

Open Circles

by Rivka Steinitz

This story begins in October 2005 when Banini and Rivka Steinitz visited Reni Steinitz in Berlin and brought her a page retrieved from their family archive in Rehovot. It was a letter from Walter Steinitz, Banini's grandfather, written in Ramot Hashavim on April 30th 1962, to Hans Röhl, a mathematics student at Kiel University (Germany). Hans Röhl was writing a thesis (Wissenschaftliche Prüfungsarbeit zum Fach Mathematik) about the mathematician Ernst Steinitz, and asked Walter, who was Ernst's younger brother, to describe the non-professional aspects of the genius' life. In his letter to Walter, the student explains that he was advised by Prof. Wolfgang Steinitz (Ernst's and Walter's nephew living in East Berlin) to approach Walter in Ramot Hashavim. Here we can't help but wonder: How did Wolfgang, given his position in the GDR in 1962, dare advise a student in West Germany to establish contact with his (Wolfgang's) uncle in Israel? We were under the impression that the Steinitz family of East Germany had, before the fall of the wall, practically no communication with the family in Israel. Are we mistaken? Walter's interesting description of his elder brother prompted Reni to ask us diplomatically: "I know you are very busy people, but perhaps you could find some additional information that would be of interest for our common archive?" We took up the challenge; how could we resist?

Rivka, determined to bring a story for Reni to the present reunion, returned in April 2006 to search the archive boxes in Rehovot. It turned out that Walter's letter that we brought to Reni in 2005, which describes Ernst as he was in his private life, was part of a file containing the correspondence that developed between Walter and the student in Kiel during the years 1962-1963. From this correspondence we learned that the student even visited Walter in Bad Nauheim (Germany), and interviewed him for the thesis. Walter died in 1963 in Bad Nauheim and was buried in Ramot Hashavim. The letter we gave Reni last year is indeed the most interesting one we found in the file. Now, before coming to this reunion in Berlin, we noted that Reni had already cited some of the intriguing parts of Walter's description of Ernst in her recent review of the Steinitz family history. We very much appreciate this, Reni! It proves that it's worthwhile challenging you with interesting material. And we appreciate and thank Miriam Gidron for translating Reni's review into English for all the family members who do not read German.

Back to our story. Rivka found (April 2006) in the archive that the student from Kiel wrote to Walter that once he completed his thesis, he would send Walter a copy. However, Rivka found no thesis in the archive, and she said to Banini: "Let's search for the thesis and bring it with us to Berlin. If Hans Röhl was a student in 1962, he should by now be in his 60's, and I have a hunch he's a professor of mathematics. Shall we try?" And Banini tries: he "Googles", cross-checks for "Hans Röhl", "mathematics", "Kiel" or "Bremen", the cities mentioned in the letters of the student. Through Google we found a number of Hans Röhl's, and, sure enough, one who is a math professor in Kiel and now lives in Bremen. Michael Steinitz (Antigonish, Canada), who heard our detective story while he visited us two weeks ago and who belongs to the community of mathematicians and physicists, commented: "of course, mathematicians don't move too much during their life". (And who should know better than Michael....)

Seeing the details of Hans Röhl from Bremen on the computer screen, Rivka determines, "that's him!!" and urges Banini "write to him immediately!". But Banini hesitates: he wants to find more individuals with the same profile and to send a query to all of them. Rivka, absolutely confident that she has found the correct person, pesters Banini with "write, now!". So, Banini sends the following e-mail on April 21, 14:15:

Dear Prof. Röhl,

I apply to you after having found your address on the Internet.

I am looking for a person whose name is Hans Röhl, who was a mathematics student at Kiel University (with Prof. Dr. F. Bachmann), and who conducted in 1962 a study about the mathematician Prof. Dr. Ernst Steinitz. As you may see from my name, I belong to the family of Prof. Ernst Steinitz. Since I am researching the history of my family, I would like very much to contact Hans Röhl and learn from him more details about Ernst Steinitz.

I should be grateful to you if you could tell me whether you are the person I look after, and if not, whether you happen to know of another mathematician in Germany who carries the same name.

Thanking you in advance for your attention,

Sincerely yours,

Benjamin Steinitz.

On the same day, at 18:14, we received the following reply:

Dear Dr. Steinitz,

I got your eMail today and I am totally surprised and pleased to hear from you. You are right you have been looking for me and I will try to help you with your genealogy. You will understand that I have to have some more time to go through old papers to refresh memory, for I will be 70 years old soon. In case you have my dissertation at hand, I am afraid of not being able to add many more extras. If you are interested in the German Correspondence with Prof. Walter Steinitz, the youngest brother of Ernst, please let me know and I will send copies of letters. My wife and I had been invited to the Couple Prof Walter Steinitz in Bad Nauheim in Spring 1962 and enjoyed that day very much.

I intend to go to the Netherlands this weekend and won't be back by May 8 th 2006. Afterwards I will be at your disposal for further information.

Yours sincerely - Hans Röhl , Nösslerstr. 8 , D-28359 Bremen

Enclosed 1 photograph - from left to right: Kurt, Walter, Sigismund (father), Ernst Steinitz (about 1886).

This is one of the unbelievable wonders of the Internet. The thesis arrived one week before we left for Berlin. Enclosed with it was also a correspondence from 1962 between Hans Röhl the student and Erna Toeplitz, the widow of Prof. Otto Toeplitz. (Prof. Toeplitz and Ernst were friends and worked as math professors at Kiel University at the same time). From the Carmel, Haifa, the lady tells Hans Röhl about the relationships between both mathematicians, and describes Ernst as an "*anima candida*". And here once again the circles widen: Uri Toeplitz, the son of the mathematician Otto Toeplitz, was for many years first flutist of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and a teacher at the Tel Aviv Academy of Music. Ruben Steinitz, the son of Gideon and Toni, grandson of Walter, was a very talented flutist who died at the age of 20. He was Uri Toeplitz's student. Gabi, the daughter of the flutist Uri Toeplitz and granddaughter of the mathematician Otto, was a neighbor of Ruth Steinitz (Banini's mother) at 23 Hechalutz Str. in Jerusalem, and became a friend of ours while we lived there. When Gabi and her family moved into the building, Ruth asked her whether she knew about the "mathematical connection" between the Steinitz and Toeplitz families. We, 35 years ago, were not interested... Nowadays we are at the right age to enjoy putting this puzzle together.

As Rivka and Banini were busy with this recent correspondence with Hans Röhl, the Israeli Steinitz family gathered on the 14th of May at the Ramot Hashavim cemetery and joined Danny at the funeral of his wife Mina. On this occasion they visited the graves of Walter and Alma Steinitz and of Hans and Lotte Steinitz. Among the relatives paying their last respects was No'omi Aridor, the only granddaughter of the mathematician Ernst. In the cemetery they also met Moni and Erik Bassow from Berlin, who had come to Israel for a happy occasion, namely to see their newborn grandson Yarden, son of Anett. Such is the circle of life. For Banini this is the story of Walter and his family, and for Rivka it turned out to be a story about identity and belonging. Ramot Hashavim in Hebrew means, roughly, a place of return. A return to what? Well, that is another story altogether.

Rehovot, May-June 2006