UNBOWED;
GRANDFATHER AND HIS GERMAN CIGAR FACTORY

A radio documentary by Hella and Sandra Rottenberg
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Podcast:

Music

FELIX: A Jewish Russian Napoleon.

SANDRA: Very distant and very intimate.

MENNO: Grandpa is my beacon.

HELLA: The patriarch.

SASHA: He was the ‘Pasha’, the tribe leader.

SANDRA: April 2015, Seder evening. Isay Rottenberg’s grandchildren have gathered to celebrate Pesach; Jewish Easter.

Grandchildren singing

SANDRA: Grandfather Rottenberg is at the center of attention, because our cousins have made a discovery. In the New Israelite Weekly Journal, there was a call for
people who believe they have a claim on stolen Jewish property in former East Germany. On the published list of names, we find: Isay Rottenberg. As the owner of a cigar factory in Döbeln: Deutsche Zigarrenwerke AG.

HELLA: We didn’t know anything about this factory. We only heard about it once.

*Static radio sound*

TINI: Our father, born a Russian, and naturalized as a Dutchman in 1929, had invested a large amount of money in Berlin. He worked in Döbeln, close to Dresden, where he ran a cigar factory that had 600 employees.

SANDRA: This is our aunt Tini speaking at my father’s funeral. She tells us about the panic that arose in Amsterdam when their father did not return home from Germany in 1933.

*Static radio sound*

TINI: Around 1933 there were only a few people in the Netherlands who thought about the events taking place in Germany. Our family, however, was confronted with a dramatic event at that time. Our father had suddenly disappeared. And we had no clue where, how or why. We assumed he was not alive anymore. Foreign affairs started working on the case and instructed consul Steenbergen in Dresden to conduct an investigation into the whereabouts of Dutch citizen Isay Rottenberg. After quite some time, I cannot remember how long, he was found in a prison in Dresden, close to death, with kidney stone disease.

*Piano music*

HELLA: We knew grandpa as the owner of the family business; the plastic straw factory, that he started
after the war and where both our fathers also worked. He travelled, read a lot and ran the factory. I lived next door to him and saw him every day. I loved no one as much as I loved him. When I was almost 16 and Sandra 11, he passed away. But what did I know about him? What did we, the grandchildren, really know?

SANDRA: We only knew that he spoke German and Russian. And, as we remember it, Dutch without an accent. That memory turns out to be not completely true. We can hear that when we listen to a recording from 1959, when grandpa turned 70.

Static

ISAY: ...with a singer, a pharmacy owner, Sol...
...This was a desert, there was nothing here. You could take the car, I lived here...

Background noise and voices

SANDRA: We knew he came from a big family with 12 children and that he grew up in Poland, which was part of Russia at that time. We know one story from his childhood: as a 13-year-old boy he successfully organized a strike at school against the exclusion of Jewish children. We also knew he had left Poland at a young age, lived in Berlin for a while and that he had ended up in the Netherlands sometime during the First World War.

Piano music

HELLA: Whenever we asked about his life, he refused to answer. The call for submitting a claim, leaves us with a lot of questions. Will we be able to find some answers to the missing pieces about his life before the Second World War? Would we, for example, be able to find out why our grandfather ran a factory in
Germany in the 30’s? And why was he still there after Hitler had come into power?

_Piano music getting stronger_

SANDRA: We started a quest. In the paperwork our parents left us, there was nothing to find. No letter, no document, no snippets of the time before 1940.

HELLA: We had almost given up, when we find about the imprisonment of our grandfather from the city archives of The Hague. The first thing we see when we open the files, is a letter from our great-grandfather, Abraham Ptasznik.

_Piano Music_

_Rustle of papers_

Ptasznik: Amsterdam, August 18\textsuperscript{th} 1935
To the department of foreign affairs, in ‘s Gravenhage

Sirs,
Thursday last I received word from Berlin, informing me that my son-in-law, Isay Rottenberg, a Dutch national, has suddenly been detained on the 13\textsuperscript{th} of this month in Döbeln, Saksen.
Despite the anti-Jewish government, that rules Germany since 1933, Rottenberg, Jewish himself, kept his company running at peace with the employees and authorities.
No plea from me is needed to convince you that the seriousness of the case calls for immediate action.
Sincerely,

A. Ptasznik

_Piano music_

SANDRA: Would we find more clues in Germany?
Piano music continues

Sound of train

Voices speaking German

SANDRA: This is the train heading to Döbeln, a little town in former East-Germany, 50 kilometers from Dresden. It’s a train that stops literally everywhere. But how did he end up in Germany? Why so far from home, from Amsterdam, where he lived? He became a Dutch national, he had a family with three children growing up, do you have any clues why?

6’44”

Sound of train

HELLA: Knowing what we know now, it makes you wonder why he would do that for god’s sake, why did he take such risks? But that is thinking in hindsight. I always saw him as a very aware person, who understood the potential dangers of the political climate I never thought of him as someone who would be naïve and who would stumble into situations. Does my image of him need to be adjusted? Did he not fully understand what was going on over there or did he feel so invincible with his Dutch passport, that he thought it would not affect him?

Accordion music

SANDRA: It’s gemütlich [cosy] in Döbeln center. We’re approaching the former town hall.

Sound of footsteps

HELLA: Here is the city archive.
SANDRA: We’re going to see *Ute Wiesner*, third floor.

*Sound of footsteps on stairs*

Knocking  
Door opens

SANDRA: *Gute Morgen* [Good morning]

*Ute speaks on the background*

HELLA: *Ute Wiesner* is archivist at the the city archive of Döbeln. She has laid out a big stack of newspapers from 1932-1935 for us.

Ute: *Ich habe ein mini kleine Leseraum, das ist nicht wirklich schön, aber da haben si ihre Ruhe* [I do have a small readingroom, not so comfortable, but here you can work undisturbed]

HELLA: At first Ute didn’t find anything in the archive about the *Deutsche Zigarrenwerke*. But when we provide her with additional search terms, she is keen to invite us back the next morning.

*Sound of door opening and closing*

SANDRA: Laid out on her large desk are eleven big folders. And they all contain documents on the cigar factory in Döbeln. The first folders say *Krenter Werke*. But on the other folders the name *Krenter* is crossed out and replaced by *Deutsche Zigarrenwerke*. It must be a few thousand pages.

*Papers rustling*

SANDRA: Look, here, this is about grandpa.

HELLA: Look at that, this is his letter head...
SANDRA: Berlin, Döbeln.. 

HELLA: ...and his signature.

_Ute:_ das sind Acten aus unserem Ratsarchiv die die Krenter Werke betreffen [these are the official papers from the city archives about the Krenter Factory]

**Music playin**

Man reading: _Berliner Tageblatt_, April 11th 1931
Krenter has opened a factory in Sachsen. Using fully automatic American cigar machines, this factory in Döbeln makes the first step towards mass production of cheap brand cigars in Germany.
For weeks advertising pillars and cigar shops showed large impressive posters reading 'The Indians are coming'.
Shortly after that, the Indians entered the market as cigars of 10 and 15 pfennig, wrapped in tasteful colored foil packaging.

**Music: ‘Wir rauchen nur Indianer’** [We will only smoke ‘Indians’]

Man Reading: _Illustrierte Industrie und Handelszeitung_, Berlin, November 1931

The Krenter Factory has expanded rapidly in its short existence. Currently they have over 50 machines and employ over 2600 people. They will expand the equipment to 100 machines and the yearly production will expand to 180 million cigars.

**Music: ‘Die Indianen sind da’** [Here come the Indians]

_Rustling papers_

_Ute:_ und dan gehts weiter, und das gibt noch [this continues, and here you find also...]
HELLA: This is the correspondence with the City Council.

Piano playing

Man reading: Meeting of the City Council of Döbeln, August 16\textsuperscript{th} 1932.
Krenter has filed for bankruptcy. The curator has taken over the buildings and the grounds. The factory is closed down.
There is also a letter from mister Rottenberg from Amsterdam.

Piano music

SANDRA: And that is a letter stating his conditions for taking over the company: 1,2,3,4 pages.

HELLA: The Krenter factory was built and bankrupt in no time. A big disaster for the city of Döbeln, leaving hundreds of families without income. They look for an entrepreneur to relaunch the company. Isay Rottenberg, a merchant from Amsterdam, sees an opportunity. He starts negotiating with the city and takes over the Krenter cigar factory in August of 1932. It’s registered in the trade register as Deutsche Zigarrenwerke A.G.

SANDRA: A short half year later, on January 30\textsuperscript{th} 1933, Hitler assumed power. We flip through the local newspaper; the ‘Döbelner Anzeiger’.

HELLA: Here it is. March 11, 1933. Some SA people [\textit{strong arm men of the Nazi’s}] came into his factory and occupied it for a few days. It says here… Uberal SA patrouillen und in besonderen waren SA posten für jüdische Firmen aufgezogen [SA patrols everywhere, especially in front of Jewish companies]
SANDRA: How does this make you feel? Why in god’s name did grandfather Rottenberg stay here?

HELLA: When you read the newspapers and see the atmosphere in that town, then you know it’s bad from the moment that Hitler is in power. SA men are in the streets, Nazi flags are raised, Jewish shops are harassed, SPD mayors are deposed, Nazi’s are named everywhere and our grandfather is in his factory, stays there, and does what he came here for. Which is running a factory producing cigars.

13’50”

Footsteps on stairway
Pop music

SOPHIE: Hallo, Ich bin Sophie. [Hi, I am Sophie]

CONNIE: Ich bin Connie. [My name is Connie]

SANDRA: Stefan Conrad, also known as ‘Der Connie’, is 30 years old and Sophie Spitzer is 26. They work with youngsters at the Treibhaus, the alternative cultural center in a former hotel in the Bahnhofstrasse in Döbeln. Here they organize debates, lectures and concerts. You can print T-shirts, take a cooking class, practice with your band or meet your friends at Café Courage.

HELLA: Connie and Sophie are unraveling the Nazi-history of Döbeln. How do they look at this part of history, being East German youngsters? They are the force behind the history team Döbeln im Nationalsozialismus. They are interested for two reasons. In the times of the DDR there was plenty of attention for the communist resistance to the Nazi’s, but there were no answers to inconvenient questions. Now the younger generation wants to know what really happened. And their work is very
relevant again. Döbeln is located close to Dresden, where far-right political movement Pegida demonstrates against the arrival of refugees every week. Connie and Sophie are worried. Recently a Neo-Nazi was elected for the city council. They show us around town and take us to all the places where they have made the Nazi-history visible.

**Live music**

**Traffic noise**

SANDRA: We crossed the square and continued walking through the beautifully looked after town, houses in nice pastel colors, everything looks impeccable. And suddenly, almost invisible, we see two brass Stolpersteine [stumbling stones], embedded in the cobbles inscribed with the names of victims of Nazi persecution.

**Connie:** Genau das sind die stolpersteine für die Familie Heinemann

**Sophie:** Wir haben Dokumenten gefunden, das in 1933 in Döbeln 29 Juden und Jüdinnen gemeldet waren

**HELLA:** We now know that 29 Jews were registered in 1933. Our objective is to create a place for all 29 Jews where they can be remembered. We haven’t been able to gather all their information, and we’re not sure that we ever will.

**Sophie:** Wir werden bestimmt von Einigen einfach keine Spuren mehr finden.

**Connie:** Hier in Doebeln wird deutlich das die Nazi’s ihr Ziel praktisch erreicht haben: Deutschland Judenrein zu bekommen.
HELLA: In Döbeln the Nazi’s have fulfilled their goal. After the war Jewish life has not returned to the city. All Jews were either murdered or they have fled. Döbeln was free of Jews: Judenrein.

Connie: ... haben die Nazi’s ihr Ziel in Döbeln erreicht. Letztes Jahr kam es zum ersten mal zum Störungsaction der Neonazi’s aus Döbeln ....

SANDRA: Stefan Trautmann, the Neo-Nazi in Döbeln’s city council, and his supporters disturbed the last memorial by publicly sitting on the Stumbling Stones. They triumphantly post pictures of this to Facebook with the caption: Stumbling Stones are not a solution for unemployment, poverty and too many foreigners.

Sophie: Stolpersteine helfen nicht gegen Arbeitslosigkeit, Armut und Überfremdung.

Music
SANDRA: In the cozy office of Ute Wiesner, Döbeln’s city archivist, located in the attic of the former City Hall, we are received by four members of the Heimatgruppe Döbeln. Four elderly gentleman sit around a wooden table and tell us what they have found out about the industrial history and about their personal memories of that time.

Jürgen: Und es entstanden Zigarrenfabriken en gros

SANDRA: Döbeln has a long history as a cigar city. Mostly one-man companies, people making cigars at home. Until Krenter started the first cigar factory in Germany.

Jürgen: was in Döbeln an Zigarrenfabriken exizierte

Music: Freuet euch. Die Indianer sind da [Enjoy, the Indians are here]
HELLA: Krenter was hyper modern, with their machines and also in marketing. Their logo was a cigar smoking Indian. They even made an Indian song. At 5 years old, Horst Schleger, now 84, collected the Indian images of the Krenter cigars. He shows us his album.

Music

Horst: das wurde ich sie schenken.. Nein... weissen sie, ich im meinen Alter. Nee, ich schenke es ihnen. Vielen Dank, Sie haben vielleicht mehr Interesse daran [I would like to offer this to you... you know at my age... you are more interested in this... thank you very much]

SANDRA: No matter how young Horst was, the 30’s are engraved in his memory.
Horst: Das ist die Ursache gewesen dass der Hitler überhaupt an die Macht gekommen ist. Die Not die herschte...

SANDRA: He remembers the bitter poverty, the hunger, the unemployed lined up to receive a piece of bread and lousy financial aid. That is why Hitler could assume power.

Horst: Es war einer schlimme Zeit.[We faced hard times]
Jürgen Dettmer: Wer der geschichte Doebelns zwischen 33 und 45 mal sich genauer angeschaut hat, der findet soviele Parallelitäten, die sind erschreckend! [Looking close at the history of Döbeln between 33 and 45, you will find so many similarities, awful!]

Hella: Parallelitäten mit? [Similarities with?]
Jürgen: Heute! Die nationalsozialisten in Döbeln haben mit drei oder fünf Mann angefangen. [Today!]

SANDRA: The Nazi’s once started out as a small group. Jürgen Dettmer sees history repeating itself. Youth is attracted to extreme right parties. It’s very urgent to point out the consequences. So many parallels to Nazi history. Awful!
Jürgen: 
Wenn man das heute verfolgt, dann ist es dringend notwendig die Leute auf zu klären, wo das hinläuft. 
[If this continues like this, we must explain what the outcome might be]

HELLA: 
Digging in the past doesn’t come without consequences in Döbeln. The Heimatfreunde, archivist Ute Wiesner, Connie and Sophie, young and old, don’t hesitate to connect the past to the present. The hatred towards Jews in the Nazi times is a warning for today’s hatred towards foreigners.

21’02”

Jürgen: 
...ein ander Teil der Jugend die dass ablehnen.... 
[...other youngsters do not support this....]

Piano Music

Sound of demonstration

People chanting: ‘Wir sind das volk’. [We are the people]

HELLA: 
The resistance against asylum seekers is pretty big, say Connie and Sophie. People are not used to foreigners here. In Dresden Pegida [Extreme right wing protest movement] has weekly protests against Islamization. But here as well, people take to the streets to protest the influx of foreigners.

Man: 
Gutenabend Rosswein! Vielen dank das sie Allen gekommen seit! [Good evening Rosswein! Thank you all for coming!]

SANDRA: 
Connie and Sophie have taken us to Rosswein, a town close to Döbeln. Today is the opening of a refugee center. There is a welcome committee, of which
Sophie and Connie are co-organizers of course, and at the same time there is a protest against the arrival of asylum seekers on the square in front of City Hall.

*Man speaking German through microphone*

**SANDRA:** … if you look more closely, you can see this town looks very different from Döbeln. The hotel right in front of city hall, *Reinischer Hof*, looks very neglected. The building next to it as well.

**Woman:** *Nee, wir haben nichts gegen Flüchtlinge...*

**HELLA:** She’s saying that she has no objection to war refugees, but the others, wearing their expensive clothing, coming here to profit from our social services. She thinks criminal activity will increase, and her daughter can’t go out alone anymore, because she could easily be kidnapped.

**DEMO:** *Wir sind nicht allein, ich zähl noch einmal auf welche Städte und Dorfen eine Demo veranstalten: Döbeln, Freiberg ....*[We do not stand alone, I will sum up for you which towns and villages are organising a demonstration: *Döbeln, Freiberg ...]*

**HELLA:** Not just in Rosswein, but in cities and villages in the whole region people protest the arrival of foreigners and Islamization.

**DEMO:** *...Dresden, Sangenhausen*

*Applause and cheers*  
*Pop music*
SANDRA: Sophie and Connie drove us to the counter protest in front of the former University that has been transformed to an asylum center. And here an almost equally large crowd has gathered. More students and youngsters have gathered here.

_Music_

SANDRA: The neo-nazi man, Trautmann, is being surrounded by protestors. He is the counselor in Döbeln, and has dared to come to the other protest. _Wo ist er dann?_ [Where is his he in the crowd?]

Connie: _Der in dem hellbraune Hose. Der dickere. Das ist Stefan Trautmann_ [He’s the one in light brown pants. That fat man. That is Stefan trautmann]

SANDRA: That is the man who sat on the Stumbling Stones together with his supporters.

_Piano music_

SANDRA: We’re back at the city archive, flipping through the files on the factory. It’s 1933, Hitler wants to show that he’s tackling unemployment. His administration is introducing a prohibition on machines. In the cigar industry, machines must make way for manual labor. This is an impossible task for Germany’s most modern cigar factory, where not a single cigar is rolled by hand.

_Piano music_

HELLA: With the support of the city council, our grandfather managed to keep his factory in business. The council had, by then, been taken over by Hitler supporters. Oddly enough they protect him, a Jew from The Netherlands. Because he is the patron of 650 families. The machines are allowed to keep running. To the great outrage of the competition.
HELLA: ...And here you see transcripts of complaints against grandpa. And also a copy of a declaration sent to the Gestapo.

_Hella:_ An die geheime Statspolizei Dresden [To the State Office of the Secret Police of Dresden]

_Piano Music_

SANDRA: November 17th 1933.

MAN’S VOICE: I hereby declare the following statements made by mister Rottenberg -non Aryan- to two tobacco traders visiting his factory. Mister Rottenberg has stated the following:

_ROTTENBERG:_ If you didn’t know it yet; I’m a Jew. As a pariah I employ 650 Christian workers. At the last elections 92 percent of the people chose the national-socialist party. You can compare the people to a whore: you promise her a small amount and wham! There she lies on the sofa.

_Papers rustling_

HELLA: Look here is a letter from the mayor to our grandfather, to the Deutsche Zigarrenwerke in Döbeln, in which he says: ‘There is an unjustified smear campaign against you, and if more claims will
reach us, in which people talk about you unjustly, then we will make sure these people get to deal with us.

_Hella reading German:_ ‘Wir bitten Sie deshalb uns diese Fälle namhaft zu machen.’ [We ask you to tell us the names]

_SANDRA:_ So he is grandpa’s ally.

_HELLA:_ Apparently he is grandpa’s ally. Here is a literal transcript of a meeting with some, 12, 13 people. Amongst them are: grandpa, the mayor, the _Kreisleiter_ of the Nazi’s, Groine, that Deter guy, from the declaration to the Gestapo, he is a man in the tobacco industry And the meeting lasted from ten in the morning, to a quarter to three in the afternoon.

*Sound of keys opening a door*

_HELLA:_ The meeting would have taken place here. A room adjacent to the Mayor’s office, but also with a separate entrance to the hallway.

*_Piano music_*

_SANDRA:_ Stenogram of the meeting the city hall on February 22^nd^ 1934. Chairman: Mayor Denecke.

*Murmur of people*

_MAYOR:_ Gentlemen, one at a time please. Mister Rottenberg has the floor.

_ROTTERBORG:_ If you, mister Deter, can convince me and the others present here, that what I am saying is false, I will immediately accept my defeat.

_MAYOR:_ Mister Deter, you may respond.
DETER: I’ve never claimed that switching to manual labor is free.

ROTTENBERG: I am glad we agree on that.

DETER: Do you mean the switch can be achieved but it’s just a matter of money?

ROTTENBERG: Yes, indeed.

DETER: If the company had gradually shut down one or two machines every month... But the truth is that mister Rottenberg hasn’t shut down any machines at all.

ROTTENBERG: Our calculations show that, even with the best intentions, our company cannot survive the switch financially. Or will you be satisfied if we turn a corner of the factory into a manual labor corner? The battle that has been fought against our factory was immense. Lies and untruthfulness are used against us, and I can prove it. When people tried and failed to target the factory, they started to vilify me, even to the Gestapo. They took it that far! Me as a person, is not a factor in this battle. Forget me, Rottenberg the Jew. You’re fixated on me and in doing so forget your own 670 fellow German citizens. I’ll be gone tomorrow if I must. But leaving isn’t the best option. Take a good look at the company in its current state. Wouldn’t it be a shame to ruin this company? You would do your fellow countrymen injustice.

_Piano music_

_Traffic noise_

SANDRA: Well Hella, we’re following in the footsteps of grandpa Rottenberg!
This must be it, on the right...

_Hella speaking in background_
SANDRA: This is it. We saw this in a picture. It’s enormous. The façade must be about a hundred meters, right?

HELLA: Or even more. There’s more than one building on the site; a high chimney.

Clattering at the fence

SANDRA: I think we need to go through the bushes.

Footsteps on leaves

SANDRA: Oh look, we don’t need to climb a fence, we can enter the terrain through here. We’re here! There is a clock that got stuck at a quarter to nine... And the windows on this side are still intact.

HELLA: The cigar machines are still here.

SANDRA: And they’ve been pushed to one side.

HELLA: I’m going to take a picture of this.

SANDRA: Directly behind the glass.

HELLA: It’s unbelievable...

SANDRA: Unbelievable...

HELLA: And here is a kind of press.

SANDRA: I think they used it to flatten the tobacco leaves.

SANDRA: Past meets the present. *Achtzig Jahre kommen zusammen*, 80 years are coming together.

Music
SANDRA: How did it go with the factory? Good. Throughout the Second World War, the cigar production continued, for the soldiers of course. And after the war, in East Germany, the factory remained an important employer in Döbeln. The factory remained active until 1981. But by that time Isay Rottenberg was long gone.

HELLA: He was imprisoned in 1935 and lost his factory. Deutsche Bank falsely accused him of fraud when he took over the factory. Before he could prove his integrity before a judge, the Nazi’s arrested him and took over the factory. Johan Steenbergen, the Dutch consul in Dresden, put in a lot of effort to have him released. And he succeeded, after half a year our grandfather returned to Amsterdam.

Piano music

ROTTENBERG: Amsterdam, January 21st 1936

To mister Snouck Hurgonje
Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs in The Hague.

Your Honor,
Due to many efforts on your part, the German authorities have agreed to release me from temporary custody.

Piano music

ROTTENBERG: Words cannot express my gratitude for your and mister Steenbergen’s cordial dedication towards me. His warm and strong support have enabled me to endure these dark times.

With my highest consideration,
I. Rottenberg.
HELLA: You would expect he would accept that his factory was taken from him. But no, he went back to Germany and undertook legal action. And sometimes he would come back to visit his family in Amsterdam. In 1938, after the violent Kristallnacht, he finally gave up.

SANDRA: And even after all that, he still dared to travel through Germany. In an old recording our aunt Tini tells us how he brought his Jewish friends from Germany and Czechoslovakia to the Netherlands by travelling with them on the train.

Noise

TINI: Well, my father was a great man, a fighter. He had a lot of Jewish friends. He smuggled all those people to the Netherlands. By train or other means. ‘I’ve got them!’ He felt so all-powerful with his Dutch passport.

Noise fades

Piano music

SANDRA: Well Hella, we found the cigar factory. We’ve seen the old machines. We’ve found a whole archive in which we can read how combative he was. And that he was not intimidated by the Nazis. But do we have an answer our initial question? Why did he stay in Germany after Hitler assumed power? He could have come back, right?

HELLA: I don’t think that question has been answered. We didn’t find an answer, because his personal motives are missing from this story. Did his business interests trump everything? Was he too proud to give up? Did he think he would win? Or did he think Hitler would disappear from the picture?
HELLA: San, I’m taking a picture of you in front of your grandfather’s factory.

SANDRA: Yes, please!

Music: Krenters commercial song.

[We will only smoke Indians, produced by Kreter; he delivers fancy brands, as this is his own import. No matter Sioux or Texas, these are first class sigars, for all the spoiled smokers. Enjoy, here are the Indians!]

ISAY ROTTENBERG: May I cordially thank you!