

A REPORT

This is a story of two people, Walther Sommerlath and Efim Wechsler, as well as their families, during one of the most dramatic periods of the 20th century. Their paths crossed as a result of the developments taking place within international politics. This account is part of ongoing research, and is based on the sources available to date.

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1. Efim (Ernst) Wechsler

Efim Wechsler was born on 19 January 1883, in Chisinau in what is now Moldova, then a central town in Bessarabia, which was part of Russia at that time. The immigration papers that were drawn up when he later moved to Brazil initially stated that he was born in Russia but this was later crossed out and amended to Chisinau. The reason was either that he did not want to appear as being born in Russia, or possibly that attempts were made to adapt the information to the changing political circumstances of the time. He came from a Jewish family and his parents were called Sine and Bertha.¹

At the turn of the century, 43% of the population of Chisinau was made up of Jewish citizens. There was considerable unrest and the region was rocked during these years by a number of

¹ Record of arrivals; Desembarque no porto de Santos, Policia Maritima, 034930 17/6 1939; Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. Immigration papers Efim Wechsler, Serviço de Registro de Estrangeros 11 March 1942; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fábio Koifman in author's possession.

pogroms, or violent riots. According to his own account, Wechsler arrived in Berlin in 1900. Later on he went by the name of Ernst.

On 14 November 1913, Efim's wife Gitlia had a daughter, Ilse.² His wife is thought to have died in 1922.³ Efim and his daughter Ilse became German citizens in 1931. A few years later, Ilse married Wolfgang Cohen.

Wechsler was an engineer and had his own office at various addresses in the city district of Charlottenburg, a middle-class area of Berlin with large park areas. From 1919, the engineering firm was located in the centre of the city on Unter den Linden, and in 1923 he ran his own workshop. That same year he also acquired a block of flats on Belle-Allianzstrasse in Kreuzberg, a district that had expanded with the advent of industrialisation towards the end of the 19th century and was a built-up area with several small businesses.⁴ In 1929, he established the engineering company Wechsler und Hennig together with his older partner, Paul Hennig.

The new laws and Aryanisation policy soon began to make the situation difficult for Wechsler. This gradually forced a sale of the company, of which he was the sole owner having bought out Hennig in 1936. The property was later put into receivership.

On 24 June, 1935, the *Polizeipräsident Berlin* authority stated that Efim Wechsler and Ilse had been stripped of their citizenship. Shortly afterwards, Ilse emigrated to Brazil on the ship Mendonça, and in August 1936 she arrived at the major port of Santos in the state of São Paulo. She moved to Rio de Janeiro, got a job as a secretary and lived at Av. Copacabana no. 554, Apt. 92.⁵

Shortly after Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, on 20 December 1938, Wechsler was ordered by the same authority to leave the country, and on 24 May 1939 he announced his intention to emigrate to São Paulo.⁶ With a passport that was issued in Berlin on 21 April 1939, he made his way to Hamburg to embark the 8,000 tonne ship Antonio Delfino captained by Christian Grau. He arrived in Santos on 17 June after a 21-day journey in first class. The other 43 passengers were Brazilian, German, Portuguese, Swiss and British citizens. Of the German citizens, four people stated that they were Jewish. Wechsler was the only one who was registered as stateless. He stated that he was 56 years old, single and Jewish. On arrival he set up residence at Avenida de Abril, no. 53.⁷

Emigration involved considerable financial sacrifice. Wechsler was only permitted to bring a maximum of 10 Reichsmark with him. According to information from the German statistics authority *Statistisches Bundesamt*, in 1939 one Reichsmark had an equivalent purchasing

² Immigration papers Efim Wechsler, Serviço de Registro de Estrangeros 22 August 1942; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fábio Koifman in author's possession.

³ Escritura de Venda e Compra, Estado de Sao Paolo, 11/11 1939. The family archives. Here his wife's name is given as Augusta Diamante.

⁴ Elsa Schneider 13/11 1950 to Magistrat von Gross-Berlin, Wiedergutmachungsamt, Berlin-Schöneberg; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

⁵ Immigration papers Ilse Wechsler, Serviço de Registro de Estrangeros 19 August 1942; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fábio Koifman in author's possession.

⁶ Elsa Schneider 13/11 1950 to Magistrat von Gross-Berlin, Wiedergutmachungsamt, Berlin-Schöneberg; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

⁷ Record of arrivals; Desembarque no porto de Santos, Policia Maritima, 034930 17/6 1939; Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.

value of EUR 3.70 in 2011.⁸ The rest of his capital was transferred to an account that was not available to him, known as a *Sperrkonto*, or *blocked account*. Anyone who moved from Germany also had to pay a special tax, *Reichsfluchtsteuer* at 25 per cent of their total wealth. Wechsler took out a loan of 10,200 Reichsmark on his property in order to be able to pay this.⁹

Soon after his arrival in Brazil, Wechsler started work in a factory in São Paulo, Companhia Brasileira de Usinas Metalurgicas Fundação National. He lived at several different addresses during the first few years.¹⁰ Four years later he moved to Rio de Janeiro. In 1943 he bought a plot of land in Jacarepaguá, where he also built a house and a small workshop with the address Estrada Tres Rio 97. He lived here next to the workshop, but some time during 1944-1945 he also lived at the address Rua General Bruce no. 502.¹¹ Jacarepaguá was a suburb of the capital's western district, a middle-class residential area. In 1948, the company was described on its own letterhead as – in German translation – Metalurgica Brasil, Kunstschlosserei, Ingenieurarbeiten (engineering works), Mechanik im Allgemeinen (general mechanics),¹²

Ilse remarried in 1948 having divorced from Wolfgang Cohen. Her new husband was a businessman called Juliusz Kauf, born on 1 January 1899 in Vienna and the son of Leon and Zofia Kauf. He was a Polish citizen. Prior to the marriage, Ilse was registered as living at Rua General Azevedo Pimentel no. 14, and Kauf at Rua Inhanga no. 27. She took the name Ilse Wechsler Kauf and two years later she was registered as living at Rua Barão de Ipanema 115.¹³ Wechsler and his daughter Ilse and her new husband became Brazilian citizens in 1950.¹⁴

Efim Wechsler died in 1962 and was buried in Rio de Janeiro. Ilse Wechsler Kauf died in 1990 in Rio de Janeiro. She did not have any children.

2. Aryanisation in Germany

Changes to the race and citizenship laws, and the continuing Aryanisation of the German business sector is a clear backdrop to the sale of Wechsler's property and firm, Wechsler und Hennig. These developments also led to the emigration of Efim and Ilse Wechsler to Brazil.

⁸ [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche Wahrungsgeschichte](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche_Wahrungsgeschichte) 12.7.2011.

⁹ Elsa Schneider 30 March 1951 to Senator fur Justiz, Wiedergutmachungsamt, Berlin-Schoneberg; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

¹⁰ Immigration papers Efim Wechsler, Servio de Registro de Estrangeros 10 September 1942; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fabio Koifman in author's possession.

¹¹ Immigration papers, Servio de Registro de Estrangeros 17 May 1945; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fabio Koifman in author's possession.

¹² Power of attorney in German translation to represent Wechsler, Rio de Janeiro 24/5 1948; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

¹³ Notarised certificate for Ilse Wechsler, Publica Forma, signed 24/9 1948; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fabio Koifman in author's possession. Certificate from security division, Ministry for the Interior 29/4 1950; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fabio Koifman in author's possession.

¹⁴ Departamento Federal de Segurana Publica 26 June 1950; Arquivo Nacional; copy via Fabio Koifman in author's possession.

In the research into Aryanisation that was launched in the 1960s it was pointed out that the entire process was contradictory, full of conflicting directives, delays and at times tactical restraint, and not at all the linear, consistent development that one would have expected.¹⁵ Events were complicated, but can be described as follows.¹⁶

Stringent foreign currency controls were introduced in Germany in the 1930s. They were introduced against the background of the Great Depression at the beginning of the 1930s, but subsequently took on elements that aimed to eradicate Jewish influence within the German business sector.

The economic crisis worsened as a result of the Austrian bank Österreichische Creditanstalt, which held a central position in the international capital market, going bankrupt in 1931. This brought about a general panic in Germany, and there were runs on the banks. Foreign loans were withdrawn. The Reichsbank's gold and securities holdings plummeted. July 1931 saw the failure of Germany's second largest bank, Darmstädter und Nationalbank.

Unlike many of the other nations that were affected, Germany opted to keep the gold standard, which meant that German export goods became expensive on the international market. The amount of foreign trade fell considerably, and what had previously been an export surplus was replaced by an import surplus. Fears were allayed slightly by Germany's decision later that year to impose a partial ban on the payment of foreign debts, and a moratorium agreement with foreign creditors. This agreement meant that foreign capital amounting to approximately 24 billion Reichsmark was frozen in Germany.

In order to deal with the problems brought about by the poor trade balance, a system was introduced that involved the German state granting bonuses to companies with export sales. Meanwhile, foreign exchange restrictions were put in place that limited opportunities for individual German traders to import goods, due to the currency allocations that were permitted. A central authority established an order of priority for importers. In spring 1932, the allocation was tightened significantly. This in turn led to several other European countries endeavouring to introduce an overall clearing system between funds for imports and exports in relation to Germany.

Despite the fact that Sweden tried its utmost to maintain the principle of free trade, even the Swedish government was forced to eventually adapt to the new conditions. In 1931, Sweden entered into an agreement on import quotas with France, and in 1934 it signed a clearing agreement with Germany, and with Italy the following year.¹⁷

On 4 February 1935, a new German currency law was introduced. One of the new regulations was that people who lived in Germany were obliged to inform the German Reichsbank if they had foreign currency, receivables or securities. Holdings of gold also had to be reported. If the Reichsbank so required, a person could then be forced to transfer ownership of their holdings to the Reichsbank. The fact that the German Reichsbank actually used this opportunity to

¹⁵ Frank Bajohr, *'Aryanisation' in Hamburg, The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of their Property in Nazi Germany*; New York 2002, page 2 and following pages.

¹⁶ The summary in this section is largely based on the Swedish Government Official Report *Sweden and Jewish Assets (SOU 1999:20)*.

¹⁷ Gunnar Hägglöf, *Svensk krigshandelspolitik under andra världskriget* (Stockholm 1958) page 16 and following pages.

acquire usable means of payment in this way had an effect on Sweden as well. The obligation to redeem holdings of gold and foreign currencies applied to everyone, not just Jewish people and other persecuted groups. Compensation was given in Reichsmark.

All in all the German foreign exchange restrictions were detailed, far-reaching and convoluted. Over time they encompassed not only traditional means of payment such as currencies and gold, but also precious stones, silver and platinum. Freedom for individuals and companies was considerably reduced. For example, there was a ban on taking more than a specific amount of Reichsmark out of the country without special permission. After the summer of 1937, import and export bans were introduced for German currency banknotes.

The German currency statutes also contained special penalty regulations. Furthermore, on 1 December 1936 a law was issued that allowed the death penalty for “economic sabotage”. This law stipulated that German citizens be punished for consciously and unscrupulously, and in contravention of the existing regulations, transferring assets to other countries, thus inflicting serious harm on the German economy. The punishment could be given even if the crime had been committed abroad. The individual’s fortune was confiscated.

Later on, the currency regulations were amended so that they could be used to discriminate against Jewish people in particular. At the beginning of 1938, the currency allocation to Jewish companies was reduced in accordance with special state instructions. In April 1938, responsibility for currency regulation was transferred to the Minister for the National Economy. In the same month, an obligation to declare all wealth owned by Jews was introduced.

As previously stated, emigrants were a specific target group for currency regulations. As mentioned above, anyone who moved from Germany had to pay a special tax, *Reichsfluchtsteuer*, at 25 per cent of their total wealth. The regulation had been introduced in 1931 under the Chancellor of the Reich and economist Heinrich Brüning before the *Machtübernahme* (“takeover of power”) to enable payment of war reparations, but the tax gradually increased. It was originally only levied on wealth of over 200,000 Reichsmark, but after 1934 the limit was 50,000 Reichsmark.¹⁸ In principle, transfer permission would be granted for remaining assets, but according to a report to the MFA (Ministry for Foreign Affairs) from the Swedish embassy in Berlin on 15 September 1938, this rarely happened. The report suggests that permission had only been given in a few, particularly deserving cases over the past four or five years.

On 1 January 1939, a new German currency came into force. The Swedish minister in Berlin, Arvid Richert, submitted the following report to the MFA: “One important new regulation aimed at obstructing the flight of capital is that gifts of money to other countries may only be sent if permission has been obtained. Likewise when a person emigrates, permission is required for moving goods and other items, in accordance with existing practice to date. Neither may Jewish people with German citizenship nor stateless Jews take any items on journeys without permission, other than those items that are absolutely necessary for personal use; this regulation is expressly declared as not applying to Jewish people of foreign nationality.”

¹⁸ Frank Bajohr, *‘Aryanisation’ in Hamburg, The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of their Property in Nazi Germany*; New York 2002, page 2 and following pages. 121.

If a person was suspected of attempting to circumvent the currency regulation, for example via unlawful flight of capital, the currency authorities could take the security measures that were deemed necessary. One conceivable measure was to appoint an administrator and commission them to manage the suspect's capital.

A number of statutes were gradually introduced alongside the currency regulation, which discriminated against Jews. The legislation occurred following summary preparations within the framework of a multi-faceted power apparatus. The regulations turned out to be contradictory and unclear. This allowed them to be applied in an arbitrary manner, which makes it difficult to provide an entirely clear description of the legal foundation for Aryanisation.

The Aryanisation of the economy was preceded by the passing of certain other discriminatory laws. On 1 April 1933, "non-Aryans" were barred from being judges and from holding civil service positions. However, this made it necessary to define who was Aryan, and who was not. A regulation on the application of the law established that non-Aryans included people who had at least one non-Aryan parent, or maternal or paternal grandparent. These exclusions from professions laid the ground for Aryanisation legislation. September 1935 saw the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws. One of them established that Jews could not be full citizens.

In autumn 1937, considerable pressure was exerted from official corners to induce Jewish business leaders to sell their companies. As the pressure increased on Jewish businessmen to give up their companies, conditions were now in place for non-Jewish business leaders to take over. Companies were sold for less than their value. In the middle of December, Jewish companies' allocation of foreign currencies and raw materials was reduced. In March 1938, public sector agreements with Jewish businessmen were banned.

Since Austria was incorporated into Germany in March 1938, many companies were compulsorily Aryanised there too without direct legal support. This development resulted in legislation in this area. So it was decided in April 1938 that public administrators or supervisors could be appointed for Austrian companies with the aim of safeguarding public interests. On 2 July the same year, a law was passed that stated that all administrators had to obtain special confirmation of their commission with the state inspector for private businesses. Developments in the Sudetenland were similar to those in Austria.

As mentioned above, in April 1938 the Jews in Germany were obliged to register their wealth and possessions. Only personal household equipment and items with a combined value of less than 5,000 Reichsmark were exempt. Following registration, any changes to a person's wealth also had to be reported.

In summer 1938, further exclusions from professions for Jews were introduced. Following Kristallnacht on 9-10 November 1938, the legislation behind the Aryanisation of companies was tightened considerably. The German-Jewish population was forced to jointly pay damages totalling a billion Reichsmark to the German state. The insurance compensation received by Jewish businessmen for damage caused during Kristallnacht was confiscated. They were also forced to repair their damaged shops and homes themselves.

Meanwhile measures were taken aimed at curtailing future opportunities for Jewish people to run their own businesses. One ordinance stands out in particular, of 12 November 1938,

which aimed to exclude Jews from German business. The ordinance stated that as of 1 January 1939, Jews in Germany were prohibited from engaging in commercial trade. Furthermore it was directed that Jewish foremen could be sacked and that Jews were not permitted to be members of cooperative associations or trade organisations.

Regulations regarding application were linked to the ordinance. Such a regulation set out what would happen to the Jewish companies that still existed. Two routes were outlined. Companies could either be transferred to Aryan ownership, or closed down via a kind of liquidation process.

A transfer would only be an option if it was deemed important to keep the company's operations going for the purposes of the national food supply. Closure was the rule of thumb. With closures, there was an obligation to offer the right of first refusal on the assets within the industry. The normal case of affairs was for the owner of the business to cover the cost of closing the company themselves. But trade organisations could instead request that a public liquidator be appointed. The cost of such a procedure would be paid by the company being closed down. Another application regulation restricted opportunities for Jews to represent companies.

At the beginning of December 1938, further ordinances were issued regarding Jewish wealth, which fuelled the Aryanisation process. The ordinance stipulated that Jewish business leaders could be ordered to close or transfer ownership of their companies within a given period of time. If the order was not followed, a public administrator could be appointed. The administrator could be commissioned to continue, close or transfer ownership of the company. Once an administrator entered the process, a Jewish owner was completely stripped of his opportunity to represent the company and have control of its assets. Furthermore, Jews could be ordered to sell their farming and forestry land.

The ordinance also contained regulations regarding securities. Within a week of the ordinance coming into force, all Jews were obliged to deposit their securities into regulated accounts. The right of disposition was then restricted. Finally, the ordinance contained regulations regarding gems, jewellery, art and similar objects of value.

The Aryanisation process proceeded relentlessly in this way, but it was difficult to gain an overview of the process and it could be interpreted and executed in different ways in different cities and regions. Much of it was down to contacts, or quite simply luck.

3. Wechsler's property on Belle-Allianzstrasse

At the end of the 1930s, Wechsler was living on Landshuter Strasse 11/12 in the city district of Schöneberg. He had also purchased a block of flats on 4 September, 1923. The owner of the property at Belle-Allianzstrasse 67 in Kreuzberg was stated as Firma Wechsler G.m.b.H.¹⁹ On 1 November 1938, management of the block of flats had been transferred to a non-Jewish property manager, Alfred Roggenbuck.²⁰ Power of attorney to safeguard

¹⁹ Otto Busse 26/9 1950 to Magistrat von Gross-Berlin, Abt. Rechtswesen, Wiedergutmachungsamt; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150. Rechtsanwalt R. v. Broecker 12/12 1934 to Landesfinanzamt Berlin, Devisenstelle; Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Rep. 36 A, G 3851/G 4024.

²⁰ Alfred Roggenbuck 30/8 1939 to Oberfinanzpräsidenten Berlin (Devisenstelle); Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Rep. 36 A, G 3851/G 4024.

Wechsler's interest in the property had been transferred to Mrs Elsa Schneider, Martin Lutherstrasse 9, Berlin W. 30. According to the official terminology, she was a *Generalbevollmächtig (plenipotentiary)*.²¹

Wechsler's property was formally a significant asset. The registered value of the property, *Einheitswert*, was unchanged for the years 1925, 1935 and 1940, at 56,000 Reichsmark. The monthly rental income was calculated in August 1939 by Roggenbuck to be 1,044 Reichsmark and the surplus was 78 Reichsmark.²²

Wechsler gained one last significant benefit from his property holdings when he was forced to leave the country. As was common practice at that time, he had to pay the special emigration tax, *Reichsfluchtsteuer*, and in order to pay it he took out a loan of 10,200 Reichsmark on the property.²³

In December 1939, Roggenbuck announced that Elsa Schneider had informed him that her power of attorney had been transferred to a Max Ratzel, resident at Friedrich Karl Strasse 25, Berlin-Tempelhof. Ratzel had then repeatedly informed Roggenbuck that he tried to sell the property.²⁴

Receivership proceedings were initiated in February 1940 via *Amtsgericht Tempelhof*. R. Jordan, Elbefelderstrasse 30, Berlin N.W. 87, was appointed as receiver and Roggenbuck delivered the documentation for administration to him, as well as to Wechsler's authorised agent Ratzel.²⁵ Two people, Albert Graeber and Otto Busse, both of whom lived in Berlin, now expressed an interest in putting in a bid for the property.²⁶

Otto Busse, resident at Grimmstrasse 24, Berlin S.W.29, eventually bought the property. He had already commissioned various estate agents to find a suitable property back in December 1939, and in the end it was Firma Marks on Charlottenstrasse in Berlin that managed to find the property on Belle-Allianzstrasse. On 21 May 1940, Busse bought the property for 60,000 Reichsmark including commission, property acquisition tax and other statutory charges, *Gerichtskosten*.²⁷

²¹ Alfred Roggenbuck 30/8 1939 to Oberfinanzpräsidenten Berlin (Devisenstelle); Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Rep. 36 A, G 3851/G 4024.

²² Alfred Roggenbuck 30/8 1939 to Oberfinanzpräsidenten Berlin (Devisenstelle); Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Rep. 36 A, G 3851/G 4024.

²³ Elsa Schneider 30 March 1951 to Senator für Justiz, Wiedergutmachungsamt, Berlin-Schöneberg; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

²⁴ Alfred Roggenbuck 10/12 1939 to Oberfinanzpräsidenten Berlin (Devisenstelle); Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Rep. 36 A, G 3851/G 4024.

²⁵ Alfred Roggenbuck 20/2 1940 to Oberfinanzpräsidenten Berlin (Devisenstelle); Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Rep. 36 A, G 3851/G 4024.

²⁶ Oberfinanzpräsident Berlin (Devisenstelle) 30/4 1940 to Otto Busse; Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Rep. 36 A, G 3851/G 4024.

²⁷ Otto Busse 26/9 1950 to Magistrat von Gross-Berlin. Abt. Rechtswesen, Wiedergutmachungsamt, Berlin-Schöneberg; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

After the war, it was possible to apply to the German government with a claim for compensation for financial damage suffered under the Third Reich. In 1949, Wechsler raised a claim with the authority in question, *Wiedergutmachungsamt*, for compensation for his property. Its official address was now Mehringdamm 93, Berlin SW 61. As in 1939, he was represented by Elsa Schneider. The owner Otto Busse contested the claim, arguing that Wechsler had mismanaged the property, that he had failed to pay interest on loans since 1936, and that this had led to the compulsory liquidation.²⁸

Elsa Schneider countered that Wechsler had left the property in good condition, and that the small debts that had been the basis of the compulsory administration and subsequent sale had arisen after Wechsler had emigrated. He had either been informed too late or not at all about important aspects of the administration. Neither had he been informed about the sale itself. It was well known, continued Elsa Schneider, that at that point no one had been able to leave the country without meeting all obligations and that there was certification from the tax authority, *Steuerkassenamt*, dated 21 March 1939 and from *Finanzamt Schöneberg* dated 6 April 1939 that Wechsler was not in debt.²⁹ One exception was possibly the 10,200 Reichsmark for which Wechsler had taken out a loan on the property in order to leave the country.

The actions and the effect of the Aryanisation process of the 1930s were relentless, but sales or liquidation often took place formally and in accordance with the applicable regulations. Wechsler claimed that the transfer of his property was extorted in a way that provided him with hardly any compensation. Otto Busse and probably the State made a profit on the purchase, but the entire process largely took place as prescribed. Wechsler did eventually win the case, but the settlement brought about by the negotiations resulted in him being awarded no more than 900 marks.³⁰

Embryonic regulation regarding compensatory claims already existed at the time that Wechsler made his claims, but this regulation developed over the years following the settlement with Busse. Of particular importance were *Militärgesetz* No. 59 from 1952, the London Agreement from 1953 and especially *Bundesentschädigungsgesetz* from 1 October, 1953, which introduced the regulation into a legal framework for the Federal Republic of Germany. The new regulations covered damage to life, body, health, freedom, property and wealth, but restricted opportunities for those who lived abroad.

4. Firma Wechsler und Hennig

As previously mentioned, Wechsler had owned his own workshop since 1923. In 1929, he established the engineering company Wechsler und Hennig on Reichenbergerstrasse in Kreuzberg, together with his older partner, Paul Hennig. The firm moved to an old industrial building on Wassertorstrasse 14 in 1931, also in Kreuzberg. This is the same street that was

²⁸ Otto Busse 26/9 1950 to Magistrat von Gross-Berlin. Abt. Rechtswesen, Wiedergutmachungsamt, Berlin-Schöneberg; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

²⁹ Elsa Schneider 13/11 1950 to Magistrat von Gross-Berlin, Wiedergutmachungsamt, Berlin-Schöneberg; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

³⁰ Wiedergutmachungsämter von Berlin, Berlin-Schöneberg 3 April 1951; Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02 No. 881150.

described in Christopher Isherwood's fictional work, *The Nowaks*: “The entrance to the Wassertorstrasse was a big stone archway, a bit of old Berlin, daubed with hammers and sickles and Nazi crosses and plastered with tattered bills which advertised auctions or crimes. It was a deep, shabby cobbled street, littered with sprawling children in tears.”³¹

Wechsler und Hennig did well. According to a document from Commerzbank, the company made a profit of 5,000 to 8,000 Reichsmark a year, which was roughly ten per cent of equity, which increased from 25,000 to 58,000 Reichsmark in the 1930s.

On 22 December 1936, negotiations were recorded for registration in the trade register. The background to this was Wechsler's buyout of his partner Hennig. Wechsler was represented via the clerk at the Administrative Court of Appeal (*Kammergericht*) Dr Godehard Weiskam. It was now declared that Wechsler was the sole owner of Wechsler und Hennig G.m.b.H. The company's capital and liabilities were to be transferred to him. The company was “*vollkaufmännisch*” (general merchants), but he intended to run the business in future as “*einzelkaufmann*” (sole trader) under Firma Wechsler und Hennig. A balance sheet from 30 November 1936 revealed a balance between liabilities and assets, with each item amounting to 71,113 Reichsmark.³²

According to today's German commercial law, the term “*Vollkaufmann*” refers to a tradesman who is fully liable in accordance with commercial law. A *Vollkaufmann* owns a company, is listed in the trade register and can grant power of attorney. An “*Einzelkaufmann*” on the other hand operates his company as a sole trader. He is the sole owner and manager of the company. He provides the company with capital and has sole charge of the profits. He is also liable for the company's debts.³³ It cannot be ruled out that it was the ongoing process of Aryanisation that was behind Wechsler's proposal to change the ownership structure.

Wechsler had consequently bought out his colleague Hennig from the company in 1936. On 2 March 1937 the trade register was informed via Weiskam's notary office that the company had been reformed through this decision, a *Gesellschaftsbeschluss* of 22 December 1936. It was particularly emphasised that in addition to Wechsler, the authority to sign on behalf of Firma Wechsler und Hennig was also held by the employees managing clerk Heinrich Engels, Oberspree Strasse 28, Berlin-Niederschöneweide, and Mrs Johanna Bongertmann, née Schmidt, Caprivi Allee 106, Berlin-Friedrichsfelde. Both these people had consequently been granted power of attorney, *Gesamtprokura*, to represent the firm.³⁴

Heinrich Engels, who became the mainstay of the company, was born in 1880 in Rheydt, had a degree in engineering and a background in a number of different engineering companies. He did not have a great deal of experience of working for this company, having been appointed in October 1936. He was the company's second in charge during the entire period up until 1944.³⁵

³¹ Christopher Isherwood, *The Nowaks* (1935).

³² Minutes signed by Wechsler on 22/12 1936 and by Weiskam on 24/12 1936; Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep. 342-02 No. 42489.

³³ <http://www.wirtschaftslexikon24.net/d/>, 2011-05-22.

³⁴ Clerk Fritz Wittmann (?) 2/3 1937 to Amtsgericht Berlin, Zweigstelle Handelsregister, Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep. 342-02 No. 42489.

³⁵ Data 2011 from Barbara Heise (BEng), granddaughter of Engels. Firma Wechsler und Hennig 2/10 1936 to Engels. The family archives.

The new laws and Aryanisation policy made the situation difficult for Wechsler. Measures that were focused against opportunities for Jews to run businesses were particularly notable. An ordinance of 12 November 1938 excluded Jews from German business. The ordinance stated that as of 1 January 1939, Jews in Germany were prohibited from engaging in commercial trade.

At the beginning of December 1938, another ordinance was issued that fuelled the Aryanisation process. The ordinance stipulated that Jewish business leaders could be ordered to close or transfer ownership of their companies within a given period of time. If the order was not followed, a public administrator could be appointed. The administrator could be commissioned to continue, close or transfer ownership of the company. Once the administrator stepped in, the Jewish owner was completely stripped of his opportunity to represent the company and have control of its assets.

A study by Frank Bajohr regarding conditions in Hamburg at that time reveals that Aryanisation had now reached a critical point. At the end of 1938/start of 1939, all Jewish shops had been sold or closed down, and hundreds of businessmen had been put in prison or sent to concentration camps.³⁶ The repressive measures included the depreciation of Jewish companies in connection with forced sales. The measures varied considerably between industries and cities. Companies were sometimes valued at half their actual value, and often the value stated was basically the bankruptcy value.³⁷

Wechsler's desire to grant Engels and Bongertmann power of attorney to represent the firm can certainly be viewed in light of the Aryanisation process. It is not difficult to understand why Wechsler felt compelled to act quickly and that he needed some luck if he was to receive any kind of compensation for his firm.

In autumn 1938 he rejected a bid of 25,000 Reichsmark from Dresdener Bank, a bid that had been reduced from 30,000 according to the same document. As previously mentioned, one Reichsmark at that time had an equivalent purchasing value of EUR 3.70 in 2011. It is easy to understand why he rejected this bid. It is not so much a question of the difference between 30,000 and 25,000 Reichsmark, but rather a matter of how he could make use of the capital. In Germany, the Aryanisation process meant that his opportunities to benefit from capital were dwindling and he had no chance of taking assets of that kind with him if he had the opportunity to emigrate. He had also been declared *persona non grata* in Germany in December 1938, and the situation was desperate. In April 1939 he was finally able to sell his company to Walther Sommerlath. The bid from Walther Sommerlath was clearly an attractive one to him, but the background to the bid requires a more detailed explanation.

5. Walther Sommerlath

Walther Sommerlath was born on 21 January 1901. In his youth, like so many others, he had entertained the idea of a military career, but when he left school he found himself in a society that had collapsed with the end of the First World War. There were shortages of most things and unemployment was high. In a candid letter to his brother Ernst he explained that he felt

³⁶ Frank Bajohr, *'Aryanisation' in Hamburg, The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of their Property in Nazi Germany*; New York 2002, page 142.

³⁷ Frank Bajohr, *'Aryanisation' in Hamburg, The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of their Property in Nazi Germany*; New York 2002, page 195 and following pages.

redundant in his home country, and that he was keen to stand on his own two feet.³⁸ In July 1920, 20 years of age, he emigrated to Brazil like many of his countrymen. Following his arrival he got a job with the steel company Aços Roechling Buderus do Brasil, which was a subsidiary of the German group Röchling. In 1925 he married Brazilian Alice Soares de Toledo in São Paulo. His first son, Ralf, was born in 1929 and his second, Walther, in 1934.

Over the years he became established in the German “colony”. He was also a member of the German School, which his son Ralf began attending in 1935, and of the Germania sports association. In 1937 he was second secretary of the Yacht Club Santo Amaro.³⁹ He joined the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, NSDAP, in December 1934.⁴⁰

In 1937, Walther Sommerlath took the decision to return home to Germany. On 30 November 1937 he handed in his resignation to Aços Roechling with effect from 28 February 1938. The company offered generous leaving terms and wished him good health: “Insbesondere wünschen wir Ihnen eine völlige Wiederherstellung Ihrer Gesundheit, die ja ein wesentlicher Grund für Ihr Ausscheiden aus unserem Hause gewesen war”.⁴¹

During the first six months following his return he worked for the firm Röchling-Buderus in Völklingen in Saar, but he travelled back to Brazil in 1938 for a period of time. During his absence, the family lived in Leipzig with Walther’s brother, the theologian Ernst Sommerlath. In spring 1939 he acquired the company Wechsler und Hennig in Berlin, and in the summer of the same year he bought the family a house on Prinz Leopold Strasse, Nikolassee, Berlin. His son Hans Jörg was born in 1941, and his daughter Silvia in 1943.

During the increasingly frequent bomb attacks, Alice Sommerlath and the children moved to the quieter city of Heidelberg in 1943. Walther Sommerlath made temporary visits there, but for most of the time he remained living in Berlin. Following the Battle of Stalingrad, Goebbels had in February 1943 declared “total war” and later said that those inhabitants who had left the capital should not return. On 3 February 1945, the firm was destroyed in a bomb attack and during the final stages of the war, Walther Sommerlath managed to leave the city via Potsdam.

The family’s situation was complicated. For several years they had lived in a situation that was considered problematic in German society at that time. Walther Sommerlath’s wife Alice had dual citizenship, Brazilian and German. She was dark-haired and spoke German with a heavy accent and stood out and was often forced to show her passport and other identification documents in public places. Their two eldest children, who were born in Brazil, had dual citizenship under Brazilian law, but German law stipulated that children with a German father only had German citizenship. Her family came from Brazil, but Brazil was now at war with Germany.

Before the war, Germany had been one of Brazil’s most important trading partners and there was a significant German minority living in the country. The Head of State Gétulio Vargas, who had launched a coup d’etat in 1937 and established a dictatorship, tried during the early years of the war to retain a balance between the warring powers. But the situation deteriorated after Pearl Harbor and the sinking of a large number of Brazilian trade ships by German U-

³⁸ See letter from Walther Sommerlath to his brother Ernst, Heidelberg 4/7 1920. The family archives.

³⁹ Publication YCSA 70 ANOS (2000). The family archives.

⁴⁰ Index card from NSDAP membership register, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

⁴¹ Aços Roechling 8/12 to WS. The family archives.

boats. Radio Berlin's foreign broadcasts provoked the population further with their incendiary announcements, and German companies and restaurants in the country were attacked. The situation was now so inflamed that Vargas was forced to adopt a position, and in February 1942, Brazil declared war on Germany and Italy.

Brazil was also the only South American country that decided to send troops to Europe. A special expeditionary force was organised, Força Expedicionária Brasileira, under General Mascarenhas de Moraes. The unit, which included an infantry division with approximately 25,000 men was supplied with American equipment and arrived in Naples in July 1944. Together with the other allied troops, they fought their way up through Italy during the fierce battles of autumn 1944 and the beginning of 1945. The Brazilian troops won their biggest victory when they forced two reduced German divisions and one Italian division to surrender at Fovorno and Monte Cassino in April 1945.⁴²

The situation was such that Alice Sommerlath and her Brazilian relatives were citizens of a hostile country, which was also at open war with Germany. Furthermore, Alice Sommerlath's brother Arthur Floriano de Toledo took part in the battles in Italy in his capacity as senior officer and military medical officer in the Brazilian forces.

Shortly after the end of the war, Walther Sommerlath came to the realisation as he had done in his youth that Germany held no future for him, as he had no assets in the country. In 1946, these thoughts developed and he decided that the family should try to return to Brazil, a natural move under the circumstances. He had spent many years there himself, his wife and two of the children were born there and now that Germany had lost the war, his wife's Brazilian citizenship was a major asset and quite simply a prerequisite for the success of the decision to emigrate to Brazil.

In 1947, the family was in a transit camp in Bedburg-Hau in the British occupation zone. Sommerlath's eldest son Ralf, 17 years, struggled to get through the Russian zone with two friends in an attempt to reach the Brazilian embassy in Berlin. They were able to inform the embassy that there was a large group of people with a strong connection to Brazil, and eventually led to the Brazilian government organising transportation. Walther Sommerlath himself had a great deal of contact with the English governor and telegram contact with the Brazilian military commission and finally managed to get an exit permit from Germany and an entry permit to Brazil.⁴³ One of Alice Sommerlath's brothers, the lawyer Carlos Eduardo de Toledo, petitioned the Brazilian authorities from his side.

Just as Wechsler had done eight years previously, the Sommerlath family would now travel to Hamburg to embark a Brazilian ship and emigrate to Brazil. A recent work describes refugee transportations of this kind and how the march led from the railway station in Hamburg, with luggage, prams and children, to a camp, where 1,600 foreigners of all nationalities gathered. The Brazilian ship Santarém, a collier that had been rebuilt to transport troops and that was now being used to repatriate refugees, left on Sunday 2 February 1947. Relatives had seen to it that the family was provided with a first-class ticket in the overflowing accommodation. The ship ventured out in temperatures of minus 28 Celsius with the help of icebreakers, and

⁴² Stellan Bojerud, *Brasilien I andra världskriget*, www.mopsen.wordpress.com/2010/01/03/; 22 June 2011, 9.00 a.m.

⁴³ Sommerlath 20/1 1947 to Engels; Barbara Heise (BEng), The family archives.

on 1 March 1947, after a 28-day journey, the ship arrived in Rio de Janeiro in temperatures of plus 40 degrees.⁴⁴

In São Paulo, Walther Sommerlath worked from 1949 until 1957 for the Swedish steel company Uddeholm. The family returned to Germany in 1957, where for ten years Walther Sommerlath was head of Uddeholm's operations in Düsseldorf. He died in Heidelberg in 1990.

6. The party organisations in Brazil

As mentioned above, in December 1934 Walther Sommerlath joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the NSDAP. His membership number was 359 2030.⁴⁵ The reason is not clear, but a background description sheds some light on the German colony and the party's position and direction in Brazil during this period.

Research regarding the National Socialist Party in Brazil has evolved. In the 1960s, works were published that considered that the party conducted a relatively discreet operation among Germans in the region, but also that the party had won a degree of general approval among the population. Some research observed that conflicts had arisen between the party and individual citizens or groups. It later emerged that the party organisations had a strong ambition to take over leadership of the German colony, but that the attempt had been almost universally rejected by the German population. A relevant and thorough piece of research on the subject was presented a few years ago by Luís Moraes (2005).⁴⁶ This section is largely based on his work.

According to official Brazilian estimations, some 233,000 Germans emigrated to Brazil during the period 1820 to 1939. This makes the German group the fourth largest group of immigrants after Italians, Portuguese and Spaniards. During the 1920s 76,000 Germans immigrated to Brazil followed by 24,000 in the 1930s.⁴⁷ During the interwar period, the background and education of the immigrants changed as major cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo underwent rapid industrialisation.⁴⁸

There was a wealth of activities in the German colony. They included several newspapers, the Germania society, women's organisations, gym clubs, the Germania sports association, school and teachers' associations, social relief organisations, evangelical and Catholic societies and the cultural association Pro Arte. The many German-Brazilian companies functioned as umbrella organisations and sponsors. Naturally the number of active organisations also varied between different cities and regions.⁴⁹

There was generally limited interest in National Socialism, the party and Hitler as a person during the 1920s. The name Hitler did not become generally known until the end of the

⁴⁴ Rosine De Dijn, *Das Schicksalsschiff. Rio de Janeiro-Lissabon-New York 1942* (2009)

⁴⁵ Index card from NSDAP membership register, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

⁴⁶ Luís Edmundo de Souza Moraes, *Konflikt und Anerkennung: Die Ortsgruppen der NSDAP in Blumenau und Rio de Janeiro* (Berlin 2005) page 12 and following pages.

⁴⁷ Moraes, page 43 and following page.

⁴⁸ Moraes, page 85.

⁴⁹ Moraes, page 75 and following page.

1920s.⁵⁰ It is not possible to say exactly when the first local party organisation was founded in Brazil, but it is likely to have been in 1926 or 1928. In Germany in 1931, a division was set up within NSDAP for Germans living abroad. In February 1934, the division was finally developed into the party's international wing with its administrative headquarters in Hamburg. In the same year the number of members in Rio de Janeiro rose from 107 to 1,014. It has been estimated that the party organisation in Brazil in 1937 was the single largest country group, larger than the organisations in all of the other 83 countries where the party was represented.

A source of many conflicts was the relationship between the party organisation and the German international cultural association *Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland*, as well as competition between them for the Germans abroad who were not German citizens. The matter of the precise scope of the party's activities, how broad membership should be and the relationship with other associations representing Germans abroad was also a source of contention. Formally, only "Reichsdeutsche", German citizens, belonged to the target group, but in many places there was an ambition to also include "Volksdeutsche", those who were of German origin or whose mother tongue was German. Another problem was the difficulty in responding to allegations of involvement in the host country's domestic matters. This resulted in a number of official principles for the foreign divisions, such as following the laws in the country in which they lived and not getting involved in the politics of the host country.⁵¹

Although the first party associations in Brazil were established at the end of the 1920s, it was not until the start of the 1930s that they began to gain strength. During the early years they lacked a permanent organisation, coordination and contact with Germany. Conditions varied considerably between cities and regions. The situation in Rio de Janeiro was at any rate very uncertain right from the start. The party group was divided into two factions and the relationship with other institutions in the German colony was tense. However, over time an overall organisation began to take shape, and in May 1934 a country division for Brazil was formally established.⁵²

The party organisation was in reality made up of a number of subdivisions. Below is a list of the key divisions and the number of members in 1939: NSDAP (2,990), the Women's Association (2,050), the Teachers' Association (100), the Hitler Youth and the German-Brazilian Labour Association (550), as well as *Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft* and *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (6,401), both of which were focused on working life.

Luís Moraes has focused in particular on the situation in the cities of Blumenau and Rio de Janeiro, but unfortunately we are left with almost no information about São Paulo. In any case he does note that progress on standardisation between organisations was particularly far-advanced in São Paulo. The teachers' association was among those that were well organised, with a country organisation. All employed teachers of German in Brazil were to be members of this organisation. For example, in São Paulo the main task was stated as bringing together and representing all teachers, and explaining their duties to their homeland and the country that the majority of their pupils regarded as their homeland. The teachers' association clearly held a strong position in São Paulo.⁵³

⁵⁰ Moraes, page 98.

⁵¹ Moraes, page 110 and following pages, page 152.

⁵² Moraes, page 135 and following pages.

Moraes, page 148 and following pages, page 172.

There are various figures given for NSDAP's total number of members. Official party statistics put the number at 2,903 people in 1937. According to American estimates based on party documents that were seized after the war, the total number of party members during the period 1932 to 1938 was 4,487, a figure that was raised by a subsequent researcher to 4,935.

Statistics for 1937 show members by professional group. The four single largest groups were craftsmen (752 people, 25.9%), independent businessmen (515 people, 17.7%), employed businessmen (418 people, 14.4%) and farmers (324 people, 11.1 %). The age ranges are also stated. Born after 1911: 308 people (10.6%), 1905-1910: 630 people (21.7%), 1899-1904: 665 people (22.9%), 1893-1898: 491 people (16.9%), 1887-1892: 405 people (14%) and pre-1897: 404 people (13.9%).

The place of birth is also given. Born in Germany before 1919: 2,618 people (92.77%), born abroad outside Brazil: 102 people (3.61%), born in Brazil: 69 people (2.45%) and no details: 33 people (1.17%).⁵⁴

Moraes takes a closer look at party activities in the capital of Rio de Janeiro. An advert was placed in one of the German newspapers in October 1931, inviting people to a meeting with the aim of forming a local association of the NSDAP. The meeting probably took the form of a lecture evening at a restaurant in the city centre. There are no details of the attendance during the early period, but the meetings were open to anyone who was interested.

However, the position of the party group in the city was complicated. During the early years, the meetings were held at the relatively obliging restaurant Bar República, rather than in the German colony's more familiar venues. Attempts to use officially approved venues were rejected. It is also evident that the party never attended major events in the colony during the early years. A direct conflict arose in 1932 between the party and the German School, in which the teachers reacted strongly to the party's criticism of "communist and defeatist" literature. It is clear that the colony's establishment did not view the party with any great interest. The road to recognition was rather a long one.⁵⁵

After Hitler was appointed Chancellor in 1933 there was a sudden change. The German ambassador attended a party meeting for the first time at the May Day celebrations in Rio de Janeiro. Public support increased and new venues were required. The fact that developments did not move quicker can probably be explained by the relatively aggressive political image of the party leadership up until that point. It even occasioned remarks from the central international wing of the party in Hamburg.⁵⁶

In summer 1933 there were changes to leading positions in the local party organisation. The explanation was that the time for the agitators' struggle had passed and that it was now time to establish an organisation "where there is room for all our German brothers with a German disposition." The programme of meetings had calmed down, and a commemorative gathering was held at a meeting at the end of the summer for the poet Theodor Körner, who had died during the war with Napoleon.

From 1934, all doors appeared to be open for events, and the organisation became increasingly integrated with the rest of the German colony. Singing groups from different

⁵⁴ Moraes, page 165 and following pages.

⁵⁵ Moraes, page 233 and following pages.

⁵⁶ Moraes, page 246 and following pages.

local associations performed at party meetings, and party officials had the opportunity to take part in other association events.

But this did not always take place without friction. A typical scenario involved the well-established cultural association Pro Arte. In autumn 1933, the party initiated contact with the association with the intention of getting involved in preparations for the election of a new board. At first the aim was to get one of the party's own candidates into a position as an elected representative in the cultural association, but it soon emerged that the ambition went further than that. In a letter, the party explained that it wanted to achieve a partnership based on trust by being allowed to set up a special commission, which would be able to review all correspondence to the association and countersign all outgoing correspondence. No verbal agreements or payments would be valid unless the commission had confirmed them in writing. Despite initial opposition, the result was the resignation of the chairman of Pro Arte and key positions in the association being taken by party members.

The development was characterised by the fact that the party succeeded in its goal of changing methods. Instead of, as at the start, going on the attack and behaving aggressively, the party now invited groups to negotiate. It was soon evident that it was the party that had the main role in these, often with ambassador Schmidt-Elskop on the same side of the negotiating table. The party achieved its goal when in June 1934 it was able to establish a framework organisation for all the main German associations in the capital: The Germania society, the German–Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, the German Relief Society, the German Women's Association, the choral society Harmoni, the singing association Lyran, the German Sports and Gymnastics Association, the sports association Germania, the German Officers' Association and the Pro Arte society. The party organisation was, of course, at the helm.

Things had now gone so far that in spring 1935 it was declared that in future the party would not only participate in events for the national festivals, but that such events were now solely a matter for the local party. The events also increased in scope. Some 4,000 people took part in the May Day celebrations in 1934; the following year the figure was closer to 10,000. This should be viewed in relation to the fact that the entire German colony in Rio de Janeiro totalled between 10,000 and 15,000 people.⁵⁷

But the party's influence soon reached its peak. The number of participants in the May Day celebrations in 1935 and 1936 remained high, but things went rapidly downhill after that. 1 May 1937 saw the last public celebration, by which time the number of participants had dropped by half. The reason was the new political climate in Brazil and the increased strength of national feeling. The spotlight was focused on the party's activities and there was talk of threats to the country's security and sovereignty. As attacks on the party became increasingly open, greater restraint was shown in the party's own events. The situation reached a climax after President Getúlio Vargas proclaimed himself dictator in 1937, and in April 1938 the NSDAP was finally banned in Brazil.⁵⁸

7. The typical party member

⁵⁷ Moraes, page 252 and following pages.

⁵⁸ Moraes, page 264 and following pages.

As regards the reason for Walther Sommerlath joining the party, we can only draw conclusions from the general events in the country and in the German colony. There are no personal statements, and naturally enough nor are there any recollections from friends or family.

We can note that there was a wealth of associations in the German colony. It must be considered entirely natural that Walther Sommerlath became involved in these at an early stage, at the school his children attended, the local sports club, the sailing club.

It took a long time for the party to achieve general legitimacy in the country. It was not until 1934 than an overseas organisation was formed in Germany, and in May the same year a national organisation was formed in Brazil.

At the same time the previous somewhat aggressive approach was toned down, and the party started to appear together with the other associations. The established circles now opened up to the party, which as from this year gained access to premises that had previously been closed to them. The German ambassador started to attend party meetings, and in June 1934 an umbrella organisation was set up for all associations in the German colony. The party was quick to take a leading role in this. That year the number of party members also increased dramatically, tenfold in Rio de Janeiro. This was also the situation, in December 1934, when Walther Sommerlath himself became a member.

When considering the number of members in the party, one should not simply consider those who were members of the core organisation, the NSDAP, but also of other organisations with ties to the party such as the Women's Association, the Teacher's Association, the Hitler Youth, the German-Brazilian Labour Association and the labour market organisations *Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft* and *Deutsche Arbeitsfront*. While the NSDAP had around 2,900 members, at the end of the 1930s the organisation as a whole had around 12,000 members. The size of the German colony in Brazil was estimated at around 89,000 people.

Unfortunately we know little about the situation in local associations in the large industrial city of São Paulo, but Moraes does confirm that the party had a particularly strong position there. The possibility cannot be excluded that one reason lies in the difference between industrial and agricultural environments, and the fact that German immigrants in the preceding decades only made their way to industrial environments. A large proportion of the German colony actually lived in São Paulo. In 1940 they totalled around 33,000 people, while the capital city Rio de Janeiro only had around 10,000 Germans.

We thus have no personal evidence. But it is clear in any case that Walther Sommerlath lived in a city where the party had a particularly strong position, and that he became a member when the party was established in all circles within the German colony, and also played a leading role in local associations, in which he had long been involved. It may also be added that he was married to a non-German, Brazilian citizen, and that their children too were Brazilian citizens. It is not unthinkable, given the atmosphere that prevailed and in order to legitimise his position in the German colony, that he felt a need to emphasise his own German citizenship.

If we also study the membership statistics, we see that Walther Sommerlath is involved in all respects in the groups that had particularly strong representation. If we add the two groups of businessmen, this category becomes by far the biggest (32%). His age also makes him a

typical member, as he was born in 1901 and is in the biggest age category (born 1899-1904, 22.9%). He also represents the dominant group in terms of birthplace, those born in Germany before 1919 (92.77%), even though this is more natural. Under all circumstances, it is evident that people of his background and profession were particularly strongly represented.

There is no known information about whether or how Walther Sommerlath made use of his party membership, or whether he even played an active role in the party. At any rate, he did not have a prominent position in the organisations. The most prominent sources relating to the party and its membership include archive films produced by the US government immediately after the war in 1945-1946. The historian Luís Moraes, the most prominent expert in this field, informed the author that during his research into this material and other documentation and publications from the party in Brazil, he never came across the name of Walther Sommerlath.⁵⁹

It can also be noted that in the late 1930s the Brazilian security services (DEOPS, Departamento Estadual de Ordem Política e Social de São Paulo) were keeping a close check on the NSDAP and the German colony. The name of Walther Sommerlath has not been encountered⁶⁰ in the security services' archives, which contain extensive material relating to German interests. There has thus not been any evidence found to indicate that he was an active party member.

8. The term *Wehrwirtschaft*

Another important factor in this context is the business activity at Firma Wechsler und Hennig and its successor Firma Walther Sommerlath. When it was taken over, the company was a small business operating in the civilian field of electrical consumer goods. But war preparations were on the way, and the company was to be drawn inexorably into the general mobilisation.

The German regime wanted to use the term *Wehrwirtschaft*, war economy, to foster a new economic principle. The new approach was not only that a large proportion of civil production should be used for military purposes, but that all activity should be viewed as a part of the overall war effort. This was partly based on experiences from the material war of the First World War, but it was also based largely on new totalitarian principles. The methodology involved converting the economy in Germany by means of transforming the liberal, market-oriented economy into a common, State-managed war economy. The individual person's economy and working life was now to be adapted to meet the requirements of total war, and naturally all companies with their workforces and production facilities were to be a part of this effort.

But this mobilisation was to take longer than had been intended by those in central office. For a long time in the 1930s the regime had to consider the population's requirements and consumer needs, now that prosperity had started to rise following the long depression. With the outbreak of war in September 1939, the German economy was also officially on a war footing, but it was to be some time yet before it could be considered a genuine war economy.

⁵⁹ Communication from Luís Moraes to the author, 10/6 2011.

⁶⁰ Message 28/6 2011 from Simone Lucena Cordeiro, Head of the Permanent Records Collection, Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo, following a search of the security services' DEOPS-SP archives; The family archives.

The British economic historian Alan S. Milward used the expression “blitzkrieg economics” to describe the economy that was sufficient to guarantee the initial victories of the German forces without having to risk the desires of their own population. These needs could initially be satisfied by means of a limited conversion of the country’s own production together with the intensive utilisation of the assets of vanquished states.⁶¹

At the same time, planning proceeded towards a war economy. There were three important preconditions to be met in order for it to be possible to guarantee a sustainable initiative: the creation of stores, a total concentration of all production on military needs through the conversion of the whole production apparatus at the expense of civil manufacturing, and the introduction of mass production of military equipment by concentrating production on the most efficient large-scale companies. Despite the strong emphasis on the objective of gradually introducing a centralisation of production, plans were obstructed for a long time because of competition between different influential authorities.

At the head of the whole organisation was, naturally, Adolf Hitler. Directly under him and outside the formal organisation was Hermann Göring, with responsibility for implementing the current four-year plan. With a view to speeding up development, in the New Year 1938 a *Generalbevollmächtig für die Wirtschaft* was set up with Walther Funk as Minister for Economic Affairs or Enterprise. Funk was responsible for a total of around 180,000 companies in Germany, of which around 25,000 were in one way or another important for the war effort. It is extremely likely that Firma Wechsler und Hennig, subsequently Firma Walther Sommerlath, belonged to one of these categories.

To further accelerate developments, in March 1940 a *Reichsministerium für Bewaffnung und Munition* was created under the leadership of Fritz Todt as Minister for Armaments. Alongside this were the purely military bodies, primarily the *Wehrwirtschafts- und Rüstungsamt*, which was organised within the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* and expanded rapidly under the leadership of General Georg Thomas. Thomas was in turn responsible for the pure military equipment industries, which in 1940 constituted around 5,400 companies. There was a conflict of competence between Funk and Todt on the one side and between the two of them and Thomas on the other, as Thomas had a stronger ambition to adapt all production to meet the purely military objectives.⁶²

Through various kinds of regulations and restrictions, developments were driven towards an economy that in 1939 was at least partly mobilised. It has been estimated that the German armaments industry’s share of total industrial production in 1938 was 7%. This share rose significantly between 1938 and 1939, but between 1939 and 1940 the increase was dramatic.⁶³

In relation to Funk’s Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Armaments and Fritz Todt were able to gradually increase their influence. Shortly before the assault on France in May

⁶¹ Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Band I, Ursachen und Voraussetzungen der deutschen Kriegspolitik (Stuttgart 1979; Hans-Erich Volkmann), page 208 ff.

⁶² Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Band 5/1, Organisation und Mobilisierung des deutschen Machtbereichs. Kriegsverwaltung, Wirtschaft und personelle Ressourcen 1939-1941. Die Mobilisierung der deutschen Wirtschaft für Hitlers Kriegführung (Stuttgart 1988; Rolf-Dieter Müller), page 350 ff.

⁶³ A.G. Ploetz Verlag, Würzburg, Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkrieges. 2. Teil, Die Kriegsmittel (1960), pages 21, 26.

1940, Todt considered that he had already completed an extensive overhaul of the German war economy. The requirement had been to convert the whole economy for war production and to follow Hitler's instructions from December 1939 "through the ruthless suppression of civil needs to create the conditions for victory by means of decisive action".⁶⁴ During the first years of the war the armaments industry increased its share of the German war economy to account for no less than 75% of GDP.⁶⁵

It can only have been a question of time before companies such as Firma Walther Sommerlath also had to be mobilised.

Making preparations for crisis or war by planning the mobilisation of the economy was of course not something that happened only in Germany. One example that comes to mind – albeit under different circumstances – is the activities undertaken in Sweden by the Royal Commission for Economic Defensive Readiness from 1928. The Commission was appointed in light of the experiences from the First World War, and it carried out valuable planning work before war broke out, when it was replaced by new bodies such as the National Ammunition Board and the Swedish Defence Engineering Board. Actual work on factory planning was given priority as the situation deteriorated, and work took place to set up war delivery contracts with individual companies. But the situation was still considered far from satisfactory when war finally broke out.⁶⁶

It had long been clear that in the event of war Sweden too would have to engage the domestic private engineering industry for its equipment supplies. Engineering companies were viewed as a potential armaments industry on a significant scale, if converted for the production of military equipment. A conversion process was also completed, even though Sweden was never at war. Purely military production within the engineering industry was 6% of total activity in 1939. During that year there was still a peacetime economy, but by 1940 the proportion of military production had already reached 22%. In 1942 this rose to 26%, and remained at a high level throughout the war.

The proportion naturally varied between different kinds of industry. There were particularly high levels of military production in instrument factories, at an average of 40%, as well as sheet metal and machine industries. The electrical industry quickly reached a very high level, but then declined somewhat during the years that followed. The conversion to military production contributed to compensating for losses of exports and civil production. The period from 1941 to 1943, which has been described in Sweden as a "crisis boom", was characterised by a relatively stable balance between a reduced domestic market and reduced exports on the one side increased State military equipment orders on the other.⁶⁷

9. Firma Walther Sommerlath

⁶⁴ Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Band 5/1, page 479.

⁶⁵ Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Band 9, Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939-1945. Ausbeutung, Deutungen, Ausgrenzung. 'Menschenführung' in Rüstungsunternehmen der nationalsozialistischen Kriegswirtschaft (München 2005; Georg Wagner-Kyora), page 388 f.

⁶⁶ Olle Månsson, Industriell beredskap. Om ekonomisk försvarsplanering inför andra världskriget [*Industrial preparedness. About economic defence planning before the Second World War*] (Stockholm 1976), page 207 ff.

⁶⁷ Ulf Olsson, Upprustning och verkstadsindustri i Sverige under det andra världskriget [*Equipment and engineering industry in Sweden during the Second World War*] (Göteborg 1973), page 119 ff.

Once Walther Sommerlath had acquired Firma Wechsler und Hennig, the same procedure took place as had for Wechsler a few years previously. The notary Paul Endlich informed the authorities that the businessman Walther Sommerlath was now running a metalworking factory under the name Firma Walther Sommerlath. The capital was 50,000 Reichsmark. Engels and Bongertmann, who held power of attorney,⁶⁸ were to be able to continue to sign on behalf of the business, but only jointly in association.

Shortly after this, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce stated that the matter concerned an Aryanisation of the company carried out at the police's instigation, and that they therefore had no objections to the change.⁶⁹ On 26 May the authorities announced that the new company had been entered in the trade register.⁷⁰ On 9 June Engels and Bongertmann announced on behalf of the company that the company's capital, with no deduction for liabilities, totalled 50,000 Reichsmark and that the company did not own any property. The latter had also been the case during Wechsler's time.

It may be noted that on its letterhead the company used the name *Walther Sommerlath (früher Wechsler und Hennig, gegr. 1911)*, which means that the company's foundation was probably considered to be the year when Wechsler might have started to run his engineering business. The area of business activity was stated as being *Metallwaren- und Apparate-Fabrik*.⁷¹

It has been mentioned that material of interest regarding Walther Sommerlath's business transaction with Efim Wechsler might be found in the Deutsche Bank's archive in Frankfurt. This has been investigated by Ralf de Toledo Sommerlath, but the three documents that were found contain nothing of any value for this report. One relates to deposits for the house by Nikolassee. The other two relate to various small transactions without any dates or detailed specifications. They are, however, of no relevance in this context.⁷²

It is believed that the company covered an area of around 50 x 50 square metres in the old factory building on Wassertorstrasse. Before the war it was a consumer goods company that manufactured electrical appliances such as hair driers and coffee makers. But the company on Wassertorstrasse was soon to become part of a completely different reality.

The ambition varied in different directions, but the intention remained to incorporate all production into the war economy. It was above all a question of utilising civil production resources in a way that also made them useful for military purposes, or, as one of the proponents of the new economy put it: "a piano factory could, without too much of an extensive conversion, manufacture aircraft wings."⁷³

As from 15 August 1940, Firma Walther Sommerlath and its 38 employees were organised as a military company or *W-Betrieb*. In light of what has been described above, it might still appear that the company had been mobilised into the war economy at quite a late stage. This

⁶⁸ Paul Endlich 2/5 and 3/5 1939 to Amtsgericht Berlin; Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep. 342-02 No.21524.

⁶⁹ Industrie- und Handelskammer zu Berlin 24/5 1939 to the Amtsgericht Berlin, Registerabteilung 552; Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep. 342-02 No.21524.

⁷⁰ Amtsgericht Berlin 26/5 1939; Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep. 342-02 No.21524.

⁷¹ Firma Walther Sommerlath 9/6 1939 to Geschäftsstelle des Amtsgerichts Berlin; Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep. 342-02 No.21524.

⁷² Deutsche Bank AG, Corporate Citizenship, Frankfurt am Main 20/7 2011 to Ralf de Toledo Sommerlath. (The family archives).

⁷³ Stefan Th. Possony, *Die Wehrwirtschaft des totalen Krieges* (Wien 1938), page 111.

might correspond with the view of the relatively slow industrial mobilisation, despite all of the directives and statements.

There was, however, a significant change once Albert Speer had taken over as Minister for Armaments following Todt's death in murky circumstances. As far as can be ascertained from the official classification of military equipment types, production at Firma Walther Sommerlath in February 1943 comprised various kinds of parts for equipment for armoured vehicles, non-motorised carriages, precision mechanics and optics, and gas masks and filters for the same.⁷⁴ By this time the conversion process had certainly taken place.

During the war the company thus became a supplier to a number of large and small engineering companies, where assembly and installation took place. The number of customers changed during the war years, but was on average one hundred or so each year. These include many well-known companies in the field of military equipment.⁷⁵ Attempts have been made to locate more detailed information relating to production in the military industry archives at Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde, but without any results. The company was of course insignificant in relation to the overall production apparatus, and it was also a subcontractor to pure military equipment industries.

Heinrich Engels became an important employee, especially after the company's foreman had left, and he received an annual salary corresponding to 5% of the annual profit.⁷⁶ But as Berlin came under increasingly intense bombing attacks, the company found itself under pressure. They had to allocate employees for air raid and fire watch duties⁷⁷, and as the setbacks increased, employees started to be called up for military service. In the final, desperate phase of the war in March 1945, the employees were called in by a 'secret' order of the Ministry of Command and the company was requested to make available all male employees who could be spared or replaced by female labour.⁷⁸

10. The company ceases to exist

On the 3.3.1945 the business had been more or less totally destroyed in a bombing raid that virtually laid waste to the whole of the district of Kreuzberg, which meant that at this time the company had to all intents and purposes ceased to exist. Alice Sommerlath and the children had already left Berlin in 1943 and moved to Heidelberg, where the whole family was living at the end of the war. But from 1946 Walther Sommerlath attempted to re-establish contact with the employees. He received letters from Mrs Bongertmann and from Kurt Hein, another of the employees who had returned from being held as a prisoner of war in England. In a letter to Engels he said that as far as he knew it was not the Russians, but the German authorities that had seized the remaining machines. He asked whether Engels knew what had happened to the other people in the business and sent his regards to him and his wife.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Reichsbetriebskarte (production index card) 27/2 1943; Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde R 3/2002.

⁷⁵ Debitoren- und Kreditoren-Salden; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁷⁶ Walther Sommerlath 24/1 1941 to Engels; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁷⁷ Polizeipräsident Berlin 22/8 1942 to Engels; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁷⁸ Rüstungskommando Berlin V des Reichsministers für Rüstung und Kriegsproduktion 3/3 1945 to Firma Walther Sommerlath; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁷⁹ Sommerlath 30/5 1946 to Engels; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

Engels sent an immediate, personal reply. He and his family were living in difficult conditions. He was now working in another company that was under Soviet management and was manufacturing for Soviet purposes. He himself had managed to obtain some documents to safe from the old factory.⁸⁰

Walther Sommerlath replied that he had discussed the possibilities of getting back the machines and that he had been asked whether he wanted to try to re-establish the company. But he considered the possibilities to be virtually non-existent. All bank balances had been seized, and he believed that there was hardly any possibility of relying on contributions from his wife's relatives in Brazil. But he asked Engels for advice on how he could return to Berlin under the prevailing political circumstances.⁸¹

But Engels was not optimistic. It might well be possible to start up the business once more with a focus on the original production of hair driers and other equipment for hairdressers, but there was a shortage of raw materials and hairdressers were not a group with any particular purchasing power in Berlin at that time. There were scarcely any prospects of Sommerlath being able to return to Berlin.⁸²

It was now increasingly clear to Walther Sommerlath that he had no future in Berlin or in Germany in general. He confided in Engels that he was toying with the idea of returning to Brazil in order to try to build a new future for himself and the family. He had tried to obtain funds, in the first instance so that he could pay outstanding wages to his closest employees, including Engels, Johanna Bongertmann and the company's foreman. He also confided in Engels that his brother Ernst has just returned with very favourable impressions from a meeting of bishops in Sweden, and that he had been in contact with a soldier who had been in the same Russian prison camp as his other brother Paul. If he had not been able to get out of Berlin in time, he would probably have been detained there himself.⁸³

But Sommerlath was still unwilling to completely let go of the idea of returning to Berlin to start up the business once more. He was in regular contact with legal advisors to sound out the possibilities of recovering the necessary machines.⁸⁴ But by the end of the year it seems that the matter was settled. In a very open, warm letter to Engels, he explained his immediate plans. He had managed to obtain an exit permit from Germany and an entry permit to Brazil. His intention was to travel to Hamburg, where he would board a Brazilian ship. He had reached the conclusion that following the loss of the company and all assets, the only prospect of a future for himself and the family was to return to Brazil. It was with a heavy heart, as he was so fond of his country, his relatives and friends. But he felt that he owed his family this, as shortly before the war he had brought them from their homeland to Germany.

He reassured Engels once more that he would compensate his closest employees for their outstanding wages, either in cash or in kind, whichever they preferred. And to make sure that Engels knew where to find him, he gave him his brother-in-law's address, where he could be reached for the time being: Dr. Renato Soares de Toledo, Rua Direita 49, São Paulo.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Engels 14/6 1946 to Sommerlath; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁸¹ Sommerlath 2/8 1946 to Engels; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁸² Engels undated, 1946 to Sommerlath; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁸³ Sommerlath 2/10 1946 to Engels; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁸⁴ Sommerlath 1/11 1946 to Engels; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

⁸⁵ Sommerlath 20/1 1947 to Engels; Dipl.-Ing Barbara Heise. The family archives.

Walther Sommerlath also had direct contact with Johanna Bongertmann. She had heard that the Sommerlaths were considering returning to Brazil and wished them all the best with this. She was able to provide news about many of the company's employees, and she took the opportunity to ask Walther Sommerlath if he had Efim Wechsler's address in Brazil. She clearly believed that Sommerlath and Wechsler had been in contact.⁸⁶

Sommerlath's direct reply has not been kept, but there is a letter to Johanna Bongertmann from São Paulo in August 1947. He was able to tell her that the family had been very well received by relatives in Brazil. He had sent a package containing coffee, cigarettes and soap to Engels, and he would soon also send some goods to Bongertmann. He had set aside one third of his wages to send packages to Germany. He also mentioned those employees that had been called up for military service and asked whether Bongertmann had heard anything from them or knew whether they had returned. He was now also able to confide in her that he had visited Rio de Janeiro. He had not yet actually met Wechsler, but as far as he knew Wechsler was living in the city and was well.⁸⁷

The final act for Firma Walther Sommerlath took place in 1957. It was then that Sommerlath requested that it be entered in the trade register that the business had ceased trading. The document was attested by the notary Ernst Schneider, Berlin.⁸⁸

11. Who acquired companies during the Aryanisation process?

There is, of course, no doubt that the Aryanisation process of the 1930s had existential consequences for Jewish businessmen and their associates, as well as far-reaching consequences for the German economy. We have also seen that the actual Aryanisation process was driven relentlessly, but that at the same time it could be vague and sometimes contradictory. Agreements led to many buyers lining their own pockets, but also to one or two attempting to do the right thing.

According to certain sources, there were 39,532 Jewish companies operating in Berlin in April 1938. One year later, on 1 April 1939, 14,803 of these companies had been liquidated, 5,976 had passed into Aryan hands, 4,136 were in the process of being transferred and investigations were under way regarding 7,127. It was not clear what was happening with the other 7,490 companies.⁸⁹

A study by Frank Bajohr involving 310 Aryanised companies in Hamburg confirmed that the overwhelmingly predominant proportion of Aryanisation took place during 1938 and 1939. Of 294 owners, 68% emigrated. In rough figures, 30% moved to the USA, 21% to the UK, 11% to the Netherlands and 11% to South and Central America.

Frank Bajohr divides the people who took over the companies into three groups. About 40 per cent were taken over by people who made active use of the situation for their own personal gain. It was not uncommon for these to be party officials or people who had previously been

⁸⁶ Bongertmann 15/12 1946 to Sommerlath. The family archives.

⁸⁷ Sommerlath 17/8 1947 to Bongertmann. The family archives.

⁸⁸ Sommerlath 5/8 1957 to Amtsgericht, Handelsregister, Berlin-Charlottenburg; Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep. 342-02 No. 21524.

⁸⁹ Sverige och judarnas tillgångar [*Sweden and the Jews' Assets*] (SOU 1999:20).

employed by the Jewish trader. They could use any means at all to force down the price, such as threatening the seller with the Gestapo or with the withholding of passports to obtain a lower price. This happened with particular frequency towards the end of the Aryanisation process in 1939. About the same proportion of companies were acquired by people who might be compared to “sleeping partners”. They often concluded formally impeccable transactions, but still attempted to gain from the deal as much as possible. The vast majority of buyers thus attempted to profit from the transactions.

According to Bajohr’s research, the remaining 20 per cent were taken over by well-meaning businessmen who tried to pay reasonable compensation to the Jewish owners. Many of these people had Jewish friends and only took over the companies when their acquaintances were in need or specifically requested them to do so. It was not uncommon for them to draw up joint agreements that were not sanctioned by the authorities. To avoid the authorities, the seller could decline any direct compensation in return for the buyer investing funds that could be claimed at a later date. In some instances the buyers went as far as helping their Jewish business partners to move property abroad clandestinely so that it could be made available to them once more. All of this in turn meant that a buyer who really wanted to pay reasonable compensation was breaking the rules and actually became a criminal in the prevailing German system.⁹⁰

There is much to indicate that Walther Sommerlath belonged to this latter category. But if this were the case, the question is how did contacts between Wechsler and Sommerlath take place? Here the trail leads to Brazil.

12. Contacts with Brazil

In the years before the war, numerous Jews emigrated from Germany to South America. The routes could vary. One person who was particularly active in efforts to facilitate the acquisition of land in Argentina and Brazil was the politician Johannes Schauff. His activities were described by Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro⁹¹. The organisation known as *Gesellschaft für wirtschaftliche Studien im Übersee* served as a base for his activities. Schauff was active in Berlin until 1936, when he himself was forced to emigrate to the Vatican. He travelled across the Atlantic several times, and during the period 1934-1939 he visited Brazil nine times. It is not clear how many Jews he helped, as statistics do not include religion, but in total his organisation distributed more than 2,200 plots of land.

One particularly successful method was so-called triangle traffic. Land was acquired in the province of Paraná by means of funds being placed in a deposit account in Germany belonging to the English organisation Paraná Plantations. These funds guaranteed a visa to Brazil. It also meant that the funds did not have to leave Germany, which was also banned as a rule under the currency regulations. The English interests in turn used the funds deposited to

⁹⁰ Frank Bajohr, ‘Aryanisation’ in Hamburg, *The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of their Property in Nazi Germany*; New York 2002, page 256 ff.

⁹¹ Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro, *Cidado do Mundo (2010)*, p. 181 ff., 2010. Peter Mainka investigated the large German settlement in Rôlandia in the province of Paraná in *Rôlandia – eine deutsche Siedlung in Brasilien im 20. Jahrhundert* (2008).

buy equipment from German industry in order to build a railway between São Paulo and Paraná. This meant that everyone involved gained from the transaction.⁹²

Various channels have been investigated to find out how Ilse Cohen (Wechsler) and in particular Efim Wechsler could establish themselves in Brazil. No information has been found to suggest that Ilse Cohen, her husband Wolfgang Cohen or Efim Wechsler were themselves involved in triangle traffic. Maria Carneiro refers to an archive about Schauff in Bolzano. No such archive has been found, and neither Südtiroler Landesarchiv nor Stadtarchiv Bozen are aware of any such archive⁹³. There are, however, some documents relating to Schauff at the *Kommission für Zeitgeschichte* in Bonn and a very extensive, well-organised archive at the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* in Munich. There is, however, nothing to suggest that there is any information about the Wechsler family in Bonn, and no information has been found in Munich.⁹⁴

Other material such as passenger lists and emigrant registers relating to the Wechsler family's emigration has been looked for in Hamburg. After the war and the flood in 1962, the shipping company *Hamburg-Südamerikanische Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft*, with which at least Efim Wechsler travelled, has no material remaining from that time.⁹⁵ Nor does the Emigrantmuseum BallinStadt in Hamburg have any material, and Staatsarchiv Hamburg states that there are no emigrant registers for the period 1935-1946.⁹⁶

But it is indisputable that emigration to Brazil was a common alternative for Jews in Germany. There can be little doubt that in Wechsler's case, this was facilitated by the efforts of the Sommerlath family.

In 2010, in connection with the attention surrounding the programme on the Swedish channel TV 4, the newspaper Expressen traced the retired judge Daniella Wexler. Efim Wechsler was the brother of her maternal grandfather. In an interview she explained that until that time she had lived under the impression that Wechsler had traded his factory in Berlin for a coffee plantation in Brazil.

At the same time, Daniella Wexler was aware that her family had some kind of connection with the Sommerlath family. On her blog she wrote a story under the heading *The Queen of Sweden and I*: "My mother left me seven cartons of letters and documents in which her whole life is stored. Even the water and electricity bills from all the places she lived. Among the papers I discovered a postcard with a picture of the king of Sweden and his wife. Just a postcard - but what was it doing there? So this is what my mother told me: Her father, my grandfather Yonah Wexler, had a brother in Berlin who was called Efim Wexler. Because of the hostile atmosphere in Germany, beginning in 1933, Efim decided the time had come to leave. In the newspaper, he saw a notice published by a German living in Brazil, an owner of coffee plantations. The man wanted to return to Germany and was looking for a business

⁹² See also Frank Bajohr page 123, with reference to Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Oberfinanzpräsident, 14, 27/11 1935.

⁹³ Communications to the author, 27/4, 28/4 2011.

⁹⁴ Communications to the author, 2/5, 4/5 2011.

⁹⁵ Information to the author, 26/4 2011.

⁹⁶ Communications to the author, 26/4, 2/5 2011.

owner who would be willing to exchange with him. They made contact. Efim, his wife and his daughter went to live in Brazil, and the German returned to Germany.”⁹⁷

It is not clear who Daniella Wexler means when she refers to “his wife”. Efim Wechsler’s wife Gitlia had died much earlier, and in the Brazilian immigration documents he is described as “divorced”.

At any rate, the issue was taken up at the same time by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz in an article entitled *The Makings of History / The metal maker and the coffee grower*: “Daniella Wexler has not yet opened all the cartons her mother left her; she’d rather paint. Queen Silvia’s spokesman says, rightly, that these events took place before her birth (she was born in 1943), and she never asked her father about his past. That’s not unusual because many German children did not talk to their parents about what happened then, but if that’s true, how was she able to tell Daniella Wexler’s mother that her father was the German who traded coffee plantations in Brazil for Efim Wexler’s metal plant?”⁹⁸

Here the newspaper had misunderstood the contacts. It must have been Daniella Wexler’s mother who had spoken of the contacts between “the German who traded the coffee plantations in Brazil for Efim Wechsler’s engineering company.” Still influenced by the TV programme, the newspaper summarised the situation as follows: “This week two women, one in Stockholm and the other in Jerusalem, discovered that the family stories they have known since childhood may be incorrect. This is the stuff that occasionally inspires books and films, but in this case, it’s generated widespread media coverage, because the woman in Stockholm happens to be Sweden’s Queen Silvia.”⁹⁹

13. The Brazilian properties

But one should not dismiss so readily the family tradition that Daniella Wexler had originally grown up with. The core of the matter was that a German businessman had advertised for someone who was interested in trading their company in Berlin for a coffee plantation in Brazil or - in other words - someone who was interested in becoming established in Germany in return for helping the other person to become established outside Germany. We shall take a closer look at the matter.

Walther Sommerlath had moved to Brazil for the first time on 1 July 1920. In 1925 he married Alice Soares de Toledo in São Paulo. Since before the First World War, his wife’s family had owned a coffee plantation, Fazenda Jangada, outside São Paulo. Over the

⁹⁷ www.quistberg.se, 11-12-2010, Historien om Sommerlath lever vidare [*The Sommerlath story lives on*]. www.expressen.se/nyheter/1.2242987/jag-visste-inte-att-koparen-var-nazist.

⁹⁸ www.quistberg.se, 11-12-2010, Historien om Sommerlath lever vidare [*The Sommerlath story lives on*].

⁹⁹ Haaretz 10/12 2010; <http://www.jewpi.com/the-makings-of-history-the-metal-maker-and-the-coffee-grower/>.

following decades parts of the plantation were owned by various branches of the family. In the 1920s the property was known as Fazenda Santa Joaquina.¹⁰⁰

On 30 November 1937 Walther Sommerlath served his notice to his employer in São Paulo, a company known as Acos Roechling, and he returned with his family to Germany with the intention of creating a new future in his old homeland. He found a new job at the company Röchling-Buderus in Völklingen in the Saar region. He was now established in Germany. Despite this, he returned to Brazil for a time in 1938, this time leaving his family at home in Germany.

According to Daniella Wexler's family tradition, Walther Sommerlath had advertised for a businessman in Germany who was willing to move to Brazil. The actual advertisement has not yet been located, but against this background Walther Sommerlath's business back in Brazil is understandable.

According to official Brazilian documents, Walther Sommerlath was now involved for a short time in a number of land acquisitions within the family's Santa Joaquina coffee plantation. On 16 May 1938, he acquired around 19% of the plantation together with his wife, and acquired just over another 1% on 17 March 1939. The couple now owned more than 20.5% of the property, and the total price of the acquisition was around 32 million réis.¹⁰¹

Those who had transferred the plots of land were all members of his wife Alice Sommerlath's immediate family, de Toledo. They consisted of her siblings and a sister-in-law. All transactions thus involved a relatively close circle of family members. This meant that Walther Sommerlath had quite a significant property portfolio at his disposal – even though he had moved to Germany. This is where Efim Wechsler comes into the picture.

On 29 April 1939 a number of people gathered in a notary's office in São Paulo to complete a property transaction. According to the minutes, the seller was the German citizen Walther Sommerlath and his wife, the Brazilian citizen Alice de Toledo Sommerlath, currently resident in Völklingen, Germany. They were represented at the meeting by the lawyer Carlos Eduardo de Toledo, brother of Alice Sommerlath. The buyer was recorded as the German citizen Efim Wechsler, divorced and also resident in Germany. Wechsler was in turn represented by the lawyer Octavio Mendes Filho. The mediating party was the lawyer Luis Augusto Teixeira de Assumpção.

It was noted initially that the sellers, Walther and Alice Sommerlath, owned 20.5% of Fazenda Santa Joaquina in the municipality of São Manuel. This proportion represented the land that had been acquired a short time previously with the aid of the family. The plantation included a main building, house for the manager, generator building, coffee plantation, installation with steam machine, yard for drying, fruit orchard, livestock and miscellaneous chattels. The Sommerlaths were also stated to be the owners of three shares in Condomínio de Santo André. The nominal value of these shares was 5 million réis per share. Condomínio Santo André was a shared property, covering a plot of land of one million square metres. It

¹⁰⁰ Oficial de registro de imóveis, títulos e documentos e civil de pessoa jurídica. Comarca de São Manuel, Estado de São Paulo 30/6, 16/8, 22/9 1915, 27/11 1919, 9/2 1926, 5/5, 12/5 1931, 31/10 1932. The family archives.

¹⁰¹ Oficial de registro de imóveis, títulos e documentos e civil de pessoa jurídica. Comarca de São Manuel, Estado de São Paulo 16/5, 16/5, 16/5 1938, 17/3 1939. The family archives.

bordered the Capuava railway station, which belonged to the São Paulo Railway Company, in the municipality of Santo André.

It was thus confirmed that Walther and Alice Sommerlath not only sold their share of Fazenda Santa Joaquina to Efim Wechsler for 40 million réis, but also transferred to Wechsler the three shares in Condomínio de Santo André for an agreed price of 30 million réis. The seller's representative certified that the buyer had transferred the amount to them, which also meant that Wechsler assumed full ownership of the assets. All parties declared themselves satisfied with the agreement. Finally, Sommerlath's lawyer Carlos Eduardo de Toledo announced that the next coffee harvest was excluded from the agreement. As it was imminent, the commitment meant that the seller was responsible for the costs of the actual harvest.¹⁰² The transfer of Fazenda Santa Joaquina to Efim Wechsler was registered in the official property documents on 10 June 1939.¹⁰³ The chronology during these hectic days is of particular interest. On 21 April 1939 Wechsler had been given his passport, and on the 29th of the same month the agreement was concluded in São Paulo. At the same time Firma Wechsler und Hennig was transferred into the ownership of Walther Sommerlath. The earliest official documents confirming this date from the first few days of May. On 24 May Wechsler registered his intention to emigrate to São Paulo, and two days later the company was entered in the official trade register in Sommerlath's name. On 10 June the plantation was then registered in Wechsler's name, and one week later he travelled from Hamburg. Desire, planning and luck were all required for all of the pieces of the jigsaw to fall into place in this critical situation.

Even though it is presented as an exchange transaction, it would of course be interesting to obtain a more detailed value of the components involved. It is not easy to define a comparable value for the Brazilian currency of the time because of the numerous changes in exchange rates in recent times, but since the gold standard had been abandoned in 1933 the réis was linked to the US dollar. The exchange rate was 12,000 to 1 US dollar.¹⁰⁴ The relationship with the German Reichsmark is interesting, because of the various transactions in Germany. It can be mentioned in this context that Germany, following the hyperinflation of 1923-1924, introduced the gold standard, and the Reichsmark thus had a fixed rate in relation to the US currency corresponding to 4.2 Reichsmark for 1 US dollar.¹⁰⁵

It must be emphasised here that these base data are extremely uncertain, but if the exchange rates mentioned above applied in 1939, 2,857 réis would have corresponded to 1 Reichsmark. The official value of the Santa Joaquina coffee plantation and the share in Santo André totalled 70 million réis. This amount would have represented something in the region of 25,000 Reichsmark.

Wechsler was now the owner of a significant part of the coffee and the tree shares in Santo André and could thus consider himself established in Brazil. But he had other plans. On 21 December 1939 he transferred the whole coffee plantation to Alice Sommerlath's brother-in-

¹⁰² Tabelião pedroso 29 abril 1939; Décimo Tabelião de Notas; Raimundo da Costa Tudeia, São Paulo. The area of Fazenda Santa Joaquina was quoted as being "25 alqueires /'barrels', ¾ and 900 square metres".

¹⁰³ Oficial de registro de imóveis, títulos e documentos e civil de pessoa jurídica. Comarca de São Manuel, Estado de São Paulo 10/6 1939. The family archives.

¹⁰⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazilian_real_\(old\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazilian_real_(old)) 12-07-2011.

¹⁰⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reichsmark> 13-07-2011.

law, Jose Baptista de Almeida Barbosa. This was the same man who had, the year before, acquired large parts of the plantation. The official price of the property was quoted as 30 million réis.¹⁰⁶ He did, however, keep the property in Santo André until 1941. It had a relatively attractive location in the centre of São Paulo, and it was in due course used by major industrial companies.

Wechsler, who had experience in the field of engineering, soon started work at a factory in São Paulo, and in 1943 he moved to Rio de Janeiro. At the time he had sufficient funds to buy a plot of land in the city, where he built a house and a small workshop.

All of these transactions, with precise details of the plot, seller, buyer and price are recorded in the official documents. But it is, of course, not possible to ascertain whether there was actually any exchange of cash funds in connection with all of these transactions. All indications are that this was an agreement that had been put in place to compensate Wechsler for the takeover of Firma Wechsler und Hennig and to make it possible for Wechsler to establish himself in Brazil. The price of Firma Wechsler und Hennig was thus quite simply the plantation and the land in Santo André, and these assets in turn created the conditions for Wechsler eventually to become established with his workshop in Rio de Janeiro.

It may be recalled that after the war it was possible to apply to the German State with claims for compensation for economic damage suffered during the period of the Third Reich. In 1949 Wechsler did apply to the relevant authority, *Wiedergutmachungsamt*, with a claim for compensation for his property on Belle-Alliancestrasse. But he never submitted a claim for compensation for Firma Wechsler und Hennig. It is not unreasonable to assume that he considered that payment had already been made for the transfer.

The matter of continued contacts between Efim Wechsler and Walther Sommerlath after the war is not so easy to resolve. In a letter to Walther Sommerlath in December 1946, Johanna Bongertmann had asked whether he had Efim Wechsler's address in Brazil. She clearly thought that they were in contact.¹⁰⁷ In August 1947 Sommerlath told her that he had visited Rio de Janeiro. He might not have met Wechsler, but he was able to tell her that Wechsler was living in the city and that he was well.¹⁰⁸ It will have to suffice to note the known facts that Johanna Bongertmann, who had worked closely with both of them, assumed that they were still in contact, and that fairly soon after arriving in Brazil Walther Sommerlath had ascertained Wechsler's presence in the country.

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¹⁰⁷ Bongertmann 15/12 1946 to Sommerlath. The family archives.

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