

The Cigar Factory of Isay Rottenberg

The Hidden History of a Jewish Entrepreneur in Nazi Germany

Hella Rottenberg and Sandra Rottenberg
Translated by Jonathan Reeder
Afterword by Robert Rotenberg

In 1932, Isay Rottenberg, a Jewish paper merchant, bought a cigar factory in Germany: Deutsche Zigarren-Werke. When his competitors, supported by Nazi authorities, tried to shut it down, the headstrong entrepreneur refused to give up the fight.

Isay Rottenberg was born into a large Jewish family in Russian Poland in 1889 and grew up in Lodz. He left for Berlin at the age of eighteen to escape military service, moving again in 1917 to Amsterdam on the occasion of his marriage. In 1932 he moved to Germany to take over a bankrupt cigar factory. With newfangled American technology, it was the most modern at the time. The energetic and ambitious Rottenberg was certain he could bring it back to life, and with newly hired staff of 670 workers, the cigar factory was soon back in business.

Six months later, Hitler came to power and the Nazi government forbade the use of machines in the cigar industry so that traditional hand-rollers could be re-employed. That was when the real struggle began. More than six hundred qualified machine workers and engineers would lose their jobs if the factory had to close down. Supported by the local authorities he managed to keep the factory going, but in 1935 he was imprisoned following accusations of fraud. The factory was expropriated by the Deutsche Bank. When he was released six months later thanks to the efforts of the Dutch consul, he brought a lawsuit of his own. His fight for rehabilitation and restitution of his property would continue until Kristallnacht in 1938.

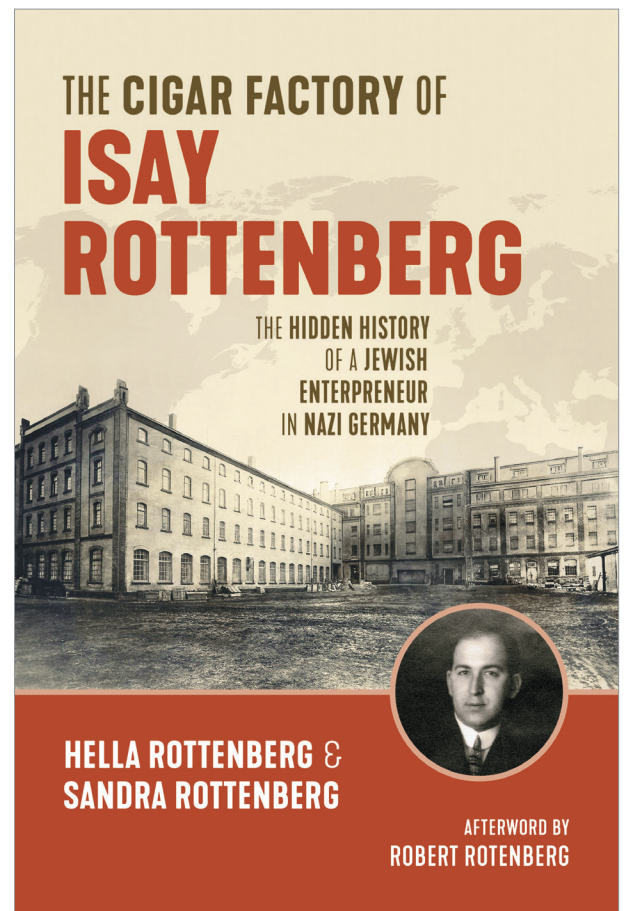
The Cigar Factory of Isay Rottenberg is written by two of Rottenberg's granddaughters, who knew little of their grandfather's past growing up in Amsterdam until a call for claims for stolen or confiscated property started them on a journey of discovery. It includes an afterword by Robert Rotenberg, criminal defense lawyer and author of bestselling legal thrillers.

Hella Rottenberg is a freelance writer and journalist. She worked as a political and investigative reporter and was a correspondent in Prague and Moscow during the collapse of communism. Her publications include books about the smuggling of a Malevich collection and the back office of criminal justice in the Netherlands.

Sandra Rottenberg works as a freelance journalist and producer for a wide range of media, public debates and political fora. She produces podcasts and chairs public debates on social and political issues. Her publications include a bibliography on women in the media and a history of the squatters' movement in the Netherlands.

Jonathan Reeder, a native of New York and long-time Amsterdam resident, enjoys a dual career as a literary translator and performing musician. Alongside his work as a professional bassoonist he translates opera libretti and articles on classical music, as well as contemporary Dutch fiction, essays, poetry, and non-fiction.

Robert Rotenberg is a Canadian criminal defence lawyer and writer, based in Toronto. He is the author of several bestselling novels, including *Old City Hall*, *The Guilty Plea*, *Stray Bullets*, *Stranglehold*, and *Heart of the City*. His most recent book is *Downfall* (2021).



234 pp. | \$24.99 | January 2022
978-1-77112-550-5



WILFRID LAURIER
UNIVERSITY PRESS

MEDIA, EXAMINATION, AND REVIEW COPIES

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Distributors: UTP (Canada) 1-800-565-9523 | Ingram (USA) 1-866-400-5351

PRAISE FOR *THE CIGAR FACTORY OF ISAY ROTTENBERG*

“Two granddaughters go in search of the hidden history of their Jewish grandfather, and they uncover an amazing story: how he bought a cigar factory near Dresden as the Nazi’s came to power in Germany, and how he fought defiantly to keep it operating, at the risk of his life. An astonishing portrait of what life was truly like for a Jewish businessman in Nazi Germany, and an exemplary example of how two determined women stripped aside family mythologies and arrived at the surprising truth about the family patriarch.”

– Michael Ignatieff, author of *On Consolation*

“Who wouldn’t like to wake up one day to discover a previously unknown family history that illuminates the world events of its day? This is precisely what happened to the highly regarded Rotenberg family of Toronto when the revealing story of their ancestor, Isay Rottenberg, unexpectedly came to light in 2017. Isay’s struggle to retain his successful cigar factory in Germany in the early days of the Hitler regime is a detailed and historically valuable microcosm of how quickly violence overwhelmed German society in the early 1930s. *The Cigar Factory of Isay Rottenberg* is also the poignant story of newly discovered ties with living European relatives. And the cherished continuities that bind families together.”

– Erna Paris, author of *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History*

“The Cigar factory of Isay Rottenberg is a fascinating story of resilience and survival. Much as their ancestor fought his fight, the Rottenbergs have left no stone unturned to preserve his story. Thank God they did! They write the way you should smoke a cigar - savouring every moment without ever letting the flame go out!”

– Mark Critch, performer, and author of *Son of a Critch*

“The extraordinary story of a determined, inventive man in lethally dangerous times and the legacy of bravery, tenacity and endurance shared by his widespread family.”

– Anna Porter, author of *The Appraisal and Deceptions*

“A remarkable window into the life of a Jewish family, just one among the millions who endured so much, who struggled so valiantly to maintain human dignity in those shadow years of the early 1930s when even the cruelest heart could not imagine a time when murder and industrial slaughter would become the German national past time. A story of redemption, courage, and honour that leaves one shuddering in awe.”

– Wade Davis, ethnographer, photographer, filmmaker, author of *MiMagdalena, River of Dreams*

“Two journalist cousins retrieve their grandfather from the silenced history of a factory stolen and a family saved. An enthralling quest.”

– Nessa Rapoport, author of *Evening: A Novel*

“A powerful and riveting account of a family suddenly discovering their heroic ancestor’s past, a story that reminds us of an individual’s power to resist the brutal killing machine of the Nazis. In the deluge of fatal statistics from the Holocaust, this book is an example of particular lives impacted, the human stories of families and people that all too often get lost. Now the world can see the brave and unstinting face of Isay Rottenberg.”

– Evan Solomon, columnist, political journalist, and radio host

