

Friedrich Weil, The End of a Wine Merchant's Business (Retrospective Account)

Abstract

Before the state introduced legislation in 1938 to end all Jewish participation in the economy, many Jews continued to maintain their day-to-day lives, operating their businesses in spite of increasing pressure and constraints. For many, their businesses had connected them to both local and more distant networks of colleagues and customers through which they established meaningful, long-term relationships. As government and public pressure mounted, it became increasingly difficult for these business owners to maintain their partnerships. Over time many Jews discovered that although their personal and business relationships were strong, most "Aryan" business owners proved unwilling to take a stand against the racist policies, choosing instead to sever ties with Jewish businesses. In this excerpt, wine merchant Friedrich Weil describes his own experiences with this process, including his recollections of businesses that cut ties with his company, often while expressing their regret at the situation. Yet contained within Weil's account is a hint of humanity, the lament that behind the racial state, there lay hidden another Germany, one simply lacking the courage to stand by Weil when he needed it.

Source

From August 1935 to May 1938, I worked as a wine commission agent, primarily in the Rhineland and in the southern German wine-growing regions. My work consisted of continuing the wine commission business my father had founded and which my two late brothers had been running. After my own wine business was destroyed during the Nazi hate campaign, I devoted myself once more to the family business. This gave me the opportunity to work closely with both the wine's producers and its large-scale consumers, particularly Germany's sparkling wine manufacturers. For the producers I was the purchaser and for the sparkling wine manufacturers I was the supplier. It was my responsibility to distribute the right wines for their respective purposes. I served as an agent for both sides, and because of my more than forty years of practical experience I enjoyed everyone's complete trust. I am certainly not exaggerating when I say that this trust, particularly that between the wine growers and me, can almost be called patriarchal. The trust continued to show itself in the final years, from 1935 to 1938, when all economic activity on the part of Jews was suppressed in a wave of unparalleled ruthlessness.

In order to practice my profession I needed a so-called traveler's identity card, which I received from the responsible authorities every year until 1935. In 1936 the now entirely politicized police refused to give me the card without offering me any explanation whatsoever. When I filed an oral complaint, I was given the rude response: "You are a Jew, and as a Jew you cannot be trusted in the exercise of your profession." I turned to the chamber of industry and commerce, and after five days a policeman brought my new identity card to me.

In 1937 I had the same problem. This time my complaint resulted in a thorough search of my office and my private rooms during my absence. They slit open my mattress. My office assistant—who had left my services six months previously—was interrogated for hours about my business ethics, my personal relationships, my foreign contacts, and where the hidden foreign currency could be found. After eight days I was once again given an identity card.

In this way I remained active in the German economy until I was suddenly sent to a concentration camp along with two thousand other German Jews on June 13, 1938. Up to this point I had been working the

same way I had over the previous forty years. In recent years I had had to deal with bigger and bigger problems. I embraced the struggle out of a sense of justice, but tyranny won the day, and justice had to hold its tongue. Leading sparkling wine companies, with whom I had maintained the most cordial relations for more than forty years, invited me to private meetings in which they explained to me in the frankest possible manner how they had been forced to dissolve this decades-old, pleasant and proven business relationship. For instance, in 1937 the Henkell Trocken company in Wiesbaden informed me through its first chairman, Director Ickrath, that it could no longer maintain its contacts with its Jewish suppliers. The personal relationship they had to the regime, namely through the marriage of one of the owners' daughters to Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, left the company no choice. They not only expressed their personal regret over the necessary dissolution of this business relationship, but also confirmed to me that the Henkell Trocken company would suffer a greater financial loss than I would, since they had always had the greatest confidence in me and knew that the company always received the best and most suitable wines. But now the company had to send a task force of six to eight of their own people into the production areas to test the wines on site, and I could imagine, they said, that this could not occur "without damages" to the company. Other equally large firms suggested that I hire an "Aryan" as camouflage, so that the company could present itself as an Aryan firm in its invoices, shipping bills, and so on. I refused categorically.

After receiving not a single order from my Aryan customers between December 1, 1937, and March 1, 1938, I decided to emigrate to America, where my three adult sons had been working for many years. On April 16, 1938, I sold my house in Frankfurt am Main. On May 8, 1938, I traveled to the American consul in Stuttgart to enquire about the necessary formalities. I did not neglect to mention that I had already been convicted by the Nazis, and I brought the conviction with me. The vice-consuls showed great interest in my case and promised me—in a nonbinding manner, of course—that they would take a sympathetic look at my application. I should provide a good affidavit, and then the case would not be a problem.

Upon my return to Frankfurt am Main I received a printed form from the Party office asking me if and when I would sell my business to Aryans, liquidate it or otherwise dissolve it. They demanded an answer within eight days. Instead of giving them an answer, I went to the local court the next day and had my firm extinguished. At the same time, I reported this fact to the responsible chamber of industry and commerce.

At the end of the proceedings, the court secretary, who issued the certificates, asked me into the adjoining room. He said he wanted to place the official stamp on the document, but in reality he wished to speak with me for a few minutes alone and without witnesses. After the door shut behind us, he told me how sorry he was to have to extinguish this highly respected firm; but I should realize that, deep down, not all Germans thought the way they were unfortunately forced to act. He gave me encouragement and wished me the best of luck from the bottom of his heart—and said he hoped I would soon witness "the retribution of the German people!"

I said farewell privately to some of my clients, and some of these visits became quite dramatic. They deeply regretted my decision, which they recognized as the only possible option open to me under the circumstances, and they basically asked me for forgiveness. Three times I was told the following in the private offices of the heads of large firms: "You should be glad that you can leave; I would be delighted if I could change places with you, because then I would leave this dump in a minute and travel abroad, but we Aryans of draft age are no longer given permission to travel overseas."

At the same time, I saw plenty of evidence of virulent hatred on the part of the Aryan population toward the current brown regime. An old farm woman could not help shouting a pure German-style curse against the brown plague so loudly that I had to ask her to be more cautious in the future.

While I was speaking to this woman in front of her house, more and more farmers and their wives joined

us. When they learned that I was emigrating to America, they were at first very quiet, but then the most prominent among them said, “Who will see to it that we can sell our wine every year?”

Each of them asked me to come to their homes to drink a glass of wine with them. Since time was short, I had to refuse, but within a quarter of an hour eight women appeared, and each of them had a farewell present under her apron: butter, eggs, bread, kirsch, and a freshly slaughtered chicken. I was deeply touched by all this attention, and at the moment I said farewell and thanked them and was about to get into my car, the mayor’s daughter brought a bouquet of fresh mayflowers for my wife.

I still look back fondly on that hour in which old Germany sought to show me its true face one last time.

Source of English translation: Friedrich Weil, “The End of a Wine Merchant’s Business,” in Margarete Limberg and Hubert Rübsaat, *Germans No More: Accounts of Jewish Everyday Life, 1933–1938*. Translated from the German by Alan Nothnagle. New York: Berghahn, 2011, pp. 48–50. Republished with the permission of Alan Nothnagle.

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