

Suhl – Minor Differences

NARRATOR

During the Nazi era, the Greifzu Company in Suhl manufactured auto parts and tools. It was run by Fritz Greifzu and his father, Leonhard.

The second son of the family, Paul Greifzu, was a famous race car driver. His greatest achievement was winning first place at the 1938 German Grand Prix at the Nürburgring. Paul was also involved in the company and worked there as a foreman.

Like many companies in Suhl, the Greifzuses employed forced laborers during the Nazi era. In 1942, several Ukrainian women were brought to the company. One of them is Oksana Yarovenko.

Much of what we know about the Greifzu case is based on Yarovenko's memories. In 1997, she was invited to Suhl as part of a student project at the Rennsteig School, where she spoke about her time in Germany.

Oksana Jarowenko was just 18 years old when she was deported from her homeland and brought to Suhl. At the Greifzu factory, she was forced to perform hard labor alongside eleven other young women from Ukraine.

According to Jarowenko's recollections, Fritz Greifzu treated the twelve Ukrainian women exceptionally well by the standards of the time. Against the police's wishes, he initially housed them in a barracks on the company grounds. Later, the police temporarily took them to a camp. Conditions there were poor, and rations were scarce. Fritz Greifzu provided the women with additional food until he eventually managed to bring them back to the company. The Greifzuses also invited the women to a family wedding. Fritz Greifzu provided them with a sewing machine so that they could sew appropriate clothing for the occasion,

Jarowenko remembered one moment in April 1945 with particular clarity:

The war was nearly over. The Allies were advancing steadily. One day, American soldiers appeared on the Greifzu factory grounds in Suhl. It was not clear exactly what the soldiers wanted. At the time, Jarowenko believed that the Americans intended to shoot Fritz Greifzu. She, along with several other Ukrainian women, intervened. The women showed the soldiers several photographs.

These photographs have survived to this day. They show Fritz Greifzu standing amicably amidst the twelve Ukrainian women, all of them smiling into the camera.

It was because of this image, Jarowenko believed, that the American soldiers spared Fritz Greifzu's life. The photograph also resurfaced in post-war records.

Shortly after the end of the war, the Greifzu family firm was slated for expropriation by the Soviet occupation authorities. The objective of these so-called sequestrations was to dismantle Nazi-era capitalism and establish a socialist planned economy. The Greifzuses were considered to be particularly compromised, as both sons and the father had been members of the Nazi Party.

ORDER

Suhl, December 21, 1945. The Commission for the Implementation of Orders 124 and 126, whose appointed members were duly represented at today's session, has unanimously approved the application for the expropriation of the firm Greifzu, Suhl.

Grounds: The business managers were designated by the FDGB, the Soviet-controlled trade union, as "declared adherents" of the NSDAP and as reactionary. In accordance with existing regulations regarding the dismantling of reactionary forces, sequestration was ordered.

NARRATOR

The Greifzuses filed an objection to the expropriation proceedings. They attached several statements from current and former employees to their objection. The toolmaker Franz Seeber recounted:

FRANZ SEEBER

During my two years of employment, I came to know not only the firm of Leonhard Greifzu but also its owners very well. I can attest that the owners never made themselves politically conspicuous in any objectionable way, nor did they ever disavow their anti-fascist convictions. For a long time—indeed, for years—Mr. Fritz Greifzu had openly expressed within the business that he did not believe the war would end in victory; this earned him a stern reprimand from the Nazis. He was also held in ill regard for having greeted Jewish people. (...)

NARRATOR

The toolmaker Otto Roßmann attested that the Greifzuses treated the forced laborers in a thoroughly decent manner.

OTTO ROSSMANN

I, Otto Roßmann, was employed as a maintenance craftsman at the firm of Leonhard Greifzu in Suhl for approximately seven years. I am pleased to confirm that the owners of the firm never engaged in activities as active Nazis. I would especially like to mention that Mr. Fritz Greifzu repeatedly demonstrated his social conscience through the excellent accommodation and additional provisions he provided to the Eastern workers.

NARRATOR

The Greifzu family's appeal was successful. The Commission's written ruling stated that their membership in the NSDAP was merely nominal; the family was not to be considered fascist or reactionary. The photographs were also mentioned; according to the ruling, they demonstrate that the relationship between the Greifzu family and the female forced laborers was "exceptionally good." The business was not expropriated.

After the war ended, the racing driver Paul Greifzu was able to successfully resume his career. In 1952, he died in a training accident in Dessau. Today, a street and a school in Suhl bear his name. One of his racing cars is on display at the Suhl Vehicle Museum. On Wikipedia, the racing driver Paul is currently described as "a little Oskar Schindler of Suhl"—even though it is actually his brother Fritz who should be credited.

There is no public commemoration of the twelve Ukrainian female forced laborers.