

Viktor Lenel (1838-1917)

Viktor Lenel (*18.06.1838 Mannheim †07.10.1917 Mannheim); parents: Moritz Lenel (1811-1876), Carolina Scheuer (1814-1857); Siblings: Pauline (1837-1895), Antonie (1839-1912), Alfred (1841-1918), Thekla (1845-1911), Otto (1849-1935, Rechtshistoriker); married to: Sara Helene Michaelis (1844-1917); children: Walter (1868-1937, Historian), Richard (1869-1950, Industrialist), Klara (1872-1932).

Victor Lenel was born on June 18th, 1838 in Mannheim to his parents Moritz Lenel and Caroline



Scheuer. After graduating from high school in Mannheim he joined in 1857 his father's business, where he was made a partner in 1866. In 1867, he married Helene Michaelis. After travels through England, France, Holland, Austria and Spain and after the death of his father, he and his younger brother Alfred, had to take over the management of the company, which had now shifted its focus from trade to industry. In 1873 the Lenel brothers founded, together with Friedrich Bensinger, the Rheinische Hartgummifabrik (Rhenish Hard Rubber Factory, picture left), which later became the Rhenish Rubber and Celluloid Factory. In 1885, the factory of waterproof clothing Lenel, Bensinger and Co. was created as a spin-off.

Viktor Lenel acted like his father active in public life. From 1875 to 1881 and from 1887 to 1893, he was a national-liberal member of the Citizens Committee. In 1876 he became a member of the Chamber of Commerce, whose Vice President he became in 1898. From 1881 to 1905 he was a commercial judge. At the age of 65, he was elected to the presidency of the Chamber of Commerce, which he accepted with the following words:

„I do know that at my age, one's forces are waning and one should rather think to shed responsibilities than taking on new ones. If I nevertheless decided to accept this position, it is because I do not feel justified to refuse the highest honor which the representatives of the merchants can bestow on one of theirs.“

From 1905-1909 Viktor Lenel was the first Jewish citizen to become a member of the first Chamber of the parliament of Baden. He was member of the school and Tax Commission and of the Commission for railways and roads. His social attitude is evident in many discussions. He advocated the introduction of an inheritance tax with the following words:

"I am of the opinion that the heritage of the descendants, which is the easiest way of acquiring wealth without any merit, would tolerate taxation very well and that it would be no injustice doing so."

On the issue of school fees of a commercial school to be founded, he said:

„I am of the opinion that the fees must be kept very moderate, because for the parties most concerned, the less privileged, it is a great sacrifice to let their children



attend school for another year."

In the interests of youth, he is committed to supporting the museums of the city of Mannheim.

„In our material time, no effort is enough to awaken the love of science and art in the youth. This means, that not only are the old existing collections to be maintained, but that they continually be enriched with new goods and new art works apt to arouse and maintain the interest.“

On his 70th Birthday, Viktor Lenel donated a convalescent home for children in Neckargemünd, which he handed over in 1911 to the city, ready for occupation. In the same year he resigned after eight



years in office as a president of the Chamber of Commerce for health reasons. The new President Emil Engelhard (1854-1920) dedicated to him the following words of farewell:

„Viktor Lenel was always a pillar and cornerstone of our chamber, and he knew how to impress, especially during the time of his presidency, the stamp of his own personality. This can however only be achieved by a striking personality. That he is one, we all know, a personality with rich gifts and a sharp mind, a firmly entrenched, outspoken character with all the corners and edges of such.“

On October 7, 1917, shortly after the death of his wife, Viktor Lenel passed away. Both spouses were put to rest in the family grave in the Jewish cemetery of Mannheim. The Reiss-Museum of Mannheim owns an oil painting of Viktor Lenel by an unknown painter.

Source: Watzinger, Karl Otto, History of the Jews in Mannheim 1650-1945, Stuttgart, 1984, p. 117ff.; Lenel Family archive.

Thal, December 14th 2010, B. Lenel (beat@lenel.ch)