

From Vienna to Treforest

by George Schoenmann

I would like to congratulate The Jewish History Association of South Wales/Cymdeithas Hanes Iddewig De Cymru on reaching the five-year milestone and am pleased to have been able to contribute to the work they have done.

My main focus has been concerned with the contribution that the Jewish refugees made to the economy of south Wales from 1938 onwards, and particularly the Treforest Trading Estate. I had a close involvement there, although I was only a child at the time, I was old enough to know what was going on and am fortunate in being able to remember it well.

Records show that there were 78 companies on the Treforest Estate in 1939, and 49 of them were owned and run by refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe. They provided employment for 3,881 people in the area and contributed greatly to the war effort.



*Graphic showing the location of General Paper &
Box Manufacturing Company Limited.*

But it was not only in Treforest that factories were established, and I want to mention other names and places in south Wales. The first that comes to mind is Merthyr Tydfil, and more specifically Dowlais, which was home to Welsh Products, who made Glamor Buttons, and also wooden toys. Close by was OP Chocolates, famous for their chocolate covered wafer biscuits.

A little nearer to Cardiff in Caerphilly were Western Gloves, and on the same site Western Fabrics. Another glove maker was Polya in Pontypridd. Then in the Rhondda Valley we had Porth Textiles, and Wilpak, who made cardboard boxes. Further up the Valleys were Sobell in Hirwaun, who made radios, and later television sets. In Cardiff itself we had Gnome Photographic Products, who in later years became the leading manufacturer of enlargers for amateur photographers, and there were a lot of them in the days of black and white film photography. Although there were other factory estates further westward in south Wales, I am not aware of refugees settling there, but I may be wrong, and apologise for any omissions.

A question often asked is why did all these refugees come to south Wales? There was a very good reason for this. South Wales was a very depressed area, being dependant on coal and steel-making for employment, and the government was keen to establish light industry in the area, and had built a large number of factory units, ready for this, but due to the depression of the 1930s, takers were few and far between. So when the Jews of Central Europe were forced to flee from Nazi persecution, and applied for visas to come to Great Britain and bring their knowledge and expertise with them, the Government would only grant permission for settlement in certain areas. I believe that the choice was between southern Scotland, Tyneside, Cumbria, and south Wales. Of these the least worst option was south Wales. Which is why we all settled in and around Cardiff.

The families all knew each other and tended not to mix too much with the local population, for several reasons. The main one of course was the language difficulties. The main common language was German, as even the Czechs all spoke German, as nearly all who came over had been born before the establishment of Czechoslovakia as a country and was part of the Austrian Empire.

The other problem was the curfew. Germans and Austrians were classed as enemy aliens, and subject to a curfew at 7.00pm, and so could not go out after this time. They were not allowed to own a camera or have a radio. They had to report weekly to the local police station. They were also subject to internment on the Isle of Man. My father managed to avoid this, as he was an essential employee, and his firm could not function without him. These restrictions did not apply to Czechs, as they were classed as immigrants from a friendly country. There was a real fear that Nazi spies had arrived with the influx of Jewish refugees, and I suppose some did get in, but I did not know of any!



Company signs in Vienna and Treforest.

My father was the guiding light behind one of the leading companies, called General Paper & Box Manufacturing Company Limited, which was taken over by Rizla when the war ended. As our family left Vienna in April 1939 with 10 Reichsmark (equivalent to £5,00 at the time) he only had a 10% shareholding, and when the offer from Rizla came in 1948 and the majority of the shareholders accepted it, he remained in the position of managing Director. But after three years Rizla decided to dispense with his services. His health suffered, but despite this he started another company, this time making furniture. He never reached old age and died in 1967 at the age of 68.

My family are all very conscious of the efforts my father made to get his family out of Vienna and escape the holocaust, which devoured so many of those who did not leave—including my Grandparents.



My father, Paul Schoenmann.

I have written a book about it, and still have copies which I can sell at cost for £15.00 plus £4.00 postage, if anyone would like to read the whole story.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy please use the [Contact Us page](#).