

My search in the archives

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In June 1949 my freshly divorced mother and I arrived by plane from Budapest in Zurich. Mother's parents were waiting for us at the airport Zurich-Kloten. They had left Hungary before, grandfather in 1947, settling first in Geneva and then in Zurich in 1948. Grandmother followed in April 1949. My father, András Majtényi, stayed behind in Hungary until 1956. He was born in 1924, the son of a high ranking communist official, and at the time of the divorce held an important position in the ministry of Commerce and Trade.



Figure 1: My parents and me, 1949, before emigration

Thus began my life as an émigré and unwanted immigrant in Switzerland. I was 15 months old.

My mother remarried in August 1951. Her new husband, Gabriel Makowsky, was a well-to-do adventurous and temporarily successful entrepreneur involved in various forms of East-West trade considered by the Swiss political police as undermining the political order of Switzerland. Her marriage gave her a Swiss passport and a provider whom she liked and held in high esteem. Nevertheless, the authorities did not extend my residence permit and tried to expel me. After they realized that I was only three years old they relented. Mother's life as Ms. Makowsky started well. Her husband spoiled her generously as long as his resources allowed it.



Figure 2: My grandparents Deutsch, my mother and me, 1949, after emigration

However, his very lucrative East-West trade was caught in the spider web of the Cold War and ended in February 1953 abruptly with a search warrant by the Swiss police of his business and private premises. Furthermore, an article published in LIFE magazine, singling out Makowsky's company, TRACONT AG, in the heart of Zurich, at Fraumuensterstrasse 15, as the secret turntable of illicit East-West trade in non-ferrous metals, especially copper. However, a certain Josef Cremer was mentioned in the article as the sole owner of TRACONT AG. Makowsky's life style turned from high flight into spiral dive, crashing five years later when he shot a bullet through his head. In truth, my stepfather Gabriel Makowsky was the sole owner of TRACONT AG. He, Josef Cremer and Alexander Deutsch, my maternal grandfather, used TRACONT AG for their large scale trade in non-ferrous metals, providing East European countries with much needed raw materials. Their motives were only partially ideological and mostly profit driven.



Figure 3: My mother, stepfather and me, ca. 1954

Now I am 73, an emeritus professor of mathematics and theoretical computer science. I had long planned to write about this period. I inherited a vast collection of family material, letters, documents, photographs - enough to write several volumes inspired by my family history. I had even requested to look for traces of my family history from the Hungarian Historical Archive (HHA). At HHA one cannot search oneself but has to rely on their services and goodwill. To my surprise, over the years they did send me over 400 pages documenting parts of my true father's life. But this is another story. The Swiss Federal Archive (SFA) I had not searched until recently.

With my newly found free time I have decided to learn more about Makowsky's life. In 2020 I filled out the necessary forms to become a registered user of the SFA. This archive has a computerized database which can be searched by its users. One types in a word and gets a list of folders containing files which were indexed by this word. I typed MAKOWSKY. There were indeed several folders fitting my stepfather's name. One of them referred to my mother and me. I typed TRACONT. Again several folders were listed. I got curious. I typed my true father's name, MAJTENYI, a folder about my mother and me popped up. I typed DEUTSCH, ALEXANDER, my maternal grandfather's name. One more folder was shown. I decided to order those folders for inspection in the reading room of the SFA in Bern.

On my first visit in June 2021 there were few surprises. The folder concerning my mother and me, covering 1949-1957, contained basic information about us. It documented mother's infringements of residency permits, which became obsolete after her marriage to Makowsky. It contained all the passports and travel permits which were issued for me when I still carried my true father's name, Majtenyi. It finally documented my name change to MAKOWSKY, but without the documents attesting to my father's agreement. I know from stories both my mother and my true father told me later that obtaining my father's agreement to a name change had been burdensome and complicated, both because my father was reluctant to sign and because his lawyer had to come personally to Zurich to deliver the documents.

The folder about grandfather Deutsch contained extensive documentation about his infringements of residency and working permits. There were several attempts of the authorities to have my grandfather expelled from Switzerland. There were his and his lawyers' appeals, which were rejected in the first instance. There were appeals to the rejections, rejected as well. There was finally a decision by the Federal Council, the proper Federal Swiss Government, confirming

his definite expulsion, alleviated by a humanitarian clause. He was allowed to stay, due to his age, his and his wife's medical condition, and because he was the sole breadwinner and taxpayer in his family. This included my mother and me, after Gabriel Makowsky's suicide in February 1958. Grandmother died in February 1959, and grandfather followed in July 1959. My widowed mother and I were left in hostile Zurich on our own.

The SFA folders labeled GABRIEL MAKOWSKY and those with TRACONT AG showed a much more dazzling picture. Gabi was born in 1908 to observant Jewish parents from the region of Czarist Russia which was later re-born as the Polish Republic. The father, Wolf (Shual) Makowsky was a traveling salesman, and the mother, Sara, née Krischtal, was a housewife. Gabi became a naturalized Swiss in 1910 at the age of two. He was trained as a tailor and later had his own clothing store. He was known to the authorities since 1929. In the period until 1946 he was subject to 25 criminal investigations by the district attorney of the city of Zurich. The accusations ranged from arson by negligence to fraud and embezzlement. He was found guilty only twice, in 1929 and 1931. In all the other cases the charges were finally dropped. However, during this period, Gabi also went bankrupt and recovered and managed to buy back his debts from the creditors at a rate of 30%. In 1944 he joined the newly founded Swiss Communist Party (Partei der Arbeit, PDA) and founded his company TRACONT AG. He made good money with Love Packages (Solipakete), a socialist/communist version of the American CARE Packages¹, cooperating with the Central Sanitaire Suisse (SS). The CSS was founded during the Spanish Civil War as an association of medical doctors in solidarity with the Republican Cause. After WWII the CSS was mostly active in southern Germany, but TRACONT AG expanded its business to include Soviet occupied Germany and Austria, in direct contravention with Truman's policy of preventing trade with the Eastern block.

The rich collection of files dealing with TRACONT AG testifies to the hostility of the Swiss anticommunists among the political police manifested in the manner they searched for irregularities in Gabi's business practices. They are full of contradictory denunciations culminating in the accusation that Gabi was

¹ The CARE Package was the original unit of aid distributed by the humanitarian organization CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere). Originally CARE was dubbed the Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe, and in 1946 CARE sent the world's first CARE Package. Although "CARE Package" is a registered trademark, the term has since been widely adopted as a generic term for a parcel of food or supplies sent for relief or comfort purposes. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CARE_Package

an agent of the Soviet NKVD. Among other things, one document mentions that young Princess Helen of Mecklenburg, from the Russian branch of the Mecklenburg dynasty, seemed to be his accomplice and also an agent of NKVD. It turns out the source of this last item, was the father of the princess worried that his daughter was moving in leftist circles.

In the TRACONT folders I also came across the name JOSEF CREMER. Indeed, the search engine of the SFA confirmed the existence of several folders labeled with that name. Curious, I ordered these folders for my next visit at the SFA in Bern.

To my big surprise, Josef Cremer appears on the horizon of the Swiss Federal Police first in February 1951 in an abstruse case of espionage. It is the case of a certain Leo Diamant aka Leo Diamond. Typing LEO DIAMOND into the search engine yielded three folders. One of them was related to some American of the same name and had nothing to do with my story. The other two did.

One of these folders was marked “top secret” at the time but is now publicly accessible. It contains the details of a military trial, in which Diamant was sentenced to three years in prison for military espionage. He was collecting material and was caught photographing the alpine military airport of Saanen near Gstaad. The second folder contained the material documenting Diamant’s capture, and also documents the capture of two more foreigners, a woman, Ms. Jrene Fleischner, née Stern, and a man, Juda Friedmann. Diamant, Fleischner and Friedmann were uncovered as cooperating agents of the Czechoslovak secret service. They consistently insisted that Diamant and Friedmann did not know each other. In the DIAMOND folder all three of them admitted to knowing Cremer. Furthermore, Friedmann admitted, that only a few days before being arrested he met Cremer in Zurich, and that a few weeks before he had signed in Vienna a partnership agreement with Cremer’s company ERLCOM. In the agreement, Friedman and a certain Otto Lichnovsky made a commitment to grant ERLCOM a privileged status in trade relations with Czechoslovak state monopoly companies. Lichnovsky was later also identified as a Czechoslovak agent. The folder LEO DIAMOND contains extensive minutes of the interrogations of all of the four suspects. The minutes usually start with a statement of the detainee explaining to the interrogator who he was (or pretended to be). In all the interrogations Cremer keeps appearing, but Cremer remains elusive.

When arrested, Fleischner carries papers identifying her as Jrene Fleischner, née Stern, born January 7, 1919 in Zuaim, CSR. She also appears in the files as unmarried Jrene Stern. In the course of her interrogation she identifies herself

as Hermina Anna Schanelcova, born November 17, 1920 in Protivin, CSR. She was released from custody on March 13, 1951. The investigation could not find any illegal activity she committed on Swiss territory. The Federal Council issues an expulsion order with a humanitarian proviso that the expulsion can be delayed until a country is found where she can be deported to legally, without endangering her life or the life of her relatives. She was then interned under a modified name and identity as Hermine Chanel, born November 17, 1920, refugee, origin unclear. There are no folders in the SFA indexed FLEISCHNER or STERN relevant to our story. But there is a folder SCHANELCOVA. It documents her internment until her unexpected death on November 17, 1952. Only in the CREMER folders it is mentioned that she seemingly committed suicide.



Figure 4: Hermina Anna Schanelcova, 1952

At the moment of his arrest, Friedmann is identified as Azriel Novidwor², born February 24, 1910 in V. Berezny, CSR, Israeli citizen, resident of Tel Aviv. Friedmann also carries a passport of Juda Friedmann, born February 24, 1907, CSR citizen, resident of Brussels. In addition he appears as Julius Friedmann. He admits that his Israeli passport is forged and gets a two week prison sentence

² As for the name NoviDwor, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nowy_Dw%C3%B3r_Mazowiecki Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki, often simply referred to as Nowy Dwór, is a town in east-central Poland with ca. 42500 inhabitants (2008). It is situated in the Masovian Voivodeship (since 1999); previously, it was in Warszawa Voivodeship (1975-1998). It is the capital of Nowy Dwr Mazowiecki County.

for using a false passport for entering Switzerland. He is released and expelled from Switzerland, as he committed no other illegal activity on Swiss territory. There are no folders indexed FRIEDMANN or NOVIDWOR relevant to our story, but he plays an important role in the CREMER folders.

In the folders indexed CREMER, Josef Cremer reappears first in November 1951, when a policeman of the political police spotted by chance a man arriving by taxi to the Czechoslovak consulate, and after a few minutes left again with the same taxi heading to the office of TRACONT AG. A few hours later he left TRACONT AG walking to his nearby hotel. This man was later identified by the hotel porter as Cremer. In January 1952 the Federal Police is informed by their contacts with the French *2ieme Bureau* about a certain Kremer, an Austrian communist, who frequently visits Zurich. Further investigations identify Kremer with our Cremer. The Swiss police wanted to prove that Cremer was a dangerous foreign agent. As a consequence, the telex and telephone lines of TRACONT were wire tapped by order of the district attorney. In January 1953 the district attorney issued an order of arrest for Cremer who at the time is in Vienna. The attorney also issued a search warrant of the private premises of my grandfather, my stepfather, Cremer's Zurich residence. and for the premises of TRACONT AG. Cremer was finally arrested at Zurich airport in February 1953. My grandfather, stepfather and Cremer were thoroughly interrogated under suspicion of being agents of a foreign power engaging in acts undermining internally the liberal order of Switzerland and externally hostile to Switzerland as a neutral country. However, nothing alike could be found, so the political charges against all of them were dropped. Cremer and my grandfather received expulsion orders, and my stepfather, being Swiss, went free but entangled in problems with the tax authorities.

Between the date of the order for Cremer's arrest and his actual arrest, seemingly by coincidence (or may be not), the aforementioned article in the LIFE-magazine appeared. The author is David Duncan, then a world famous photo reporter working for TIME-LIFE. Searching the internet, I found his Wikipedia page and an archive in Texas, the Harry Ransom Center (HRC), holding Duncan's estate. Among the material in the HRC I found four boxes containing all the papers and rolls of film which form the basis of Duncan's article. The HRC was kind enough to digitize the contents of the four boxes and send it to me for a fee of 400 USD. Strangely, in December 1952, Duncan then in Zurich got hold of a transcript of some of the wiretaps of TRACONT AG documenting Cremer's involvement in the supposedly illicit copper trade

between Chile and Czechoslovakia. But Duncan does not disclose his source. In retrospect he must have obtained the transcripts through a cleverly engineered leak from the Swiss police. Duncan's article had enormous repercussions worldwide reinforcing the view that the Swiss would do anything for money as long as it was done discretely. Duncan's article was addressed to three senior appointees of the newly elected American president D.I Eisenhower: his foreign secretary John .F. Dulles, his United States High Commissioner for Germany James Conant, and his director of Mutual Security Agency and Foreign Operations Administration Harold Stassen. The article appeared duly timed, just a few days after Eisenhower's inauguration. It was meant to draw attention to the discrepancy between the professed principles of the Truman doctrine of the Cold War and the reality on the ground. The article was probably written on the initiative of Senator O'Connor, head of a committee investigating illegal trade and commerce under the Truman administration. O'Connor had held hearings uncovering these discrepancies. However, ultimately, it had no serious effect. There were too many contradicting interests at work. The Truman doctrine remained a facade behind which free trade prospered.

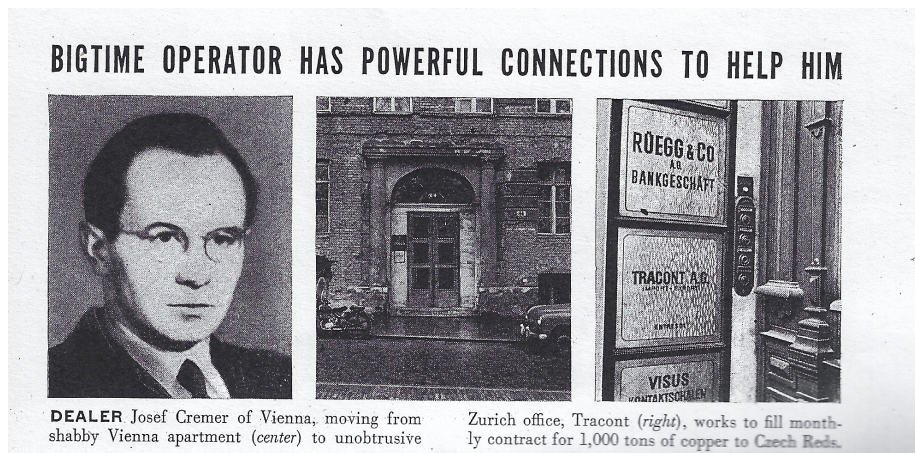


Figure 5: J. Cremer and Tracont AG, as shown on the LIFE article

The Swiss were not too worried about implementing the Truman doctrine. They were worried about the possibility that some or even all of the profits of firms like TRACONT AG would be used to finance the Swiss Communist Party, or even worse, to build hostile networks of agents threatening the liberal and not so liberal systems of the so called Free World. The head of the Federal Justice

Department, Federal Council Feldmann, explicitly asked the Federal Police to investigate this aspect. However, they failed to obtain any evidence in this direction.

My studying of the documents in the SFA and the HRC left a deep impression. I learned a lot about my grandfather and my stepfather, although without major surprises. I encountered three personalities of whom I had not heard before, Leo Diamant, Hermine Schanelcova, and Josef Cremer. They conquered my heart and imagination.

In the following I want to tell their stories staying as close as possible to the details which are documented in the archives. However, I take the liberty to expand their stories bridging the gaps left by the documents by using my own imagination and background knowledge of the period. There will be plenty of ambiguity, but my tale will be always guided by my own empathy.

For all these protagonists the Big Patriotic War ended in May 1945. They were all adults at that time. All of them had to rebuild their lives. In 1950 they were all somehow involved with Josef Cremer. Their biographies stand out as examples of lives traumatized by World War II, illustrating how these lives were shaped through the beginnings of the Cold War.

My grandfather, a Hungarian of mosaic faith born in 1887 in the Hungarian kingdom, became a leading Hungarian industrialist. He was arrested by the occupying Germans in March 1944 and eventually deported to Berlin, where he was interned with other Hungarian industrialists and forced to help prepare the restoration of postwar German economy. He was liberated from detention in Berlin by the Red Army. He returned to Budapest and found his wife and daughter safe and alive. His son had spent the wartime studying in Switzerland.

My stepfather, of Jewish immigrant parents was born in 1908 and became Swiss in 1910. He was safe during the war. Being Swiss he served in the Swiss army. At the end of the war he grabbed opportunities in the emerging postwar economies in occupied Germany, Austria and Palestine.

Leo Diamant, an Austrian Jew, born in 1922 in Vienna, spent the war in England and Australia and returned to Vienna in search of riches but failed. A seemingly naive amateur spy recruited by Schanelcova, he triggered a chain of unexpected events.

Hermine Schanelcova, a proud Czech with a Czech father and an Austrian mother, born in 1920, was in Prague when the Red Army liberated the city. Having only German papers she risked deportation to Germany according to the Benes decrees. She joined the Czech secret service to avoid her deportation.

Caught accidentally by the Swiss police, she is the tragic figure in this tale. She was introduced by Friedmann to Cremer as Jrene Stern, and this is how she met Diamant. Friedmann turned her into Jrene Fleischner until the Swiss police identified her as Hermine Schanelec.

Josef Cremer himself, an Arian German born in Köln in 1916, spent most of the war in various prisons and concentration camps due to his antifascist and socialist activities. He was liberated by the Americans in Dachau. He is the slick indestructible Jack of all trades. He was the business partner of my grandfather and my stepfather. He was a business partner of Friedmann. He was a temporary patron and possibly lover of Jrene Stern. And he was a business acquaintance of Diamond whom he also introduced to Jrene Stern.

Juda Friedmann is the mysterious man behind Cremer and Schanelcova. We know very little about him besides what Schanelcova and Cremer reveal. It seems to me the Swiss police let him go too quickly. His fate during WWII remains unclear. However, he provided the link to KOVO, the Czech state monopoly company trading in raw materials and to the Czech secret service acting as a middleman.

There are two investigators who stand out on the Swiss side: Inspector Maurer of the Federal Police and Police Private Schoch of the Cantonal Police of Zurich. They found the links leading from Diamant to Schanelcova and Friedmann, and later to Cremer, my grandfather and my stepfather, and Maurer coordinated the interrogations of all of them. The results of their investigations look at first sight very impressiver, but Maurer's obsessive search for the agents of the communist world conspiracy did not allow him to grasp the true nature of his discoveries.



Figure 6: Reynold Tschäppät

Reynold Tschäppät, a prominent politician of the Swiss Social Democrat Party, was in charge of Hermine Schanalcova during her internement. He was, under the head of the Swiss Foreign police, Heinrich Rothmund, vice-director of the department of refugees of the Federal Ministry of Justice. Whereas Rothmund was xenophobic in general and responsible for the harsh treatment of Jewish refugees trying to enter Switzerland during WWII, Tschäppät in our story, represents the humanitarian side.

Sources

All the material used here is from the Swiss Federal Archive

- (i) Dossier E4264#1988/2#31259*, Deutsch Alexander, born 04.06.1887
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- (iv) Dossier E2001E#1967/113#12476*, Tracont AG, Zürich
- (v) Dossier E2001E#1000/1571#1743*, Tracont AG, Zürich
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- (xiii) Dossier E4320B#1990/133#2178*, Cremer, Josef, born 1913
- (xiv) Dossier E7160-03#1968/108#24*, Cremer, Josef