

**Reception with restitution of property to the descendants of Henny and Siegfried Insel on September 24, 2024 at the Oldenburg City Hall
Sabine Stührholdt, Oldenburg City Museum**

Dear guests! Dear descendants of the Insel family - dear far travelled families from Israel and from the United States!

It is not easy for me either to simply follow on from Dietmar Schütz's upsetting report.

The Oldenburg City Museum is grateful for the opportunity to be able to return some very personal objects from the former property of Henny and Siegfried Insel to you, Reuven, and to you, Lee, also on behalf of your siblings and cousins: A pewter jug bearing a dedication inscription for the wedding celebration and a set of jewelry for the silver wedding anniversary, consisting of an elaborately crafted tiara for the wife and a pin for the husband. The objects came to our Museum's collection in 1997 as a private donation. They then lay dormant in the Museums magazine rooms until provenance research brought them back to light.

Just to explain it briefly: *Provenance research* is about finding out where our collection items have come from and whether there is any injustice connected with them. In particular: whether they were stolen from previous Jewish owners during the Nazi regime, or whether Jewish owners were forced to sell or leave the objects behind under the pressure of Nazi persecution.

With the generous support of the *German Lost Art Foundation*, we were able to research the history of the pewter jug and the wedding jewelry and learn a lot about the life and shattering fate of Henny, Siegfried, Grete and Hermann Insel. And we were able to locate the descendants of the family who are alive today. Several of them, descendants of Siegfried Insel's brothers Emil and Gustav, are with us today. The descendants of his sister Sophie, on the other hand, feel too much pain at the memory of the cruel injustice to their Oldenburg ancestors. That is why they want no further contact and no share of the restitution.

When the Insel family was forced to move from Oldenburg to Hanover in 1936, they gave the pewter jug and the silver wedding jewelry to an Oldenburg couple they were

friends with. Immediately after their move, Henny and Siegfried from Hanover wrote a postcard to their friends in Oldenburg in which they thanked them warmly "*for all the efforts*". Presumably the friends had helped them prepare for their involuntary departure. When clearing out their very large and beautiful apartment in Oldenburg before moving into a small new-built apartment in Hanover, Henny and Siegfried were forced to part with many things and reduce their household goods in order to minimize their belongings.

Their bitterness at this humiliation is expressed in a list of their belongings that they were later forced to draw up for the Nazi authorities when they emigrated.

Shortly before they left Oldenburg in 1936, in their distress, they even offered some of their household goods, which they were unable to take with them from Oldenburg to Hanover, for purchase to the Oldenburg State Museum (in the castle).

But why did they give away these very personal objects, which we see here, to friends? Perhaps precisely because of their very private nature? Perhaps because they saw no sales value in them? These are private mementos with a piece of family history attached to them. We must assume that they only parted with them under the pressure of injustice and degrading circumstances. Otherwise, they would have had no reason to do so. That is why we are returning them today.

Do the objects tell us anything about the Oldenburg Insel family, which was wiped out and almost forgotten for a long time? What do we know? And what can we only assume?

The jug and the jewelry belonged to family celebrations, to wedding parties. Let us try to get them to speak:

The pewter jug was once a gift; it bears a personal dedication from Paul Weinberg for the "*wedding celebration*" on November 19th in 1905. Traditionally, people gave gifts made of pewter, a soft metal, for the 10th anniversary of a marriage – because the marriage was not yet so "solid". Henny and Siegfried Insel had indeed married 10 years before the year of the engraving, 1895, but not on November 19th, but already in June. Instead, the date engraved on the jug is the exact date of the 10th wedding anniversary of Sophie, Siegfried Insel's sister, and her husband Salomon Baer. They were married in their hometown Berne (close to Oldenburg) on November 19th in 1895. So is this a gift that was originally given to Sister Sophie and brother-in-law Salomon for their 10th wedding anniversary? However, Siegfried and Henny Insel had married only a few months earlier and therefore had their tenth wedding anniversary

in the same year 1905. Did the two couples celebrate their wedding anniversary together? Did they perhaps exchange gifts with each other after the celebration? Or was the pewter jug a gift from a shared friend to both couples? And who was this friend Paul Weinberg? So far, we do not know for sure, because there were several Paul Weinbergs in their local area.

And what about the artful silver wedding jewelry? Does it reveal more of the family history? The tradition of wearing such jewelry was not specifically Jewish, but was widespread in the past. It was a common custom to pass on the festive jewelry to the next silver wedding anniversary couple within the family – and between generations. Henny and Siegfried's 25th wedding anniversary was in the summer of 1920, and they probably wore the graceful tiara and pin themselves on this special occasion. This jewelry also raises questions for us:

- Which relatives were formerly invited to Henny and Siegfried's silver wedding anniversary? Their sister-in-law Rosa, your grandmother, Reuven? Perhaps their two adult nieces Marta, your grandmother, Lee, and Else, your mother, Reuven? Both nieces had married themselves only a year earlier, in 1919.
- So conversely, we can also ask: Were the Oldenburg relatives – Aunt Henny, Uncle Siegfried, Cousin Grete and Cousin Hermann – perhaps themselves invited to the wedding celebrations of their two nieces Else and Marta in 1919?
- Grete Insel was already 16 years old at the time. Did the weddings of her two cousins perhaps inspire her to have her own dreams for the future, which were later cruelly destroyed by the Nazis?
- Shouldn't Grete have worn this tiara once in her later life? Or, the wife that Hermann sadly could never have?
- And Grete's cousins Marta and Else? Could perhaps even they have worn this tiara at their silver wedding anniversary, which was in 1944 for both of them, if Hitler's Germany had not existed? Fortunately, the two young cousins had managed to escape the Nazi terror long before 1944: Marta with her family to the United States: Else with her family to Palestine – including their young son Reuven ...!

The objects help us to remember and to ask questions. That makes them precious! And even more, they create a variety of connections:

- Connections between us Oldenburgers today and the murdered Oldenburg family Insel whose memory we honor.

- Connection between you descendants and your Oldenburg ancestors, who are now perhaps a little less distant than they used to be.
- Your brand new connection as descendants with each other, between Israel and the USA.
- Connections between you descendants and us here in Oldenburg, who are so grateful to get to know you!

We are delighted that we can officially return the objects today, right now. They will then embark on a journey to Israel, where you, Reuven, intend to keep them temporarily. But for the future, you as descendants have together decided that the pewter jug and the wedding jewelry should return to Oldenburg to the newly opened City Museum – so that they can continue to remind us of the life and fate of the Oldenburg Insel family in our future exhibition on the city's history – and thus also of the immeasurable injustice done to so many other Jewish families under the inhuman Nazi reign of violence. We would like to warmly thank you already today for your joint decision, for your generosity and for your trust that we will value the objects and display them in the City Museum in your spirit in order to keep the memory alive.