

Dating the Gasthof Vollbrecht Photograph

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This photograph, which was taken at Nikolausberg, near Göttingen, has been reproduced for the first time in [Brewer et Smith, 1981]. The caption prepared by Clark Kimberling for the occasion was based on inquiries which he had made during the year 1980. Kimberling's papers related to this are now preserved at the *Abteilung für Handschriften und seltene Drucke* of the State and University Library at Göttingen. They contain several testimonies about the picture, by Natascha Brunswick (1909–2003)¹, Heinrich Heesch (1906–1995)², Otto Neugebauer (1899–1990), Bernhard Hermann Neumann (1909–2002), Nina Runge-Courant (1891–1991), Olga Taussky-Todd (1906–1995), Bartel Leendert Van der Waerden (1903–1996), Michael Weyl (1918–2011)³, Ernst Witt (1911–1991) and Erna Bannow-Witt⁴. Some of these testimonies are very incomplete or contradictory. Kimberling finally decided to date this photo to 1932. The aim of this note is to refute the reasons for this dating which we are aware of, and to present instead circumstantial evidence which strongly suggests that the picture was actually taken in July 1933. Indeed, Emil Artin was staying in Göttingen between the 13th and the 15th of July 1933, delivering lectures on the classification of simple Lie groups. If this dating is correct, the *Gasthof Vollbrecht* photograph takes on a new meaning. In fact, at that time Emmy Noether and Paul Bernays had already been put on leave from their positions at the University of Göttingen⁵. Hermann Weyl was about to leave Nazi Germany with his whole family and become a permanent member of the newly created *Institute for Advanced Study* (IAS, Princeton)⁶. Ernst Witt on the other hand had joined

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1. Natascha Brunswick had been Emil Artin's wife until 1958.

2. Heinrich Heesch was Weyl's assistant at the University of Göttingen during the time-period 1930-1933.

3. Hermann Weyl's youngest son. Michael Weyl's elder brother Fritz Joachim Weyl, who is seen on the picture, died in 1977.

4. Erna Bannow-Witt was born in 1911. Both Ernst Witt and his future wife are seen on the picture.

5. For more details about Emmy Noether's dismissal from Göttingen University in April 1933, see in particular [Schappacher, 1993, 57].

6. See in particular the letter of Hermann Weyl to the founding director of the IAS Abra-

the Nazi party and the *Sturmabteilung* as of May 1933⁷.

Inconclusive elements for the 1932 dating

Among the testimonies collected by C. Kimberling in 1980 and preserved in Göttingen, only two pretend explicitly that this photograph was taken in 1932 : those of Michael Weyl and of Bernhard H. Neumann.

In a letter to Kimberling from 5 May 1980, Michael Weyl claims that “all evidence points to the last summer Hermann spent in Göttingen : 1932.”⁸ This is misleading because many documents prove that Weyl was in Göttingen at least until the end of July 1933. For instance, on 20 July 1933, Weyl sent a letter from Göttingen to his friend Erich Hecke⁹. Moreover, at the end of July 1933, Weyl was part of the doctoral examination committee of Ernst Witt’s¹⁰. Even more explicitly, in his 1935 tribute to Emmy Noether, Weyl refers to the first weeks of the summer of 1933 he spent together with Noether in Göttingen :

A stormy time of struggle like this one we spent in Göttingen in the summer of 1933 draws people closer together ; thus I have a particularly vivid recollection of these months.¹¹

Nor is B.H. Neumann’s testimony more conclusive. In a letter to Kimberling dated 8 October 1980, he strongly denies that the young lady on the picture whose identity will finally remain undetermined is his wife Johanna Neumann (1914–1971)¹². Then he simply states without evidence that the photograph must have been taken at the latest in 1932. In a nutshell, M. Weyl’s testimony is based on an erroneous assumption and Neumann’s is not connected, even indirectly, to the event represented by this photograph.

Furthermore, if the picture were indeed taken in 1932, one would have to explain Artin’s presence in it. Peter Roquette has tried to do this in a 2008 article on Weyl and Noether :

There is a nice photo of Noether with Weyl and family, together with a group of mathematicians posing in front of the “*Gasthof Vollbrecht*”. The photo is published in [Brewer et Smith, 1981] and dated 1932. Since Artin is seen as a member of the hiking party, it seems very probable that the photo was taken on the occasion of Artin’s famous Göttingen lectures on class field theory which took place from February 29 to March 2, 1932¹³.

ham Flexner from the 30th of March 1933 and a letter of Flexner to Weyl from the 27th of April 1933, Records of the Office of the Director Faculty Files / Box 37 / Weyl, Hermann 1932-1933. From the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ, USA. For a commentary about Weyl’s exile, see in particular [Schappacher, 1993, 78-87], [Siegmond-Schultze, 2009, 56-59] and [Eckes, 2016].

7. [Kersten, 2000, 158] and [Schappacher, 1993, 66].

8. Letter of Michael Weyl to Clark Kimberling from the 5th of May 1980, *SUB-Göttingen*, Cod. Ms. Kimberling 42.

9. Letter of Hermann Weyl to Erich Hecke from the 20th of July 1933, *ETH-Bibliothek*, Zurich, Hs : 91 598b. For a commentary about this letter, see [Eckes, 2016].

10. [Kersten, 2000, 158].

11. Reproduced in [Dick, 1981, 132].

12. Born von Caemmerer.

13. [Roquette, 2008, 306]. Several copies of the transcription of Artin’s lectures on class field theory by Olga Taussky are preserved at the University of Göttingen.

But this hypothesis is plainly contradicted by the ladies' short-sleeve dresses and the leaves on the trees. Furthermore, we do not know of any other visit of Artin's to Göttingen during the summer of 1932. This suggests considering the alternative dating of the photograph, to July 1933.

Evidence for dating the photograph to July 1933

Two direct witnesses of the scene have independently dated this photograph to July 1933 : Hermann Weyl and Ernst Witt. Weyl mentions the picture in his correspondence, which we have recently discovered, with his childhood friend, the geographer Carl Rathjens, also a native of Elmshorn (1887–1966)¹⁴. Rathjens renews contact with Weyl at the end of World War II. Rathjens, who was an opponent of Nazism, belonged in 1946–1947 to a denazification commission at the University of Hamburg. It is in this context that he inquired about Weyl's opinion on Witt¹⁵. Weyl responds to Rathjens' request as follows :

Witt kenne ich ganz gut. Er ist ein ausgezeichnete Mathematiker und ein anständiger, ziemlich simpler Kerl. Aber er war ein guter handfester Nazi aus Überzeugung, [Added in handwriting : das ist ausser Zweifel]. Seine Anständigkeit verriet sich z.B. darin, dass er seiner (jüdischen) Lehrerin Emmy Noether die Treue hielt. Ein Bild, das ich aufbewahre, von einer Mathematiker-Zusammenkunft in einer Göttinger Gartenwirtschaft, die aus Anlass von Artins Besuch im Sommer 1933 stattfand, zeigt Witt in einer Gruppe mit solchen schon Verfehmten wie Emmy Noether, Bernays, etc.¹⁶

There can be little doubt that Weyl describes here the group photograph in front of the *Gasthof Vollbrecht*. Moreover, he clearly says that Artin visited Göttingen during the summer of 1933.

Witt's testimony is consistent with Weyl's claim. In a letter to Kimberling dated 11 November 1980, Ernst Witt answers Kimberling's questions about the photograph as follows :

Das Bild wurde auf einem Ausflug zum "Kerstlingröderfeld"¹⁷ gemacht, im Juli 1933, im Anschluß an einen Vortrag von Prof. Artin über die Klassifikation einfacher Liegruppen. Über diesen Vortrag gibt es eine Ausarbeitung von Heinrich

14. The letters of Hermann Weyl to Carl Rathjens and the copies of Rathjens' letters to Weyl are preserved in Carl Rathjens archive, *SUB-Hamburg, Carl von Ossietzky*, NRa : Ba : W 174-191. We have discovered this correspondence in March of 2015, while studying the correspondence between Hermann Weyl and Erich Hecke. Erich Hecke and Rathjens both made their career in Hamburg. For more details about this discovery, see [Eckes, 2016].

15. Copy of Carl Rathjens' letter to Hermann Weyl from the 28th of December 1946, Carl Rathjens archive, *SUB-Hamburg, Carl von Ossietzky*, NRa : Ba : W 181 : "Ich gehöre seit einigen Wochen der Denazifizierungs-Kommission für die naturwissenschaftliche Fakultät der Universität an. Wir hatten uns das letzte Mal mit einem Mathematiker zu beschäftigen, der bei Dir in Göttingen vor 1933 studiert hat. Er behauptet auch noch nachher mit Dir in Verbindung gestanden zu haben. Es ist Herr Witt, der als Missionarssohn in China geboren ist und mir nicht den Eindruck macht, als wenn er wilder National-Sozialist oder Militarist gewesen sei."

16. Letter of Hermann Weyl to Carl Rathjens from the 24th of January 1947, Carl Rathjens archive, *SUB-Hamburg, Carl von Ossietzky*, NRa : Ba : W 182.

17. The *Gasthof Vollbrecht* is located at Nikolausberg, North-east of Göttingen, not at the *Kerstlingröder Feld*, which is due East of Göttingen. Both places were common destinations for hikes from Göttingen, which may explain Witt's confusion.

Heesch (damals Assistent von H. Weyl, jetzt Emeritus in Hannover) und mir.¹⁸

Witt provides here an important clarification : in July 1933, Artin was actually lecturing at the University of Göttingen on the classification of simple Lie groups¹⁹, a theme of particular interest to Weyl.²⁰ These lectures are similar to a 1933 article by van der Waerden on the same topic²¹ and they took place between the 13th and the 15th of July 1933. A copy of the lecture notes by Heesch and Witt is extant in the library of the Göttingen Mathematics Institute. Moreover, at the very beginning of a letter to Helmut Hasse from 21 July 1933, Emmy Noether clearly refers to Artin’s lectures on Lie groups at the University of Göttingen which took place “last week [*vorige Woche*]”²². In addition, Weyl alludes to Artin’s presentation in the second part of his lectures on Lie groups and Lie algebras at the IAS in 1934–1935²³. A clear reference to Artin’s lectures can also be found in [Witt, 1941, 290]²⁴.

To sum up, Artin lectured on Lie groups at the University of Göttingen between the 13th and the 15th of July 1933. Moreover, Weyl and Witt attended these lectures and they both independently relate this event to the group photograph in front of the *Gasthof Vollbrecht*. These are very good reasons to date the photograph to July 1933.

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18. Letter of Ernst Witt to Clark Kimberling from the 11th of November 1980, *SUB-Göttingen*, Cod. Ms. Kimberling 44.

19. H.G. Bigalke mentions Artin’s lectures on Lie groups in [Bigalke, 1988, 82] without giving any precise date. P. Roquette and G. Frei also allude to Artin’s lectures on simple Lie groups in [Roquette et Frei, 2008, 301] and in [Roquette *et al.*, 2014]. They erroneously date these lectures to 1931 or 1932.

20. [Hawkins, 2000] and [Eckes, 2014].

21. [van der Waerden, 1933].

22. Letter of Emmy Noether to Helmut Hasse from the 21st of July 1933, reproduced in [Lemmermeyer et Roquette, 2006, 195].

23. [Weyl, 1935, 93-94].

24. This article is reproduced in [Witt, 1998, 213-252] with a detailed commentary by Ulf Rehmann

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