

On our own behalf:

A study concerning the life and work of the founder of the foundation

Ernst Jung – Opportunist & Philanthropist

By Peter Zolling

At the beginning of 2021, the Jung Foundation for Science and Research commissioned historian Dr Peter Zolling with a scientific investigation into the life of entrepreneur and philanthropist Ernst Emil Jung. The documentation results are now available in a study that is publicly accessible via the foundation's website.

Ernst Jung founded the Jung Foundation for Science and Research in 1967 and set the course for its genuine medical focus in the mid-1970s. Together with his wife Claere Jung, he also established the Ernst and Claere Jung Foundations in Stade and Hamburg, which have become known for their senior housing complexes, as well as the Claere Jung Foundation, which has gained a reputation for promoting research in ophthalmology and providing assistance for the visually impaired and blind.

Prior to his death on 8 January 1976, Jung was able to look back on a long and fulfilling life as a merchant, entrepreneur and philanthropist. He was part of a generation whose creative drive had to prove itself in the “age of extremes” (historian Eric Hobsbawm) – in many ways: economically, politically and morally.

In a hitherto unknown temporal density, contemporaries of the first half of the 20th century in Germany experienced the First World War, the downfall of the German Empire and the birth of the Weimar Republic (which was financially burdened with considerable mortgages), attempted overthrows from left and right, hyperinflation, the Great Depression and finally, the agony of democracy and the Nazi dictatorship, which led to the Second World War and unprecedented crimes, culminating in the break with civilisation in the holocaust, the genocide of the European Jews.

An entrepreneur such as Ernst Jung faced a radically changing scene, especially in the 30s and 40s, with relentlessly new constellations, posing a conflict between economic gain motives trained on capitalist opportunity and the ethical foundation of convinced protestants.

Ernst Jung started his business life in 1920 as a small merchant trading industrial mineral oil in Hamburg. He came from very modest circumstances. Jung grew up in the Hamburg district of Hamm; he visited the local secondary school and completed commercial training before volunteering in World War I.

Although Jung laid the foundation for his entrepreneurial career in 1920 with the formal entry of his company Ernst Jung Oel-Import, it was probably the twenties which were hardest for him as a young businessman. In addition to the explosive political and economic situation mentioned above, the dominance of large Anglo-American and Dutch corporations in the oil and petrol industry also undoubtedly contributed to this difficulty. As a result, Jung initially decided on a career as an employee and worked his way up to be an authorised signatory in the Hamburg branch of the American Atlantic Refining Co. where he worked from 1928.

It was not until 1936 that Jung finally ventured into entrepreneurship and set the course for expansion beyond just an oil importation and sales business. He ventured into the production of lubricating oils in his own refinery, the Hamburger Mineralöl-Werke Ernst Jung in Wilhelmsburg. At the same time, an extensive tank storage operation was set up in Stadersand on the Unterelbe. Jung received protection for these projects from the Wehrmacht and the Navy, as he became a major supplier. He was also supported by the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Businessman and entrepreneur Ernst Jung took advantage of the situation and put himself in the profitable service of the military and economic war effort of the Nazi regime, whose upgrading and self-sufficiency goals were set out in the four-year plan announced by Hermann Göring in 1936.

Already during the gradual seizure of power by the National Socialists and also after the consolidation of the dictatorship, Jung tried to arrange himself with the new circumstances for his own benefit, even though he was rooted in Protestant Christianity and politically inclined towards the national-liberal camp. Back in 1934, a short membership of the NSDAP ended because Jung had previously shown sympathy for the Freemasons. Nevertheless, he seemed to have made good and useful contacts within military circles, which insisted that he should enter into the production of special mixed fuels, preferably for the needs of the navy.

With the start of the four-year plan in 1936, these plans were advanced, so that by the time of the outbreak of war in 1939, Jung had already generated considerable wealth in this short period of time, which he was able to increase significantly by the end of the war in 1945. Against this background, the self-assessment of Jung is not surprising, that he was already the largest independent mineral oil company in Germany by the end of the thirties. Ernst Jung did not develop into a convinced national socialist. Instead, he climbed into an economic elite of war profiteers closely associated with the political system, who kept the violent apparatus running – opportunists, smooth wheels of a well-oiled machine, who were partly responsible for the atrocities that were perpetrated in the name of Germany during the Second World War.

As Jung's wealth increased amidst these conditions, it also profited from the exploitation of forced labourers, civilian and war prisoners from numerous countries. These were deployed in Jung's companies from 1939 to 1945 and, in the case of the tank storage facility in Stadersand, were also accommodated there: Polish, Ukrainians, a Slovakian, Dutch, Italians – 52 men and one woman in total. 15 people kept the refinery operations at Plant I in Wilhelmsburg going. 38 people ran the tank storage area in Plant II in Stadersand.

In the summer of 1944, the SS built one of the largest external storage facilities at the Neuengamme concentration camp, on the Dessauer Ufer in the port of Hamburg. Deported prisoners from the Auschwitz destruction camp were also accommodated there. These had to do the work of slaves in the Hamburg factories. Among other things, in companies producing mineral oil – such as Jung Plant I in Wilhelmsburg – they were forced to defuse unexploded ordnance, repair bomb damage, remove debris and lay new pipes.

Witness statements attest that from late summer 1944 to spring 1945, 120 to 170 short-term prisoners worked on such tasks in Jung's port operations under a special order. These include Belgians, Russians, Greeks, French and Germans. Their working and living conditions were pitiful. As one of the survivors in the "Sonderkommando Jung", the Belgian prisoner Victor Baeyens, remembered: "Our special group, which originally comprised 170 men, has shrank quite a lot. Many have already died, and out of the 100 Belgians, there are seven left."

Taking into account the high death rate among the concentration camp prisoners and the fact that the deceased were immediately replaced by new concentration camp occupants from Neuengamme, the total number of forced labourers employed by Ernst Jung in Stadersand and Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg during the Second World War is likely to have been between 200 and 250. The idea that entrepreneurs such as Jung were obliged by state or party authorities to employ forced labour is misguided. On the contrary: Over the course of the war, in view of the general lack of resources, war-torn companies, including Jung's mineral oil companies, competed for the ever-scarcer workforce. Companies had to submit applications to have concentration camp inmates transferred as forced labourers.

After the war, Jung contested all the accusations of a collaboration with the NS regime in de-nazification proceedings, including his temporary NSDAP membership. In the end, despite the contrary evidence and relevant expert opinions from German authorities, he was able to assert his view towards the allied military authorities that he was not a follower, let alone an accomplice, but an opponent of the violence-based National Socialist rule. The fact that he got away unscathed with this self-palliation of his active role in the "Third Reich" was once again due to his adaptability and the key position for the British occupying power into which he quickly grew, as soon as the war ended. Because just as he helped oil Adolf Hitler's war machine, he had now advanced to become a fuel supplier to the English army, for which he made himself indispensable until 1949.

In the years that followed, Ernst Jung, the “politically exonerated” entrepreneur, succeeded in maintaining and further expanding his middle-class position within the German and international oil and petroleum businesses, with the tailwind of the Marshall Plan and the imminent economic recovery of the newly founded Federal Republic. In the fifties, with the switch to the production of paraffins, petroleum jelly and novel lubricating oils, and thanks to an expanding fuel business, the Hamburger Mineralöl-Werke of Ernst Jung became one of the strongest independent German players in this industry – flanked by its own small fleet of acquired tankers. In the mid-fifties, Jung's companies employed around 400 people. From 1960 onwards, one of his ships, named after his father Friedrich Jung, supplied the German Navy in the Baltic Sea as a floating oil storage facility.

Since the early sixties, the self-made man, inspired and encouraged by his wife Claere, had been looking at the long-term future of his companies and assets. As the marriage had remained childless and the couple had Christian charitable convictions, the establishment of corresponding foundations was an obvious choice. It all began in 1964 with the Ernst and Claere Jung Foundations in Stade and Hamburg, followed by the Jung Foundation for Science and Research in 1967 and finally, the Claere Jung Foundation in 1974.

At the same time, Ernst Jung restructured his group of companies and gradually withdrew from operational management. In 1962, he sold his production facility in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg, the company shares were taken over by the Atlantic Refining Co. and Jung subsequently operated as the Chairman of the supervisory board of Jung Atlantic Refining GmbH, the German partner of the US company. A few years later, the company was renamed ARCO Raffinerie GmbH. As part of a realignment, the American owners parted ways with the mineral oil business and concentrated entirely on the production of paraffins and waxes until the company was transferred to the Schümann Group in 1983. In the strict sense, however, the company history of the Hamburger Mineralöl-Werke Ernst Jung ended in November 1977 with the removal of the original company from the commercial register, just two years after the death of its founder.

A portion of the current capital stock of the Jung Foundation for Science and Research, which, at Ernst Jung’s request, has primarily honoured human medical services since the mid-seventies, originates from both the lease as well as sales proceeds from Jung’s operating facility in Stadersand, where assets were also built up with the help of forced labour during the Second World War.

In response to the results of this study, which have now come to light, the Jung Foundation for Science and Research faces up to its founder’s history and assumes responsibility to contribute to efforts to compensate the suffering and injustice experienced through forced labour in Ernst Jung's companies.

Dr Peter Zolling, author of the study “Ernst Jung – Opportunist & Philanthropist”, is a trained historian. For many years, he has been responsible for contemporary history as a journalist in the news magazine “DER SPIEGEL”. He has published numerous monographs, including the standard work “Deutsche Geschichte von 1848 bis zur Gegenwart - Macht in der Mitte Europas” published by Carl Hanser Verlag. Zolling works as an expert in corporate communication and crisis communication in Hamburg.