# On Stefan Cohn-Vossen and his family

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*Many mathematicians know and appreciate the book "Geometry and the imagination" by Hilbert and Cohn-Vossen* [15]. *It was first published in German in 1932 and has been translated into many languages. In contrast to David Hilbert, the second author, Stefan Cohn-Vossen, is less well known. In an effort to find out more about him, we realized that his life and that of his family had been affected by many dramatic and historic events.*

## 1 Stefan Cohn-Vossen

Bernhard Arnold Stefan Cohn-Vossen was born on May 28, 1902, in Breslau, Germany (now Wrocław, Poland) as the youngest of three brothers, and died on June 26, 1936, in Moscow. His mother Hedwig, née Vossen, was originally from Cologne; his father Emanuel Cohn was *Justizrat* in Breslau. Stefan Cohn-Vossen spent his childhood and youth in Breslau, where he attended the Johanneum, a highly respected secondary school. This school had several famous students, most notably Fritz Haber, a chemist and Nobel laureate (1918), Otto Stern, a physicist and Nobel laureate (1943), but also the mathematicians Wolfgang Fuchs and Otto Toeplitz. Emil Toeplitz, the father of Otto Toeplitz, was a mathematics teacher at the Johanneum. The school had a balanced distribution of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish teachers. In 1914, it had 280 Protestant, 70 Catholic and 180 Jewish students. To teach them mathematical reasoning the teachers used sets of constant width as an example. Consider the following two statements, (a) and (b) on a plane convex set $C$: (a) The set $C$ is a disc. (b) The set $C$ has constant width. Then (a) implies (b), but not vice versa, because there are many counterexamples, for instance the Reuleaux triangle. These sets of constant width are described in some detail in [21, Section 20].

As a teenager, Stefan Cohn-Vossen composed music and dedicated it to his mother, see [24]. When he graduated from the Johanneum, the Roaring Twenties had just begun.

Stefan Cohn-Vossen studied first in Breslau, then in Göttingen and again in Breslau. According to his mother's diary [6, p. 101f], he chose Göttingen because he was a member of the Zionist youth organization "Blauer Stern" (Blue Star) and its members had asked him to found a local chapter in Göttingen. In 1924, Stefan Cohn-Vossen received his doctoral degree in Breslau under Adolf Kneser [8]. The title of his dissertation was "Singular points of a family of curves with a given differential equation." This topic had been suggested by Guido Hoheisel. A single copy of the dissertation is preserved and can be found in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Grzegorz Karch searched for it in Wrocław and found the minutes of his oral examination for the PhD. The so-called Rigorosum included geology and Hebrew as subjects.

From 1924 to 1929 he had postdoctoral positions in Berlin and Göttingen. In [11] he described his scientific education and development.

In 1929 his habilitation took place in Göttingen. The original habilitation thesis "Non-rigid closed surfaces" [9] was also made available to us in facsimile by Richard Cohn-Vossen. On October 10, 1930, Stefan Cohn-Vossen became Privatdozent (lecturer) for "geometry and geometrical analysis" at the University of Cologne. In this tenured position his salary depended essentially on the number of students who enrolled in his classes.

On December 12, 1931, he married Elfriede Ranft, the daughter of a Protestant pastor from Saxony and a prospective physician. (Best men at the wedding in Holweide, Cologne were Hans Lewy



*Figure 1.* Stefan and Elfriede Cohn-Vossen.
(Photo courtesy of Richard Cohn-Vossen.)



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and Karl Dörge.) Since she was Protestant and he was Jewish, they did not have a religious wedding ceremony, much to the dismay of their four parents. Incidentally, the picture in Figure 1 was taken at their address Waldhausstr. 9 in Holweide, Cologne. Later they moved closer to the university, to Theresienstr. 20 in Lindenthal, Cologne [10]. In 1932 the book with Hilbert [15] appeared, and he gave his inaugural lecture on "convex surfaces" in the Aula Magna in Cologne. As we discovered only this year, Josef Naas was his doctoral student then. Naas was enrolled in Cologne from the summer of 1928 to 1933 and in 1935 he defended his doctoral thesis [20] in Cologne with Hans Ludwig Hamburger as official advisor, but in the CV accompanying his thesis he thanks both Cohn-Vossen and Hamburger for their advice and support. Stefan Cohn-Vossen and his wife continued to stay in touch with him.

In March 1933, Adolf Hitler and his party were democratically elected and in April a law was passed to the effect that Jews could no longer be public employees. According to [14, p. 109] on April 29, 1933, it was recommended to Cohn-Vossen that he should not exercise his right to teach (venia legendi), and on May 2, 1933, Christian Eckert (the then acting head of the University Curatorium) wrote a brief letter to him stating that, based on an April 29 cable from Berlin, he was temporarily suspended from teaching. In September 1933 the suspension became permanent. The curatorium was composed of scientists and a majority of seven representatives of the city [14, p. 30]. Until early April 1933, when he was ousted by the Nazis and went into hiding in a monastery, its head was the mayor of Cologne, Konrad Adenauer. Democratically elected governments can suddenly behave unlawfully, and we are currently seeing more examples of such behavior. No one stops them from doing so.

In any case, Stefan Cohn-Vossen had no income and no academic future in Germany. First he moved to Locarno in Switzerland where his parents had fled and tried to find employment elsewhere, for example, in Britain, France or the US. The archive of the British "Society for the Protection of Science and Learning," which tried to help displaced scientists in those days, has documents to this effect [3]. As references, he listed Blaschke from Hamburg, Carathéodory from Munich, Courant from New York, Erhard Schmidt from Berlin and Heinz Hopf from Zurich. From Locarno he moved to Klusstr. 7 in Zurich.

The photo in Figure 2 shows him with his wife and his mother in Switzerland, presumably at Lago Maggiore, as in a letter from September 1936 to the University of Cologne he left his parents' address in Locarno as his mailing address.

According to [26, p. 127], Charles Loewner recommended him for a position in the US in a letter to the head of Dartmouth College, Richard Courant recommended him for a chair at the newly established Istanbul University and Chaim Müntz from Leningrad and Fritz Houtermans from Kharkiv supported his application at Leningrad University. But also the topologist Heinz Hopf from Zurich



*Figure 2.* Hedwig, Stefan and Elfriede Cohn-Vossen. (Photo courtesy of Richard Cohn-Vossen.)

tried to help him find employment. He contacted James Stoker in Pittsburgh, who recommended Cohn-Vossen to his Carnegie Institute of Technology [16], and he wrote to Élie Cartan in Paris, Luitzen Egbertus Jan Brouwer in Amsterdam, Pavel Sergeyevich Alexandrov in Leningrad and Oswald Veblen in Princeton [17] on his behalf. Like Cohn-Vossen, Hopf had spent his youth in Breslau, and like Cohn-Vossen, Hopf was Jewish and married to a Protestant woman. In the end, Hopf's recommendation [18] to his coauthor, the Soviet topologist Pavel Sergeyevich Alexandrov [2], helped him to obtain an appointment at the Steklov Institute (located until 1935 in Leningrad, then moved to Moscow). Shortly before the appointment became official, in August 1934, he had also received a vague offer from the Academic Assistance Council in London (to be found in the Archive of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning [3]) for a position at a so-called black college in Atlanta and had responded that he was interested in it, should his planned appointment in Leningrad not materialize.

Before they left for the Soviet Union, Stefan Cohn-Vossen and his wife had a son, David Hans Richard Cohn-Vossen, born on September 30, 1934. According to the family he was named after David Hilbert, Hans Lewy and Richard Courant. Under [24] the son quotes from a letter of his proud father to Josef Naas. This close friendship continued for many decades and was extended to Elfriede Cohn-Vossen and her second husband and later children. Incidentally, Stefan Cohn-Vossen had the nickname Confuz in those days. The emigration meant that the three had to become Soviet citizens, and thus lose German citizenship.

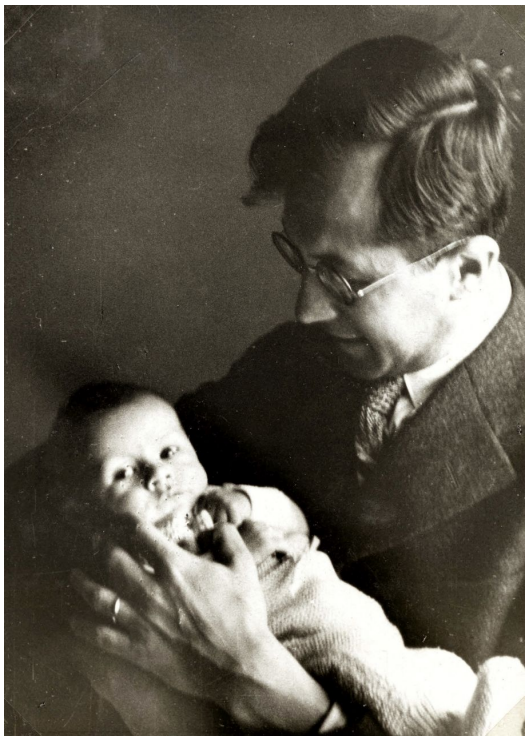


*Figure 3.* Stefan Cohn-Vossen and his son on the train to USSR. (Photo courtesy of Richard Cohn-Vossen.)

The photo in Figure 3 shows Cohn-Vossen with his son Richard on a train to Moscow in 1934.

In Leningrad the family lived at ul. Herzena 39 (now Bolshaya Morskaya ul.) close to the Hermitage.[1] Cohn-Vossen was welcomed into the circle of his colleagues and felt much at ease there. During this period he was extraordinarily academically productive; he wrote many papers and according to reports from his wife, he was often in a sort of mathematical flow or research mode, familiar to many mathematicians and their families. In this wonderful state all day-to-day worries tend to retreat into the background. According to a remark in [13, p. 86], see also [22, p. 251f], he also had a very gifted student, Vilkitsky, of whom no other record seems to exist.[1] His identity is unclear because a student by this or a similar name was enrolled neither in Leningrad nor in Cologne. Since the content of [20] and the remark in [13] are strongly related,[2] it is conceivable that the name Vilkitsky is a pseudonym for Josef Naas to avoid politically motivated problems by hiding the relationship between Josef Naas and Stefan Cohn-Vossen from public view.

Stefan Cohn-Vossen died on June 25, 1936, in Moscow, as a result of pneumonia [5, 7]. He had caught the infection in March 1936 during a train trip, and at that time no appropriate antibiotics were available. His wife reported on his bad health in a letter to the Hopf couple [5] and asked them not to tell his brother or parents because they might become too worried.

His death was also made public in the West, but apparently not noticed in Cologne. The paper "Existence of shortest paths" [12] that Cohn-Vossen had submitted for publication to the journal *Compositio Mathematica* on June 27, 1935, has a footnote: "Stefan Cohn-Vossen died at the age of 34 on June 25, 1936. The name of this colleague will live on in our journal, especially because of the extraordinary progress which his theorems concerning the shape of geodesics and total curvature of open surfaces […] contribute to geometry in the large."

In March 1946 the offer was made to him to return to the University of Cologne. We quote (and translate into English) from the letter of March 11, 1946, which can be found in [14, p. 405f]:

> "Dear Colleague,
> Since the Nazi regime has been removed, all directives have become invalid by which faculty members had been eliminated for racist or ideological reasons. I have been authorized by the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Cologne to request that you return to our university and take up the position that you once had. Indeed, it is a difficult task to return to Cologne, an almost completely destroyed city, and to start a new life. As intensive as our efforts are to re-establish our university, we will also do as much as is in our power to help you to resettle in Cologne. With best regards,
> Yours,
> Prof. Peter Rassow
> Dean of the Philosophical Faculty
> [Handwritten undated addendum:] According to information from Prof. Hamburger: Cohn-Vossen †"

It was mailed to his last known address in Switzerland and returned as undeliverable. Today the language of this letter seems almost cynical: not colleagues, but rather regulations drove Cohn-Vossen away and the return is not difficult because of the injustice he suffered, but rather because Cologne was in such a destroyed state!

In 1947, 11 years after his death, a long article by Aleksandr Danilovich Aleksandrov "On the works of S. E. Cohn-Vossen" was published in Russian, in a sense an academic epitaph [1]. The translation of this article into English was generously done by Andrei Iacob. The approval for the publication of the English version on the internet by the editors of the *Uspekhi Matematicheskich Nauk*, in particular Victor Buchstaber, was made possible in 2014 with the help of Ari Laptev, then director of the Mittag-Leffler Institute near Stockholm. Aleksandr Danilovich Aleksandrov was a differential geometer and lived from 1912 to 1999. Aleksandrov can certainly be counted among Cohn-Vossen's mathematical descendants, since after his doctoral thesis on weak convergence of

[1] Galina Sinkevich, personal communication.
[2] Alexander Lytchak, personal communication.

sequences he swung to the field of geometry. Among the students of Aleksandrov were Perelman (who refused the Fields medal), Bakelman, Burago and Zalgaller. Aleksandrov's article about Stefan Cohn-Vossen represents a very impressive commendation of his work. Moreover, in 1959 a collection of seven selected papers by Cohn-Vossen appeared in Russian translation [13]. In spite of his short lifespan, Cohn-Vossen had a seminal and lasting influence on his field.

## 2 His wife, Elfriede Cohn-Vossen

What happened to Stefan Cohn-Vossen's widow Elfriede Cohn-Vossen? She was now a Soviet citizen, had finished her medical studies and married Alfred Kurella, another exiled German and Soviet citizen, in 1938 in Moscow. They were neighbors in an apartment building at Ul. Bolshaya Kommunisticheskaya 24. The couple had two children together, a son Stefan Kurella in 1940 and a daughter Brigitte Kurella in 1945. When Germany attacked Moscow, Elfriede and her two little sons were evacuated from 1941 to 1943 to Chistopol (in Tatarstan), some 700 km east of Moscow. A vivid description of the transport can be found in [25, pp. 385–406]. There she worked in a hospital and raised the two children under extremely difficult conditions. Her husband had to stay essentially in Moscow. A published collection of letters that she exchanged with Alfred Kurella [19] bears witness to the incredible hardship that she had to endure and to her moral compass. According to Stefan Kurella, many of those letters were transferred in person by Boris Pasternak.

From 1946 to 1949 the family bought a house and lived in Pskhu, a picturesque mountain village in Abkhazia, about 60 km east of Sochi. Elfriede Cohn-Vossen worked in the hospital and took care of patients in surrounding villages, while Alfred Kurella wrote political poetry. Walter Ulbricht, head of state of the GDR, knew Alfred Kurella from their time at the Comintern in Moscow and wanted him back in Germany as a member of his political cadre. Therefore, Elfriede and Alfred returned first to Moscow (1949–54), and in 1954 they moved to Berlin, in 1955 to Leipzig and in 1958 back to Berlin. Brigitte Kurella recalls a visit of Josef Naas to Moscow in the early 1950s.[3] In 1957 Elfriede Cohn-Vossen died in a riding accident after her horse bolted.

Stefan Kurella had a polio-related handicap. He studied ethnology and worked at an institute for social medicine in Berlin, later as interpreter for Russian and French. After 1990 he worked on various projects, for a short time as chauffeur of Josef Naas,[4] and he founded an organization that raised money for a school in Pskhu. Brigitte Kurella studied medicine, worked as a neurophysiologist at the Humboldt University and later as head of a sleep lab. Josef Naas maintained close contact both with Richard Cohn-Vossen and his family and with Elfriede and her new Kurella branch of the family, also after Elfriede's death.

## 3 His son Richard and granddaughter Simone

In 1953 the son David Hans Richard of Stefan and Elfriede Cohn-Vossen began studying physics in Leningrad. There he first lived with Aleksandr Danilovich Aleksandrov and his wife in their apartment. In 1955, he joined his parents and siblings in Leipzig, where Alfred had become director of a newly established institute for literature. This included regaining (East) German citizenship. He was told by an official that he no longer could have three first names and that he had to choose the one he wanted to keep. After the death of his mother Richard no longer felt obliged to study physics. The family moved back to Berlin in 1958. He worked as an interpreter for DEFA (a film company) and later as a documentary filmmaker. We mention here just three of his films. In 1966/67 he made a remarkable documentary film on Paul Dessau, composer of music to Berthold Brecht's "Mother Courage and her children." This film won an award at the 16th International Filmweek in Mannheim (West Germany).[5] In 1970, he made a short film on the job of mathematicians and for mathematical expertise he received help from Josef Naas, then head of the Mathematical Institute of the Academy of Sciences in (East) Berlin. As mentioned before, Josef Naas had been a close friend of Richard's father Stefan and became a fatherly friend of Richard as soon as they met in Berlin. The commentary to this film about mathematicians was written by Wolfgang Thierse, who became a highly respected politician after the 1990 reunification of East and West Germany. To be precise, Thierse held the second-highest political position in Germany (Bundestagspräsident) as head of the German parliament from 1998 to 2005. In 1976 Richard Cohn-Vossen documented the everyday life of a porcelain worker's family in Ilmenau and refused to cut scenes in which socialism was criticized. Therefore, the film was not allowed into the theaters. It finally premiered in 2011, more than 20 years after the GDR had ceased to exist.

On November 13, 1976, Wolf Biermann, a political singer and songwriter, who had emigrated from West to East Germany in 1953, gave a concert in Cologne, West Germany. During the concert he criticized conditions in the GDR, whereupon his East German citizenship was revoked, so that he could not return. Richard Cohn-Vossen was one of the first to sign a petition on behalf of Wolf Biermann. He was urged to retract his signature and refused. As a consequence he lost his job and applied to move to West Germany. In 1979, he was finally allowed to do so, presumably because his pending application had started to raise unwanted publicity in the

[3] Brigitte Kurella, personal communication.

[4] Stefan Kurella, personal communication.

[5] https://www.iffmh.de/festival/history/1967

international film-making community. Some Spanish moviemakers had contacted his cousin Esteban Cohn-Vossen in Barcelona, who then tried to support his application. After settling in Hannover, Richard Cohn-Vossen worked for the NDR, a local radio and TV station in northern West Germany. Around 1980 he gave a radio interview to the WDR, a station located in Cologne, and mentioned that his father had been a mathematician. By pure chance Curt Meyer, a number theorist from Cologne, heard this interview on the radio and mentioned it to his colleague Peter Dombrowski, a differential geometer in Cologne, who had grown up in Breslau and who realized that Richard Cohn-Vossen could tell us about the fate of his father. Subsequently, he got in touch with Richard.

Richard Cohn-Vossen's daughter Simone became a theater actress. She recalls a visit to the weekend cottage of Josef Naas on an island in lake Teupitz, south of Berlin. Josef Naas had no children and had meant to leave his villa in Berlin-Pankow to Richard Cohn-Vossen, but Richard had moved away from Berlin and was no longer interested in it. Since Richard's half-sister Brigitte Kurella had taken care of Naas when he needed medical care in old age, he left it to Brigitte Kurella.

It is curious to note that in the summer of 1938 Naas had married Martha Jessen, the first wife of his official PhD advisor Hamburger, one year after their divorce in 1937. Martha and Josef Naas also suffered political persecution by the Nazis. As communists, they spent time in concentration camps. Martha Jessen died in 1983, Josef Naas in 1993.

## 4 His brothers and their families

Stefan (1902–1936) was much younger than his two brothers Berthold (called "Friedel") (1889–1933) and Walter Heinrich Gerhard (1892–1981). According to [6], they were both in relatively poor health and often ill. Therefore, during the First World War they were conscripted but never sent to the front, and thus they survived the war.

Friedel Cohn-Vossen was expected to become a lawyer and to take over his father's law firm. He was interested in poetry and the arts. According to [7, p. 57], he wrote poems, a major paper on Shakespeare and had learned French, Italian and Catalan in order to read classical poetry in those languages. His mother worried about him a great deal, but eventually he passed his examinations and started a successful law career. His last position was Verwaltungsgerichtsdirektor (head of the Administrative Court) in Wiesbaden. He married relatively late at the age of 42 on November 28, 1931. As a teenager, he was already aware of antisemitism and made two unsuccessful attempts to have his last name changed. As the Nazi movement gained momentum, in 1930 [7, p. 61] he recommended to his parents that they move their financial assets to Switzerland. On May 26, 1933, he committed suicide under the Nazi regime [7].



*Figure 4.* Friedel Cohn-Vossen. (Photo courtesy of Esteban Cohn-Vossen.)

Gerhard Cohn-Vossen, born on April 29, 1892, in Breslau, received a doctoral degree in law at Breslau and had a law firm in Dresden. He was a member of the Social Democratic Party and published political papers. His father had talked him out of a career in music. On May 24, 1928, he married Sophie Marckwald from Erdeborn. On September 2, 1930, they had a daughter Eva Barbara. In March 1933 his parents decided to emigrate and asked him and his family to come to Breslau for a farewell visit. Upon their return they were told that the police had already been looking for them because they were "Jewish communist pigs." The next day they fled to his grandmother in Teplice and from there in June 1933 to his parents in Locarno. Almost all of this and the following information is from [7]. Later Gerhard officially lost his PhD title, and of course his property.



*Figure 5.* Sophie and Gerhard Cohn-Vossen.
(Photo courtesy of Esteban Cohn-Vossen.)

In August 1933 Gerhard and Sophia emigrated further to Barcelona in Spain. Here Gerhard first tried to make a living by selling pharmaceuticals containing radium to doctors and pharmacists. In 1935, they were joined by Stefan's and Gerhard's parents, who moved into an apartment next door with all their belongings from Locarno. Meanwhile, Gerhard had met a Bavarian beer brewer who wanted to open a brewery in Spain and who was looking for an investor to help him. Thus, they made plans and rented a suitable villa for production with living accommodation upstairs in Moncada outside of Barcelona.

They managed to obtain a brewing permit, acquired the necessary equipment and started their microbrewery business from scratch at the beginning of 1936. This year brought much hardship. In the summer of 1936 they received news that Stefan Cohn-Vossen had died. Moreover, civil war had broken out in Spain and resulted in great chaos. The truck that was supposed to deliver their beer was confiscated, for example, so that they started selling and serving it on site, and their brewing partner left and went back to Germany. In October 1936 Gerhard's parents moved back to Locarno because they no longer felt safe. Also, Gerhard and Sophie decided to leave Spain, they put most of their belongings in storage and moved temporarily to a farm in southern France, where they lived under very rural conditions.

In the spring of 1937, under threat of confiscation of the brewery, Gerhard was forced to return and to start brewing again. His brewmaster was gone, so he experimented and managed to succeed. In the summer of 1937 Sophie and their daughter Eva also returned to Moncada. Since they had run out of supplies for the brewery during the next winter, they were allowed temporarily to close shop. They returned to Locarno. This involved obstacles such as walking 13 km from Moncada to the French consulate in Barcelona (and back) just to obtain visas for transit through France to Switzerland. Public transport had broken down, and they had no car. When the civil war in Spain ended and their temporary permission to stay in Switzerland, which had been repeatedly extended, finally expired in 1939, they tried to return to Spain, but now Germany was at war with France. After obtaining entry visas for Spain in January 1940, Gerhard took a plane from Rome and Sophie and Eva a ship from Genoa to Barcelona, with their modified German passports that had a red "J" (for Jewish) in them. The ship was stopped at sea by the French Navy and directed to Marseille where they spent a whole week on board and upon interrogation barely escaped imprisonment before the ship was allowed to continue to Barcelona, not without leaving much of its freight and some passengers in Marseille.

Their stored belongings had been put out on the street for grabs and by lucky coincidence [7, p. 139] they found some of their cabinets, one of which happened to contain Hedwig's diary [6]. Sophia saved and later transcribed this handwritten diary, and it is the only source of essential information about Stefan Cohn-Vossen's childhood in Breslau. They continued with brewing and running a beer garden in their old location in Moncada, and with much hard work they were able to make a living. When the German army had reached the Pyrenees and was threatening to enter Spain, they were so desperate that they planned to commit suicide and include their daughter, should this invasion start [6, p. 135]. Fortunately it did not, and after Hitler's Germany suffered losses in Africa, Italy and Russia, they gathered new hope and decided to have another child, Esteban Cohn-Vossen, who was born in January 1943. In 1956, they sold their brewing license and the business to a larger brewery (Damm) in Barcelona. The sales contract contained a clause that would grant their son lifelong employment in the new company, should he want it. In fact, Esteban became an engineer and worked in the new brewery until his retirement.

In the same year they received some financial compensation from the government of West Germany for the loss of their real estate which had been confiscated when they left Germany in 1933. Gerhard died in 1981 and Sophie in 1999, both in Barcelona.

Their daughter Eva trained as an opera singer, one of her classmates was Montserrat Caballè, and after some engagements at the Nuremberg opera she moved to France in 1959 to marry Zygmunt Ehrenfreund, a former acquaintance from Barcelona. Zygmunt Ehrenfreund was born May 26, 1923, in Jasło, a small town in the south of Poland that was occupied by the German army in September 1939. Together with his father Jacob, he fled to Lwów which belonged at that time to the Soviet-occupied part of Poland and today to Ukraine (Lviv). From there they were deported to Siberia, where they spent the entire Second World War. After their release in 1945 they were the only survivors of their entire family. They left Poland and spent a year in a camp for displaced persons near Salzburg. Jacob died there, and in 1946 Zygmunt had finally found refuge in France.[6] He worked as a textile merchant and after her marriage Eva became a German language teacher. In 1960, they had a daughter Gisèle, who became an interpreter, and in 1964 a son, Jacques, who holds a chair for Jewish history at Lausanne. Both children moved to Israel, as did Eva and Zygmunt after their retirement. Zygmunt died on June 19, 2009, and Eva on January 25, 2010, in Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, the villa and former brewery in Moncada (today Montcada i Reixac) has been converted into a center for cultural events, named "Casa Larratea".[7]

## 5 His parents

Emanuel Cohn, born in 1860, and Hedwig Vohssen, born in 1863, were impressive personalities. Emanuel had 10 older brothers and

[6] Jacques Ehrenfreund, personal communication.

[7] https://www.montcada.cat/el-municipi/guia-del-municipi/equipaments/centre-cultural-casa-larratea

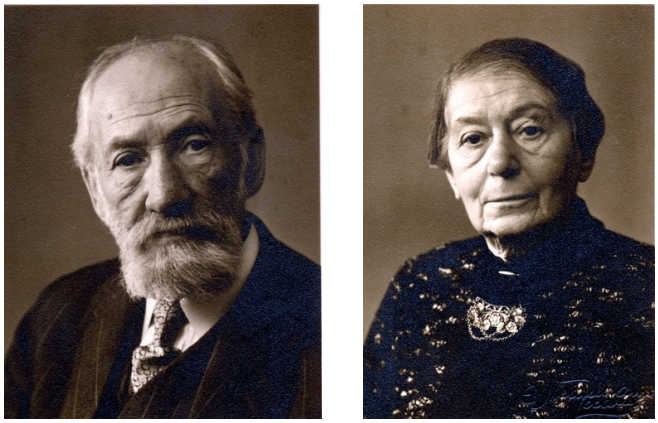


*Figure 6.* Emanuel and Hedwig Cohn-Vossen.
(Photo courtesy of Esteban Cohn-Vossen.)

sisters. He grew up in the Silesian town of Oppeln (today Opole, Poland) and was the only one among the siblings to receive higher education. He studied law and his doctoral thesis (at the age of 23!) is available under [4]. He was a highly respected lawyer and notary. According to [7, pp. 54ff], the University of Breslau wanted to hire him as a professor, provided he would be baptized, which he refused. Since the surname Cohn was quite frequent, in 1919 Emanuel and Hedwig asked for and obtained permission to have it officially changed into Cohn-Vossen. This applied also to their children.

His wife Hedwig Helene Vohssen came from a rich merchant family; her father David Vohssen was co-owner of the company "Gideon & Vohssen" in Cologne while her mother Elise Perutz came from an upper class family in Teplitz (today Teplice, Czech Republic). Her maternal grandfather was successful as a banker and mine manager. Thus, Emanuel married into liberal circles. He and his father-in-law were Freemasons. Hedwig Vohssen was very much interested in both the arts and politics. She loved Italy and Italian architecture and made frequent trips, for instance to Venice [5]. Apparently she also corresponded with Jewish intellectuals. A letter of Franz Rosenzweig from March 7, 1918, addressed to her can be found in [23, p. 66f]. They discussed questions of Zionism, and also Hermann Badt participated in these discussions.

In Breslau the family had a rich social life, for instance, participating in the salon of Alfred and Toni Neisser, well-known philanthropists with a large art collection in their Villa Neisser. The Cohn-Vossens also lived in a villa in Kleinburg, a wealthy residential district of Breslau. Moreover, they owned another house with several rental apartments and they were well-off financially. Presumably part of their wealth came from Hedwig's considerable dowry.

She inspired her three sons with her intellectual versatility, in particular Stefan, who was not only interested in mathematics but also in music and politics. Much to her dismay, her husband Emanuel was not very interested in the arts and seemed to spend most of his time with his law office. He encouraged his two older sons Berthold and Gerhard to study law.

In March 1933 Emanuel and Hedwig Cohn-Vossen immigrated to Locarno, Switzerland. Except for a tentative attempt to settle in Barcelona in 1935/36, they stayed in Switzerland until their deaths in 1947 (Emanuel) and 1949 (Hedwig).

## 6 Epilogue

In 2014 a memorial colloquium for Stefan Cohn-Vossen took place in Cologne, during which a newly built seminar room was dedicated to him. The event was attended by his son Richard Cohn-Vossen and his nephew Esteban Cohn-Vossen, who generously contributed personal remembrances and all the photos in this article. Details on the event can be found via [24]. In his opening speech Vice-Rector Tassilo Küpper acknowledged the injustice that had been done to Stefan Cohn-Vossen by the University of Cologne and reported of a similar formal declaration from University of Wrocław (formerly the University of Breslau), which acknowledged the injustice done to Gerhard Cohn-Vossen through the revocation of his PhD title on March 15, 1940.[8]

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