

Tbilisi 2022 Abstract Submission

Title

Settlers from Württemberg as wine producers in the multicultural environment of Azerbaijan 1816-1935 and their role in the wine industry, using the example of the Vohrer family in Helenendorf

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

history, viticulture, wine trade, German settlers, pietists, colonization, Azerbaijan, Caucasus, Helenendorf, migration

Research Question

What were the factors that led to the Vohrer family's rise to become a nationally important wine producer? What role did the multicultural environment play here?

Methods

Qualitative evaluation of primary and secondary sources, including micro-historical case studies

Results

The Vohrer wine company occupied an outstanding position and played a significant role in the economic transformation process in the South Caucasus.

Abstract

1816 was a year without summer. There was a severe famine in Württemberg. As a result, about 17,000 people emigrated in 1817 for economic reasons to escape impoverishment, partly also for religious reasons. More than 5,500 people shipped down the Danube from Ulm on riverboats, so-called Ulmer Schachteln, to southern Russia after the Russian crown had recruited colonists. About half of them moved on to the South Caucasus, because as Pietists they believed they would see the Second Coming of Christ near Mount Ararat. The families had been promised land near Tbilisi, but the last arrivals had no more room there, so 135 families had to move 180 km further towards Elizavetpol in present-day Azerbaijan, where they founded the settlement of Helenendorf. Among them were the Vohrer and Hummel families from Reutlingen, who rose to become important wine producers in the second half of the 19th century and founded modern viticulture in Azerbaijan.

The paper examines, using the example of the Vohrer family, the factors that led to the success of the company, the role played by the multi-ethnic environment of Azerbaijan, where they got their knowledge of viticulture, what viticultural techniques they used, what was their relationship with the local population and what traces they left in the South Caucasus.

Like all settlers in Helenendorf, the Vohrer family initially lived in very modest circumstances. Around 1860, the tailor Christoph Vohrer began to trade in wine, which he produced on his small estate. He steadily reinvested the proceeds. By 1910, the family owned several wine estates with a total of 4700 hectares of vines and also

purchased grapes. Their 30 wine cellars, up to three stories high, had a storage capacity of more than 9 million liters. The average annual wine production was 4.3 million liters. In 1910, the turnover amounted to 1.6 million rubles, which represented 13.4% of the turnover of all industrial and commercial companies in Elizavetpol Governorate. 80% of the wine produced was sold to the Soviet Union. Vohrer had branches in Elizavetpol, Tbilisi, Baku, Batumi, Ashgabad, Merv, Kars, Aleksandropol, Tomsk and Krasnovodsk. In 1916, the value of Vohrer's company was about 8.5 million rubles, or 17 million Reichmarks.

On the one hand, their business success was based on their pietistic attitude: the Vohrers were pious and hard-working, all male members of the family worked in the company. Other management tasks were delegated to relatives or trusted persons of many years' standing. The family maintained harmonious relations with the local population and knew how to adapt to their environment. They systematically expanded their business by taking advantage of every opportunity when a large Armenian landowner had to sell his estate due to liquidity problems. In addition, high margins could be achieved in the Russian market.

But in particular, they combined traditional viticulture with modern knowledge and techniques in the vineyard and cellar and in this way achieved not only wines that regularly won prizes at international exhibitions, but also above-average yields. The sons mostly studied at the most renowned viticultural schools, either Landwirtschaftliche Hochschule Hohenheim (Württemberg, Germany) or at the Lehranstalt für Weinbau in Geisenheim (Hessen, Germany) and thus always brought up-to-date knowledge to the company. The Karajer winery developed into a state-awarded model estate, where new cultivation methods or international varieties such as Riesling, Mourvèdre, Cabernet, Pinot Gris, Malbec or Muscat were tested. An important role was played by a sophisticated irrigation system for which Vohrer had commissioned Persian experts. Vohrer imported the most modern equipment for wine production, such as Seitz filters, and maintained its own wine laboratory and barrel production. The fact that the region was located at a cultural hub probably had a positive overall effect on the company's development.

After a brief period (1918-1920) during which Azerbaijan was a republic, circumstances changed. With the Sovietization, the Vohrer family lost the company and the property was transformed into sovkhoses, but it was possible to transfer the vineyards of the winegrowers in Helenendorf and neighboring villages into a cooperative, which became the most important wine producer in Azerbaijan under the name Konkordia from 1922 to 1927. The leading Helenendorf families, above all Vohrer and Hummel, were able to remain in the management. Konkordia processed 42% of the grape harvest of all of Azerbaijan and was able to establish a trade network of 183 stores in the USSR. Last but not least, the cooperative was an instrument of cultural self-government and served the common good, for example, by financing the schools that were open to German and Azerbaijani children. In 1930, forced collectivization took place, the structures of the German settlers were broken up, people were arrested in many cases and systematically harassed from 1935. In October 1941, all remaining Caucasian Germans were deported to Kazakhstan. Only a few members of the Vohrer family survived, among them Julius Vohrer, who after his arrest in 1935 was exchanged for a communist at the intervention of relatives in Germany and was released.

German-Azerbaijani relations are complex, but also ambivalent. The wineries in the Göygöl region often refer to Christoph Vohrer when citing the roots of modern viticulture in Azerbaijan. The cultural heritage of the Caucasian Germans is now being cultivated in the former settlements and dialogue is being maintained, even though it is a burden for both sides that many individual fates of the deported ethnic Germans cannot be clarified to this day.

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