

## Wuppertal Traces of a glorious textile past

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Fig. 1:  
Old Wuppertal postcard, probably early 1970s. Photo: D. Nicolai.

### Abstract:

Wuppertal today is a town of 350,000 inhabitants in the densely populated land of North Rhine-Westphalia / Bergisches Land in Germany and merged from six cities, Elberfeld and Barmen being the most important ones, in 1929. The name derives from the river, Wupper, along which textile handicraft developed since medieval times, and, starting in the mid-18th century, transformed into a wealthy innovative textile industry centre, known as the German Manchester. Famous quality products like Goldzack elastic or Bemberg lining came from there, it's the birthplace of Aspirin by Bayer, the *Rauhfaser tapete* (a popular ingrain wallpaper), but also Friedrich Engels, co-author of the Communist Manifest, and the poet Else Lasker-Schüler were born here. In 1900 the *Schwebebahn* (suspension railway) was inaugurated, then and still a symbol for technical innovation, connecting the city following the Wupper. Beautiful villas and industrial architecture manifest the textile past.

Today the Pina Bausch dance company and the sculptor Tony Cragg found their home in Wuppertal.

This paper tries to explore this intriguing place via its textile context.

### Content:

Introduction / City history / Religious diversity and social / Famous companies and their products / Textile museums / People from Wuppertal / Wuppertal today / Selected Bibliography / Links and addresses



Fig. 2:  
Illustration found in an old tourist brochure, probably late 1950s. Photo: D. Nicolai.

## Introduction

I came to Wuppertal for the first time in spring 2016, while I was working as a costume designer in nearby Cologne. I was looking everywhere for a very specific fabric and could not find it, when I remembered the company Buddeberg & Weck in Wuppertal. I did not know them personally, but their salesman regularly visited costume shops at operas I was working for – and I had always been impressed by his suitcases loaded with the most diverse fabric swatches.

So I decided to go there, and I immediately was enchanted by Wuppertal, and of course, by Buddeberg & Weck.

## City History

The writer Heinrich Böll, who obtained the Nobel Prize for literature in 1972, describes Wuppertal as a city without make-up and points out that this city was built by men of enterprise who lived in their own city, trying to impress with prestigious projects and private art collections and not with diplomacy.

The city of Wuppertal today counts around 350,000 inhabitants and is located in the densely populated land of North Rhine Westphalia in Germany. The area is called Bergisches Land, which refers to the landscape of smooth green hills. In 1929 six former independent cities, each one with a specific textile tradition, lined along the river Wupper, among them Barmen and Elberfeld being the most important ones, were united and given a new name after a long discussion: Wuppertal. The city seal depicts a clew of yarn as a symbol of the textile history. It is a city without a true centre and a peculiar mix of industrial buildings, the largest quarter of turn-of-the-century villas in Europe (*Briller Viertel*), 31 (only 10 of them still active) railway stations, some of them built like castles, prestigious cultural buildings, a zoo and a botanical

garden. A unique example is the famous *Schwebebahn* (suspension railway), inaugurated in 1900 by Emperor Wilhelm II, proclaiming the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship. It is still in use and transporting up to 75,000 passengers daily. 4,500 buildings are listed at the monuments administration.

Textile tradition began in medieval times when the area was famous for bleaching, still remembered with the annual festival of the bleachers. In the 17th century developed the trade of the Turkish Red Dye, together with weaving braids, called Barmer products ('Barmer Artikel'). This became the cradle of Germany's chemical, machine and textile industrialisation, the 'German Manchester' with its peak between 1830 and 1885. During this period an annual fair, the *Welttextilmesse*, took place in Wuppertal for international trade and exchange. Wuppertal needed a lot of energy for the mills: it came as coal from the *Ruhrgebiet* (the Ruhr district). The first German steam engine railway track and the first rack railway were built here: the need of transport, importing coal and raw material and exporting the products, was essential to the industry. The chemical giant Bayer was founded in Wuppertal and later moved to Leverkusen needing more space. Friedrich Bayer's private palace with an eclectic interior design – camouflaged with a modest street facade – is a lawyer's office today.

Wuppertal is also the place of one of the first big department stores in Germany founded in 1889 by Leonhard Tietz, the brother of Hermann Tietz who founded the first Berlin department store Hertie. His strategy of no obligation to shop, fixed prices and the possibility to exchange products guaranteed a huge success. Both Tietz families had to flee Nazi Germany, both were restituted after the war, and their department stores continued as Kaufhof (Leonhard Tietz) and Karstadt (Herrmann Tietz).

After the war and rebuilding the considerable damages the textile industry flourished until the end of the 1960s. Since the 1980s and the globalisation of the textile market the local textile industry has been diminishing. Among the last remaining big companies are Berning (producing metal studs and closings for jeans), ENKA (medical fibers), Vorwerk (carpets) and YKK as the European centre of the Japanese enterprise for zippers.

## Religious diversity and social engagement

Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx' co-author to write the communist manifest, was born in Wuppertal to rich textile entrepreneur parents. He was sensitive to the Social Question because he witnessed the misery among the textile workers. Wuppertal became the centre of the socialist party movement and fight for social justice such as the introduction of health insurance (*Krankenkassen*). One of the leading German health insurance companies is still called *Barmer Ersatzkasse*. 'Elberfelder System' meant the social engagement of the bourgeois class, supporting mainly schools and kindergartens.

In the period of the emerging Third Reich Wuppertal was the place of aggressive conflicts between the nationalist and socialist workers' unions, known as the Wuppertal Union court process. (<http://www.gewerkschaftsprozesse.de/index.php>)

The Wuppertal area changed its rulers several times during the centuries, so there was never an obligation for a specific religious denomination. Attracting workers from everywhere it became and still is the area of the most open religious diversity in Germany.

In 1934 the Wuppertal protestant priest Karl Barth of the *Bekennende Kirche* issued the declaration of Barmen to stand against the Nazi politics. Wuppertal was also the first German city to twin itself with an Israeli city, Beersheva in 1977.

The old synagogue today serves as a museum and study centre with an exhibition *Tora and Textiles*.

Wuppertal was awarded the title 'Place of Diversity' by the German Government in 2008.



Fig. 3:  
Goldzack Elastic. Photo: D. Nicolai.

### Famous companies and their products

Wuppertal was never the place of beautiful silk fabrics like Lyon – but it was the centre of technical supply for the textile industry, such as buttons, braids, linings and manufacturing machines needed for textile production. Nearby Solingen is famous for its quality scissors. Some brands of special products are still remembered and are part of the Wuppertal identity.

#### 1st example: Goldzack elastic

The Goldzack company, founded in 1868, producing various kind of elastic articles, is best known for its elastic by metre with a golden zigzag pattern – which has no further function than to distinguish it from other elastic bands. Introduced in 1934, it was in use in each German household. By 1950 they were market leaders. In 2003 they were adjudged bankrupt. The haberdashery articles were sold to the company Willian Prym who continues to sell them successfully.

#### 2nd example: Bemberg lining

Bemberg lining is another famous brand name originating in Wuppertal for high quality lining. Founded in 1792 as a wine-dealer, the company developed into a textile empire with partners in Augsburg and Krefeld. In 1903 the *J.P. Bemberg AG* was founded. They began experimenting with rayon and cupro rayon silk, Cuprophan, and branches in Japan, Italy, the UK and the US (Beaunit Mills Inc., NY) were founded in the 1930ies. In 1925 *Vereinigte Glanzstoff-Fabriken AG* took over and founded the American Bemberg Corporation New York and Seta Bemberg in Gozzano in Italy. During the war 70% of the production buildings were destroyed, and by 1962 the company flourished again employing over 3,000 workers with the synthetic fibre *Perlon* and built the first 'sky scraper' in the city centre, still dominating the city silhouette.

In 1971 Bemberg and Glanzstoff merged to ENKA.

#### 3rd example: Riri zippers

The zipper company Riri (*Rippe und Rille* meaning rib and groove) was founded by the Swiss businessman Martin Winterhalter in Wuppertal in 1923 after he bought the patent No. 99924 for a slide fastener from the US inventor. He immediately knew that this system to close and

open garments was more than a brand: it was the magic of a new era. Only here in Wuppertal he found the technical skills to develop the necessary machines. In 1925 already 10,000 metres of Riri were produced daily. In 1936, opposing the Nazi regulations he left Germany for Switzerland and re-established his company in Mendrisio, where it is still located. The life of this adventurous man reads like a novel. (Baur 1989)



Fig. 4:  
Logo *textil im Wuppertal* © Bergischer Geschichtsverein.

## Textile museums

The *Bandwebermuseum* remembers where the Wuppertal textile industry came from: it is an interactive place to tell about the tradition of weaving braids.

*Die Färberei*, a former place for dyeing, is now a place of cultural interchange and the centre of 13 different textile walks through the city. Each walk highlights a different aspect of the textile past in the city and leads to the most important industrial buildings. A total of 70 plates with explanations fixed to the buildings correspond to the maps explaining the walks.

This is an initiative of the *Bergischer Geschichtsverein* and *Kulturbüro Wuppertal* and is called *textil im Wuppertal*.

The *Museum of Early Industrialisation* is located in the former Friedrich Engel's parents' house and mill and displays the history of the Wuppertal industrialisation.

The Von-der-Heydt-Museum is a Fine Art museum and not a textile museum, but it was founded by the Elberfeld textile patron's banker family von der Heydt and possesses a rich collection of impressionist and expressionist art. The Asian collection was sold to Zurich becoming the Rietberg Museum in the former Wesendonck villa, built by a Wuppertal merchant working in Switzerland.

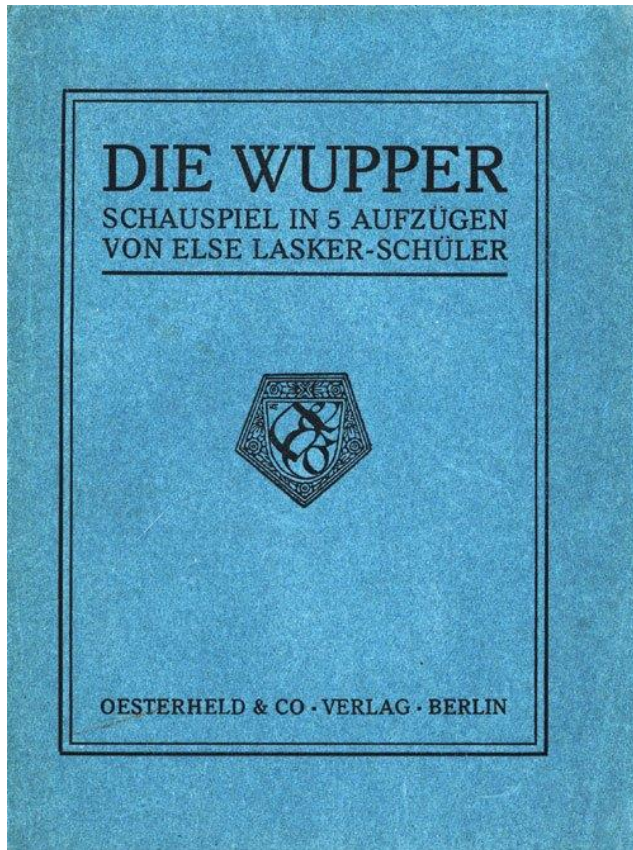


Fig. 5:  
Book cover 'Die Wupper' by Else Lasker-Schüler. Photo: D. Nicolai.

### **People from Wuppertal**

The most famous female poet of German language, Else Laser-Schüler, was born in Elberfeld. One of her theatre plays is called *Die Wupper* and tells the story of a textile worker's family. Johannes Rau, a former president of Germany was born in Wuppertal, and so was Rita Süßmuth, former president of the Bundestag (German parliament). The actor Horst Tappert was born here, internationally famous for his role as inspector Derrick. The film director Tom Tykwer comes from Wuppertal and speaks about his city as the German San Francisco because of its many stairs in the historic centre. Alice Schwarzer, the leading feminist in Germany, also was born in Wuppertal. Johann Carl Fuhlrott was born here: he discovered the Neandertal human in the nearby valley. The museum dedicated to him was closed due to financial short cut.

### **Wuppertal today**

The textile industry has been in decline since a long time, only 7% of the per capita income derives from textile industry today. The city is struggling for a new identity. Various initiatives are trying to vitalize empty buildings, like the 'Ideon Park' or the 'Engeneering Park', often subsidised by local industrialists or the Jackstädt Foundation by a former CEO of Jac, a company which produced adhesive foils.

There is a vivid cultural life. Wuppertal's opera is world-famous with the Pina Bausch dance company. The British sculptor Tony Craig chose Wuppertal to be his home and dedicated a sculpture park *Waldfrieden* to the city.

Wuppertal is continuing to reinvent itself.

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## **Links to museums & addresses:**

Bandwebermuseum [www.bandwebermuseum-wuppertal.de](http://www.bandwebermuseum-wuppertal.de)

Textil-im-Wuppertal [www.textil-im-wuppertal.kulturserver-bergischesland.de](http://www.textil-im-wuppertal.kulturserver-bergischesland.de)

Museum für Frühindustrialisierung [www.friedrich-engels-haus.de](http://www.friedrich-engels-haus.de)

Bergischer Geschichtsverein [www.bgv-wuppertal.de](http://www.bgv-wuppertal.de)

University of Wuppertal/Industrial Design [www.uwid.uniwuppertal.de](http://www.uwid.uniwuppertal.de)

Ausbildungszentrum der Rheinischen Textilindustrie [www.az-textil.de](http://www.az-textil.de)

Von-der-Heydt-Museum [www.vdh.netgate1.net](http://www.vdh.netgate1.net)