poor”. Later only Stürm realized that the holidays were financed by the German restitution payments. Because it was not allowed to export forex at that time, the money was stacked in a blocked account. The family had to spend it in Germany.

The 60 years old letter

“In our home we did not speak about the past” remembers Stürm in a speech he delivers in June in the Emperor’s Hall in the townhall of Frankfurt. He and his American cousins Nancy Ginsburg and Susan Neulist as well as 31 others descendants of Jews fled from Germany are invited there for searching the traces of their ancestors. A lifetime has passed since the “cake devouring” in the restaurant of the Palm Garden; 60 years during which Stürm had the opportunity to answer the open questions of his family history. To find out, how the manufactory for car supplies “Vogel Brothers Ltd” became “Elsen+Hemer Ltd”.

Only two years ago – during a family reunion in the USA – the 65 years old man learned more precise details. The descendants of his grand-uncle Kurt Vogel showed him a letter of the company Elsen+Hemer written in German from the year 1951. In the course of restitution payments the company wanted to find a peaceable solution with the family. The issue came to nothing.

This excited the curiosity of the grand-children of the Vogel brothers, whether the company still existed and how it dealt with its corporate history of nearly 100 years. Indeed, they were successful and found the rubric “history” on its homepage. However, what Rolf Stürm and his relatives read there made them speechless. The actual owners, the grand-sons of Heinrich Elsen, refer to the “100 years of family tradition” without mentioning the true founding family and the circumstances of the change of owners with any word.

“Interpretational sovereignty of identity”

On the very same evening Rolf Stürm sent an e-mail to Frankfurt asking that the founders and former owners of his family are to be correctly mentioned. He did not receive an answer. Only reaction: The word “family” disappeared from the homepage. Half a year later Stürm wrote a second letter and sent it by postal mail. Again, he did not receive an answer. Last June, he and his cousins visited the company face-to-face. The company owners promised to mention the Vogel brothers in the corporate history. As far as today, this did not happen.

However, Rolf Stürm does not want to tolerate that the actual owners slant their history and lie. “This was the company of my grand-father, he never would have sold it by his own free will. My great-grand-father had founded it in 1914 and, maybe, I would manage it today. This is part of my family history, part of my identity. If the actual owners rewrite this history, they unduly claim by this the interpretational sovereignty of a part of my identity. This is not due to them.” He wants historical justice, says Stürm. Financial claims may not make sense any more. “Stolen art never expires by limitation; the robbery of a company obviously does.”

“Not denying history”

Rolf Stürm is a sober scientist with an MD and PhD, he does not like overexcitation. The non kept promises make him angry, but they do not cause him sleepless nights. He wants to have the “interpretational sovereignty” back – and an appropriate citation of the merits of his ancestors: “They were lucky, they could emigrate in time and start a new life. They were not gased.” All he wants is an adequate citation on the homepage of the company. He calls it an “Electronic Memory Stone” referring to the “stumbling stones” which remember the victims of the NS-time all over in Germany.

Because Stürm knows the issue of “Aryanization” from the other side, too. He goes to the book shelf and comes back with two volumes, the final report of the Bergier Commission and the book “Aryanization in Austria and its connection to Switzerland”. “Lotte Vogel, my mother, was a German Jew, who fled to Switzerland with her parents in time.” His father Paul Stürm was a Swiss descending from a Catholic family. “If you look up the name Stürm in these two books, you bump Eduard Stürm, my Christian grand-father.” He had a timber trade company with saw mill in the village of Goldach in the canton of St. Gallen. He also was a partner of a forestry in adjacent Austria.

When Austria was connected in 1938 to the German Reich, Eduard Stürm’s business partner, he a Jew, too, had to flee to Poland and to sell the company to the German Kontrollbank for the underprice of 20 000 Reichsmark. Shortly after this, Stürm’s grand-father purchased the shares for 55 000 Reichsmark. “He was not an aryanizer in the effective sense of the word. However, there is no doubt he had some profit from the aryanization”, says Stürm. “This, too, is part of my family history, of my identity. Our history is not always as we may like it to be – but does it make sense to deny it?”

Key of the photos:

Grin and bear it. Ernst Vogel (in the middle, with his niece) at his 50th birthday on July 7th 1935. On the left of him Heinrich Elsen with arms crossed; obliquely right behind him Georg Hemer.

German Jews. Ernst (right in front) and Kurt (left in front) Vogel in uniforms during World War I. The picture may date of 1916.

The truth seeker. Rolf Stürm reviews the colorful history of his family.