

Guten Tag Attendorn! (Good Day Attendorn!)

By Lucy Mumford



The atmosphere in the group of awestruck teenage class-mates was electric, as they stood, eyes gleaming and hands shaking, within touching distance, of a 100%, genuine, antique treasure, that history tells us, should not still exist. The account they'd just heard of the chance discovery, after more than eighty years of loss, followed by a year of international detective work, was like something they'd read in an adventure story. It was sensational, it was real, it was here and this is the story.

Cwmaman, Aberdare, Rhondda Cynon Taf, September 2020 and lockdown was in its sixth month. Time at home for me, after my day at work as a key worker, was becoming increasingly dull and there was only one available release at this time, online shopping.

I have been known to spend a day at Pontypridd auction house, bidding on the odd lot or two, I received email updates and I noticed they were experimenting with online auctioneering, as they couldn't open, so I took a look.

I looked through the catalogue, of hundreds of lots, with some photographs and a brief description; a few items caught my eye. My furloughed son would be able to attend appointments to collect any won lots, a day after the auction finished. I chose to leave four cheeky bids, though I had been hesitant about one lot, "3 pictures in gilt frames", what exactly were they? Two pictures looked like chocolate box prints behind domed-glass the other looked

like a Mr Darcy type, from a country estate. He looked the part, so I gave in, thinking I'd probably get nice frames or nothing, whatever.

Auction day came, I came home from work and checked my emails. I did have an invoice from Pontypridd auction but I'd only won one lot, the one with the three pictures. My son phoned me at work on collection day, excited, saying "I think the picture of a man is a real oil painting!

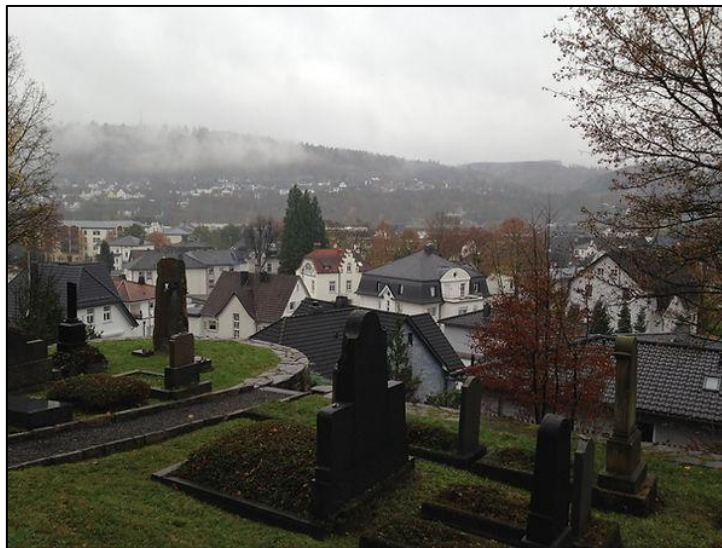
When I first saw the pictures, I could see they were all a bit old and dusty and the portrait caught the eye, it was an oil, result! Looking closer I could see it wasn't top class but done by a competent artist and there was some writing on the back. The writing was in italics and worn in places but the word "Berlin" and "1830" were clearest. I dusted the pictures, hung the portrait in my lounge and put the other two to one side until I knew where to put them.



I had a closer look at the portrait, hanging above the sofa in my lounge, magnifying glass in hand, looking for clues to its identity, the name on the back could be the artist but it was difficult to be sure exactly what it was. The shirt pin on the front was more revealing, it had a gold coloured arrow, pointing to the man's left, I know this meant protection. Sitting on the arrow was a short, squat creature, with a very long tail; I looked at German mythological creatures in an online search and there was one with a long tail called Bahkav, that had two versions, one dragon like and the other, short and squat, both with a very long tail. This beast harassed drunken men and lived in the sewers in Aachen, I thought the "drunken men" bit and "protection" would fit in with the broken nose that the man in the portrait appeared to have.

Something made me wonder if he could be Jewish, being German, but then again, he could be anyone from anywhere, a resident of Berlin.

I thought the people to know would be in Berlin's national art gallery, the Alte Nationalgalerie, and checked out their website, which was also available in English. I should say here that in my other reading and communications I initially relied on Google translate and later DeepL translator, which is more accurate. I sent copies of photographs of the front of the portrait and back to their "point of research and scholarly contact" and Holger Neiderhausen replied, saying they had passed my emails and observations to their research colleagues. Majka Cornelia Schielinski replied saying that the sitter was Mr Abraham Ursell 04/10/1802-25/12/1882), painted in 1830 in Berlin and that the painter was unknown in the Alte Nationalgalerie. She did send a link, <https://www.juedisch-in-attendorn.org/julius-ursell-weg/streckenverlauf-highlights-infos/station-7-die-firma-a-ursell/> which led me on my international research journey.



The Jewish Cemetery, Attendorn.

I translated the page into English and initially contacted Otto Hoffer, who is the Attendorn city archivist, he thought the picture could be a significant find, if it really was Abraham Ursell. His first question was "why was Abraham Ursell in Berlin in 1830?" Knowing now, what I learned about Berlin and Aaron Abraham Ursell, (who went by the name Abraham, though his father Abraham Aaron Ursell , went by the name Aaron) I suspect Abraham was in Berlin on business, sourcing metal for his factory, that amongst many things produced zinc and tin-plated wares. Berlin was known at the time for having many factories that processed metal ores.

Otto led me to Hartmut Hosenfeld, Tom Kleine and Anke Reinitz, who work as the [Juedisch-in-attendorn initiative](#). Hartmut has researched the Jews in Attendorn for 40 years, reinstating

their memory. He has written a book about them, which also has an English translation and kindly sent me a copy; this helped a lot in my research of the family and how the portrait could have ended up in Wales. Hartmut was awarded the Order of Merit Cross, for his work, the highest award a civilian can have in Germany, it is like a knighthood here.

The painting's journey had many leads, was it brought into the UK by family members fleeing Germany in WW2? I researched Segfried Ursell's journey here, as he was Abraham's grandson, he came here with his wife Helene, and daughter Ilse; his son Fritz Ursell was already doing post graduate wave research at Bristol University, after his Maths degree. I researched online and discovered Ilse and her mother had left a lot of restitution papers at The Keep, in Sussex University, as well as information online about the family. Ilse was now 98 years old and had suffered a stroke, but found a way to contact her, under her married name, Eton, and her children David and Rachel, who did say that they now do have relatives that live in Wales. They showed their mother a photograph of the portrait, I had sent them by email. Their mother definitely recognised the picture but couldn't remember who's house it had hung in, she had only been 16 when she left Attendorn. The family were sure the portrait would not have been sold or lost as David had a portrait of Mina, Abraham's daughter in law. If the painting had been seized by the Gestapo, as family members tried to save valuables by sending them out in crates, known as lifts, the portrait would have been destroyed, because it was of a Jew, slightly and it's style, would see it labelled as degenerate art. The SS guards had looted the family villas, they too would have destroyed this portrait. We checked the family import papers and restitution claim, just in case it was looted art. When finally we could get some access to the paperwork, thanks to the researchers at The Keep, the painting was not listed there.

I researched the painting's movements from this end, which was tricky due to data protection. I searched and searched and discovered that the painting had been at a restaurant in Cowbridge and had been bought by them in April 2011 from an English importer of Antiques and Folk Art from Europe. The antique dealer's digital records only start in 2012, information before then was sketchy.

I suspect the picture had been found in a wall, floor or attic of a house somewhere in Germany, undergoing repairs and ended up in the open market that way? Hartmut's book did mention that two of the grand-daughter-in-laws of Abraham, Else and Martha, had smuggled family valuables out to family and friends in Berlin, Munich, Dusseldorf and Cologne, in large suitcases, including to Martha's sister Dr Margrete Kahn, in Berlin, one of the first women in Germany to get a Phd and it was in Maths. None of these women lived to tell their tale, though much of the family valuables were recovered from family and friends, post war.

After much contact with Attendorn and the family descendants, I decided that the family should own the portrait collectively, it would be on permanent loan to the Sudsauerlandmuseum and in the care of the Juedisch-in-Attendorn initiative and that was agreed.

The story has come full circle, back to the teenagers, on the stage in Attendorn's town Hall, in front of the painting, after the big reveal, at the Shalom Attendorn 2021 festival. Abraham Ursell returned home in honour.

All images courtesy of Lucy Mumford.

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