

Stolperstein Eduard Wertheimer  
Bielefeld, 01. October 2016

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Dear Ms Sampson, dear descendants of the Wertheimer family  
Ladies and gentlemen

In the first days of August 1942, a large group of people collected in front of the house at Kastanienstr. 4, where today a Stolperstein has been set in memory of Eduard Wertheimer. The people crowded up to the trestles on which the Fiscal Department of Bielefeld offered the household contents which had belonged to Eduard Wertheimer, either for sale or auction. This entire personal legacy from cupboards and drawers could be bought at bargain prices. These prices are noted down in a detailed list; for made-to-measure suits, 150 books, large amounts of worn shirts and underwear, up to “a small bread basket” for 20 pfennigs. It is the final act of the fiscal robbery of Eduard Wertheimer, and in the complete eradication of the traces of his life, the final public humiliation beyond his death.

Today, we have reinstated the name of Eduard Wertheimer by setting a Stolperstein at the place where he lived, right in the middle of public street life, in the local memory of his home town of Bielefeld. The entrepreneurial Wertheimer family is already highly valued in terms of local memory. When their silk-weaving mill was built in the Jöllenbeck district of Bielefeld in 1889, the family not only provided well-paid jobs close to home for the local weavers but also facilitated a relatively smooth transition from the hand looms used to work from home to the machine-powered factory work of the industrial era. Care of the welfare of their workers and their families and extensive social commitment were firmly anchored in the company’s philosophy.

In the second generation, Eduard and Paul Wertheimer took over the flourishing silk-weaving mill from their parents Joseph and Jenny. The brothers then successfully established the company in the market for high-quality, fashionable silk materials for the upper price segment. Their success is documented by figures showing an annual profit of 800,000 Reichsmark (for 1935) and approx. 600 employees.

On January 31, 1933, one day after transfer of power to Hitler, the Berlin newspaper “Jüdische Rundschau” wrote; *“As Jews, we are now confronted with the fact that a hostile power has taken over the governing force in Germany.....Hitler’s successful agitation is to a large extent due to his unscrupulous anti-Jewish propaganda. We are convinced that the German people are still strong enough to counteract this barbaric anti-Jewish policy.”*

The Jewish community in Bielefeld, however, considerably underestimated the threat of National Socialist racial ideological politics, in no way feeling that they were an ethnic minority but German citizens like everybody else. In addition, everyone thought that the situation would not really turn out to be so bad.

Paul Wertheimer, a silk-weaving entrepreneur with contacts all over Europe and a feeling for markets and developments, already had fears for the continuation of his

business and the humane survival of his family as early as 1933; *“When Hitler came into power, our father predicted everything that was to come and already set the date for his emigration – The Berlin Olympics of 1936.”*

In the autumn of 1935, the Wertheimer brothers found themselves severely persecuted by the Westphalian financial authorities. In a dramatic action by the Gestapo, their passports were taken away and the Wertheimer business premises as well as their homes were searched. The brothers were forbidden entry to their own premises. Months of stressful investigations carried out by the customs and tax authorities did not confirm the suspicion that the Wertheimers had illegally transferred operational revenue to Switzerland via their Swiss-German subsidiary.

This procedure did not leave Paul and Eduard Wertheimer unaffected – they no longer had any hope and their health had suffered considerably. Therefore they tried to sell their company at short notice but without success as no buyer could be found due to a sudden structural crisis in the textiles industry. Under the pressure prevailing through these circumstances, the brothers were compelled to accept the offer made by the Dutch-British margarine producer Unilever, which was far below the basic value of their company. So, in August 1936, the way to emigration to Great Britain was clear for Paul Wertheimer and his family. The majority of the proceeds from the sale of the company, already so low, was lost through legal fiscal theft. The instruments employed for this state-organized robbery were: taxation for fleeing the Reich, DEGO tax paid to the gold and currencies bank, plus the assets were credited in “emigration prevention marks,” which were not freely convertible in the capital markets.

Eduard Wertheimer, on the other hand, at no point considered emigration. He loved his native country and had decided to hold on in Germany for the rest of his life. His brother Paul said; *My brother, who is caring for a large number of relatives, is fine and feels happy in the fulfilment of this duty.*” Eduard lived quietly, away from the public eye and occupied himself with his earlier physics studies. He had never felt at home in his role of co-entrepreneur, leaving the operative side of the business to his brother. His greatest interest was in the theory of physics and radical change in the philosophy of physics through Max Planck’s quantum theory. He was a member of the German Physics Association in Berlin, the elite association of German physicists. His first publication in 1911 was on the subject of Planck’s law of effectivity. This was followed by 15 further publications in highly-regarded physics journals. In 1937, he concluded his scientific lifework with a 50-page paper dealing with the fundamental electromagnetic and kinetic laws of gases. We do not know until today how and where he acquired this highly specialized knowledge. According to his family, he was only able to fulfil his lifelong dream of studying physics at the age of about 40, when he studied at a university in Zürich.

At the end of 1937/38, the National Socialist regime intervened acutely in Eduard Wertheimer’s living and financial situation. The fiscal authorities in Bielefeld reached out to get hold of the old family villa on Detmolder Straße in order to establish an “armament commando” for the Wehrmacht. Eduard came under threat and was so intimidated that he sold the house for half of its market value.

In the night of November 10, 1938, Jewish businesses were destroyed and synagogues set on fire by fanatical National Socialist activists throughout Germany. Flaming signs of impending disaster blazed in the sky over Bielefeld as well as in the town of Essen, where Eduard's sister Anna lived. Her husband was the prominent solicitor and co-founder of the Folkwang Museum, Dr. Salomon Heinemann. Their villa was set on fire and their collection of Expressionist paintings went up in flames. The elderly, childless couple lost all will to live after this catastrophe and fled together into death. Two Stolperstein memorials are dedicated to their lives and work in Essen. Only a few weeks later, Eduard Wertheimer had to pay the unimaginably perfidious "Jewish atonement tax," which had been decreed by law. The fiscal authorities demanded approx. 380,000 Reichsmark from him. This shows procedures which today must be fittingly described as legal fiscal robbery.

An extensive bundle of files held by the superior president of finance in Münster at that time testify to what motivated Eduard Wertheimer during the last years of his life. He exhausted all possibilities of financially supporting the members of his family and further members of the Jewish community through his considerable entrepreneurial assets. As an assimilated, German-conservative Jew, he did not uphold a close relationship to the Jewish religion and had hardly any contact with the synagogue community in Bielefeld. However, in the situation of extreme persecution, he changed his more distant relationship with Judaism to offer his suffering, persecuted fellow Jews support and solidarity.

*My assets amount to about one million Reichsmark – he wrote to the president of finance in Münster in 1939 – as I am over 70 years of age, I do not need to make any provisions for myself. On the contrary, my assets may be reduced through large-scale expenditure on the generous support of relatives and Jewish organizations to encourage emigration if this is desired.*

In this way he supported those willing to emigrate, financing their retraining in crafts and the purchase of agricultural equipment for a new start in Palestine. In February 1939, an "assignment of assets decree" was imposed on his entire property. He then had to manage to live from 350 Reichsmark per month. Any gifts he wished to give were limited to 400 Reichsmark and beyond this he had no further access to his assets.

Eduard Wertheimer prepared his departing from life with foresight. He was able to rely on a secret informer (probably from National Socialist circles) giving him timely information about the date of impending deportation. He was aware of the machinery of the last possible robbery to be committed: on receiving the written notice of deportation, his entire assets would more or less automatically fall to the Third Reich. In his last will and testament, he named distant relatives through marriage, who were British nationals, as sole heirs, thus protecting his assets from confiscation by the Third Reich.

On 20.07.1941, Eduard Wertheimer returned home from the Franziskus hospital, having had treatment for wounds following a suicide attempt. He placed his will and testament and funeral arrangement documents at hand and wrote a farewell letter to his former private secretary, Bruno Bauch; *The news that I am to be among those to*

*be transported has not yet reached me but I can wait no longer. Hopefully I will succeed this time.....*Following this, he ended his life by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets. Ten days later, on 31 July, a deportation train containing 590 Jews left Bielefeld station for the concentration camp Theresienstadt. Among the deported persons were 145 Bielefeld Jews, including Eduard's cousin, Otto Rüdberg, widower of Meta Wertheimer and the last owner of the Wertheimer plush-weaving mill in Rohrteichstrasse, which belonged to the other branch of the family.

To conclude, let us have a brief look at a touching document bequeathed to us by Eduard Wertheimer (you can see it over there). Three days before his death, he made a final application to the superior president of finance in Münster for a gift to be made to Jews in Bielefeld suffering persecution and privation. The gift was to be for the maximum amount allowed of 400 Reichsmark per month for a period of three months. The enclosed plan of distribution comprises 35 names. Permission for this reached the Bielefeld Commerzbank on the day of Eduard's death. Due to the speedy intervention of the bank, this assistance never reached the recipients. But we ourselves should see this final memory of Eduard Wertheimer as a wake-up call to help desperate people suffering persecution in the here and now.

Many thanks for your interest and attention.

Friedhelm Wittenberg (Translation: Brenda Kreis)