

THE AUNT FROM VILLACH

My great grandmother Eugenia Wechsler né Engelhardt died in 1908 in Gorizia at the age of 42. She left behind her husband Hermann and three minors, Bruno, my grandfather Otto and Gisella. After Eugenia's death, her children spent the summers with "The Aunt from Villach" when Hermann Wechsler went about his business on mainland Europe. Family memory lead us to believe, that Hermann "dropped" of his children at an aunt's in Villach, Tyrol. Unfortunately family memory failed in remembering the aunt's name or who's aunt she actually was, just like it failed in remembering, where Villach actually lied. Like my elders and siblings, I never gave the woman's identity a thought and without an inkling of Austrian topography or history, the story never was questioned.

In 2011, I discovered how frail family memory was. Due to bad weather, we had to cancel a trip to "climb" the Jungfrau. Instead we decided to visit South Tyrol. Being bored with Meran, I suggested staying in Görz, which family lore remembered as the origin of Eugene's family in South Tyrol. It turned out, that Görz was not in South Tyrol, and so we replanned our route and discovered Villach on the way, which was not located in Tyrolia but in Carinthia. Remembering the story about "Aunt from Villach", we stopped over at Villach, visited the protestant church and searched the cemeteries looking for familiar names like Wechsler or Engelhardt, hoping in a naive way, I would stumble over a clue to my grandfather's time in Villach. Without avail. I reasoned that the lack of clues probably meant the "Aunt from Villach" was married and went by another name than Wechsler or Engelhardt and put the case to rest.

A few months after our visit to Villach, I discovered a copy of my great grandfather's probate records in the National Archives of Britain. The records contained papers referring to a custody case entered around the orphaned Wechsler children. According to the documents, the three Wechsler orphans were living with their aunt Emilie Engelhardt, Eugenia's sister. According to the records, she had been taking care of the children after Eugenia's death in Alexandria, Egypt. The court determined that the children would be placed under the guardianship of Bension Ventura, brother-in-law of Hermann Wechsler and husband of Egizia Wechsler, Hermann's sister. As both Bruno and Otto were earning money as apprentices, there was enough for the orphaned family to remain in their own household, with Emilia continuing to care for them. Only a few months later the economic situation worsened when Bruno, the eldest of the three Wechsler orphans died after contracting Typhus. The household was dissolved and Gisella and Otto were placed with members of the Wechsler family. Gisella went to live with Egizia and Bension, while Otto stayed at the home of a Bensilum cousin. Emilia took up work with a family and faded into the distant haze of family memory.

Even though the records shed some light on who took care of the children after Eugenia's death, they did not confirm that Emilia was the legendary

"Aunt from Villach". Like Eugenia, she was born in Trieste, not Villach, so the "from Villach" couldn't refer to her place of origin. The probate records also offered no information to her whereabouts. Did she stay in Egypt or return to Trieste, or was did she relocate to Villach? The office of anagram and a letter from Adolphe Billep were able to answer these questions.

From the records of the Ufficcio di Anagrafe in Trieste, Emilia probably returned to Trieste. She emigrated to Villach October 19th, 1951, most likely to join her sister Anna, who, according to the anagrafe office had left Trieste as a young woman for Feldkirchen, a town close to Villach. In his letter to my father written in early 1957, Adolph Billep confirms this, by mentioning that he should visit Aunt Emilie, the last living Engelhardt sister, in Villach, Carinthia, who she was residing in an old age home. As the family was Lutheran, it was easy to locate this home, which is located in Waiern, on the outskirts of Villach in the direction of Feldkirchen. Further research shows, that Anna died in Waiern in 1947, as did another sister, Emma, who died in 1953. Anna remained unmarried all her life, Emma married Imre Boskowitzc in Budapest in 1908. The other Engelhardt sister, Adolph's mother, Maria, was the only one, who didn't "return" to Villach. She probably died in Braunschweig, where she spent her married life with Fritz Billep.

The riddle of the unknown "Aunt von Villach" was solved. Or was it the "Aunts from Villach"?

Sources

Estate of Hermann Wechsler. Special Court for Germans and Austrians in Egypt. Case #37 of 1916. Archive: The National Archives, Great Britain. FO 856/56.

Letter from Adolph Billep to Hermann Wechsler. Adolph Billep alias Peter Rendalen. Berlin, 1957.

Names

EUGENIA TERESA CAROLINA ENGELHARDT (1865, Trieste - 1908, Görz).

Daughter of Carl Engelhardt and Anna Bauzher (Baucer). Married to Hermann Wechsler, which whom she had four children: Egydie, Bruno, Otto and Gisella.

EMILIE JOSEPHINE ANNA ENGELHARDT (1873, Trieste - after 1957).

Daughter of Carl Engelhardt and Anna Bauzher (Baucer). Remained unmarried. Last place of residence was an old age home in Villach, Austria.

HERMANN WECHSLER (1865, Alexandria - 1916, Alexandria).

Son of Israel (Giacomo) Wechsler and Rosina Camerini. Married to Eugenia Engelhardt, which whom he had four children: Egydie, Bruno, Otto and Gisella.

ADOLPH BILLEP (1907, Braunschweig (assumed) - after 1957).

Son of Franz Billep and Maria Elisabeth Anna Engelhardt, sister of Eugenia Engelhardt and Emilie Engelhardt. Lived in Berlin. Was an actor and went under the pseudonym Peter Rendalen. Remained unmarried.

