

HERBERT MOHR-MAYER

VICTOR MAYER (1857–1946)

HUMOROUS, DILIGENT AND
SOCIALY CONSCIENTIOUS

THE LIFE AND WORK OF A GERMAN
JEWELLERY MANUFACTURER
FROM PFORZHEIM

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Title picture: Portrait of Victor Mayer, oil on canvas, 1937.
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THE PREAMBLE

THE HAIGERLOCH PREDECESSORS

My grandfather told of times when there was neither electricity nor cars, and his father, Eduard from Haigerloch, moved with the post carriage from the baroque residence city of the Princes of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen to Baden when his home town fell to Prussia in 1849. For the son of a pharmacist, separation from Haigerloch was painful, as the Mayers were seen there as being among the well-established bourgeois families. They were recorded in the church registrars as pharmacists, master rope makers, saddler masters, councilmen and teachers. The family even had a cleric in their midst: Father Desiderius Lenz, the founder of the “Beuroner Art”. If a stroke of lightning and the French had not burnt all church registrars in the years up to 1720, the family history of the Mayers could have been traced way back to the Habsburg era. Naturally, like the Habsburgs, the Mayers were strict Catholics – with just one exception.

The parents of Victor Mayer’s great grandmother, Uri Kinzinger and Judith, née Odenheimer, were of Jewish belief.² Nevertheless, the genealogists were uncertain, as the ruling prince Joseph Friedrich forced all Haigerloch Jews to convert or to move away. Most of them left the principality, but ours remained, professed the so-called “Jewish unfaithfulness” and were christened in the Catholic faith IN CUMULO 1754 in the Castle Chapel of Haigerloch. His Highness the ruling prince personally accepted the god parenthood for this great grandmother and gave her the Christian first name of the Countess of Zollern, Anna Maria.³ In the “cabinet discussions”, my grandfather only mentioned these things in passing, but we grandchildren were able to read these things from his demeanour and later on in the still existing church registrars.

In the age of National Socialism, family members – for fear of discrimination and persecution – wanted to hide their Jewish predecessors. In a rash moment, they simply cut out the revealing pages from the family tree of the Mayers and were

2 Family tree of Heinz E. Henninge, Haigerloch, summarised.

3 According to the church registrar of Haigerloch, the Jew Uri Kinzinger was christened in the Castle Chapel of Haigerloch on July 21, 1754, together with his four children. The previously deceased Jewish spouse Judith is mentioned in the church registrar on an inserted sheet. Only the original first name of the father is mentioned. Uri Kinzinger received the christened name Meinrad after the prince of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen.



Bonaventura Mayer, née Braun (born 1821 in Rottweil, died 1886 in Pforzheim). No photograph of Victor Mayer's father Eduard exists.

therefore able to provide a flawless “proof of Arian heritage”.

In the world of jewellers and stone traders, the name “Mayer“ and the reference to the Jewish predecessor (the “drop of blood of the maternal ancestor”) were very helpful. For example, many doors in Belgium and Holland - faced with the German occupation during the Second World War - would otherwise have remained closed to me.

When my grandfather spoke of his father Eduard, he not only spoke of how he fled the Prussians into Baden in the revolution year 1849. He also did not fail to mention how Eduard Mayer so to speak “en passant“ picked up his lover, Bonaventura Braun, in Rottweil,

perched her on the carriage and galloped off to the small Baden city of Pforzheim. In more precise terms, they never made it to the centre of Pforzheim, as they stopped off in the inn “Zum Kreuz“ in the suburb “Untere Au“ - although it would not have taken them much longer to get to the core city. The “Kreuz“ was directly adjacent to the confluence of the Enz and the Nagold. If one wished to overcome this barrier and get to the opposing core city, it was required that one paid a bridge tax. Was it the inherent frugality or more likely the Swabian snugness that prevented the beloved couple from continuing their journey? But most certainly the Swabian couple liked it so much in the Au with the Schelmenturm and the rural but very ordered suburban milieu that they settled there. They took out a permanent lease, married in December 1849 and ultimately took over the inn “Zum Kreuz“. This inn was built in 1775 already, in front of the Auer Gate (so outside the city), in the direct proximity to the berth, the Wood Garden, as a semi-timbered house. This meant that the raftsmen were able to find a safe haven even after the “gates were closed”.

Over the years, the family became larger and larger. Bonaventura Mayer gave birth to a child almost every year, and, on December 1, 1857, Victor was born as the eighth child.⁴ In 1871, Bonaventura brought her fourteenth child into the world.

The following will describe the political, economic and cultural environment into which my grandfather and his siblings were born.

⁴ See family tree in the appendix.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE JEWELLERY CITY OF PFORZHEIM IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 19TH CENTURY

In the middle of the 19th century, the medieval raftsman and craftsman city of Pforzheim developed to become the most important industrial city in Baden. The infrastructure required for this was personally promoted by the ruler of the region.

The enlightened absolutist Margrave Friedrich,⁵ from 1806 onwards Grand Duke, was a remarkable mercantilist and granted his subjects extensive freedoms in order to drive forward industrialism. He benignly banned torture, allowed his subjects freedom of movement as early as 1783, loosened journalistic censure and laid the foundation for freedom of profession, which his successor paraphrased in 1862.

In founding the margrave's manufactory for "Watches, fine steel products, gems and jewellery" in the Pforzheim orphanage in 1767, the margrave so to speak sounded the starting bell for the establishment of the jewellery and watch industry within this liberal environment in the three valley city. Between 1787 and 1800, the Pforzheim citizens Kiehnle, Bohnenberger, Hepp, Schofer, Denning and others founded the first jewellery manufactories, known at the time as "Cabinets". The regional ruler promoted the construction of roads and schools and reorganised administration.

1877 saw the foundation of the Grand Duke's Arts and Crafts School. The job market offered sufficient skilled workers. There were refineries, precious metal and gemstone suppliers, tool dealers specifically for jewellery and all necessary suppliers for braces,⁶ pearls and chemicals.

The family Benckiser played an exponential role for the infrastructure of the city. This family of entrepreneurs excelled themselves as jewellery manufacturers,⁷ as managers of the "Oberer Hammer"⁸ and the tin plate smithy "Unterer Hammer" (since 1776) and as owners of an ammonium chloride smelter in the Bleichstraße⁹. As founding and supplier industry, the Benckisers were indispensable for the Pforzheim jewellery firms. In 1855, they provided the industry with wood gas for the first time in Pforzheim, supplied the city with Grössel Valley water, built water and sewage ducts and built bridges over the Enz. Unfortunately, the significance of the Benckiser families for the development of the Pforzheim jewellery and watch industry has been honoured far too little, given the dynamism, the inventor's spirit and the social conscience found within this large family which played a role model's function for the gold fabricants. My grandfather always spoke with great respect of the "Benckisers".

5 Period of government 1746-1811.

6 Braces are prefab, usually mechanical components for the jewellery industry, e.g. brooch clasps and ear pins, etc.

7 Jewellery and gold manufactory Benckiser since 1816.

8 Since 1752 blast furnace plant, iron foundry, machine factory and bridge construction company of European significance, in place of the current company seat of the firm Victor Mayer, Simmlerstraße.

9 Bleichstraße 78-88.

Later on, the firm Victor Mayer had several points of contact with the House of Benckiser: As early as in the Eutingenstraße 2, it purchased gas from the Benckisers, produced from 1884 onwards in Eutingenstraße 4; in 1904, it bought parts of the Benckiser property (chemicals factory) in Bleichstraße 88, and now, the firm Victor Mayer resides in Simmlerstraße 13–14, also formerly property owned by the Benckisers. Gas supply was of pivotal importance for the Pforzheim jewellery industry. Gas lamps replaced the oil lamps and industrial gas took the place of in-house carbide gas in order to solder and melt. A milestone in energy supply was the generation of electricity in Pforzheim from 1893 onwards and the supply of electricity to industrial businesses, which started in 1894. As early as 1895, 346 motors in 132 jewellery manufactories were connected to the municipal grid.¹⁰ Pforzheim was indeed one of the first cities in Germany that used electricity on an industrial scale. A new golden age unfolded in Pforzheim with the slogan “Ohne Gas kein Spaß – ohne Strom kein Lohn“ (No fun without gas, no wage without electricity) and the introduction of these modern sources of energy, of which Victor Mayer was also able to reap the rewards.

Construction of the Grand Duchy’s railway line Karlsruhe–Mühlacker in 1861 and the Nagold Valley Line to Lake Constance meant that Pforzheim was connected to the “world.” In 1883, the luxury train Orient Express from Paris to Constantinople halted for the first time in Pforzheim. Without the railway, Pforzheim could never have become a jewellery city of global standing. Neither customers nor suppliers would ever have laboured to the jewellery city in the Black Forest with poorly upholstered carriages on bumpy roads. Even the Pforzheim jewellery travellers would never have reached the wider world with postal carriages. Fast, safe and inexpensive dispatch of the finished jewellery would have been inconceivable without the post and the railways. Naturally, in the so-called good old days of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the railway was by no means a high-speed means of transport. If one considers that the Grand Duchy’s Baden Railway ended in the Baden terminus of Mühlacker and both travellers and baggage had to be lugged to the Royal Württembergische Terminus in order to continue journeys with the Württembergische Railway, one can catch a glimpse of how time consuming and arduous travelling by train could be. This charade was repeated numerous times on longer journeys as the German states consisted of many smaller principalities with numerous smaller, regional railways. Nevertheless, the steam locomotive represented huge progress and was several times more comfortable, safer and faster than the postal carriages operated by the Thurn and Taxis family. One could say that the railway heralded a new age and it was a godsend that the lines were planned to run through Pforzheim – to the benefit of our jewellery industry.

10 Timm, Christoph: Pforzheimer Bijouteriefabrikhäuser. Materialien zu einer Denkmaltopographie; in: Denkmalpflege in Baden-Württemberg. News Sheet from the State National Trust, 22nd year, edition 2/1993, p. 125–135.