Dating the Gasthof Vollbrecht Photograph

Christophe Eckes* and Norbert Schappacher†

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This photograph, which was taken at Nikolausberg, near Göttingen, has been reproduced for the first time in [Brewer et Smith, 1981]. The caption prepared by Clark Kimberling for the occasion was based on inquiries which he had made during the year 1980. Kimberling’s papers related to this are now preserved at the Abteilung für Handschriften und seltene Drucke of the State and University Library at Göttingen. They contain several testimonies about the picture, by Natascha Brunswick (1909–2003)¹, Heinrich Heesch (1906–1995)², Otto Neugebauer (1899–1990), Bernhard Hermann Neumann (1909–2002), Nina Runge-Courant (1891–1991), Olga Taussky-Todd (1906–1995), Bartel Leendert Van der Waerden (1903–1996), Michael Weyl (1918–2011)³, Ernst Witt (1911–1991) and Erna Bannow-Witt ⁴. Some of these testimonies are very incomplete or contradictory. Kimberling finally decided to date this photo to 1932. The aim of this note is to refute the reasons for this dating which we are aware of, and to present instead circumstantial evidence which strongly suggests that the picture was actually taken in July 1933. Indeed, Emil Artin was staying in Göttingen between the 13th and the 15th of July 1933, delivering lectures on the classification of simple Lie groups. If this dating is correct, the Gasthof Vollbrecht photograph takes on a new meaning. In fact, at that time Emmy Noether and Paul Bernays had already been put on leave from their positions at the University of Göttingen ⁵. Hermann Weyl was about to leave Nazi Germany with his whole family and become a permanent member of the newly created Institute for Advanced Study (IAS, Princeton)⁶. Ernst Witt on the other hand had joined

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¹ Natascha Brunswick had been Emil Artin’s wife until 1958.
² Heinrich Heesch was Weyl’s assistant at the University of Göttingen during the time-period 1930–1933.
³ Hermann Weyl’s youngest son. Michael Weyl’s elder brother Fritz Joachim Weyl, who is seen on the picture, died in 1977.
⁴ Erna Bannow-Witt was born in 1911. Both Ernst Witt and his future wife are seen on the picture.
⁵ For more details about Emmy Noether’s dismissal from Göttingen University in April 1933, see in particular [Schappacher, 1993, 57].
⁶ See in particular the letter of Hermann Weyl to the founding director of the IAS Abra-
the Nazi party and the *Sturmabteilung* as of May 1933\(^7\).

**Inconclusive elements for the 1932 dating**

Among the testimonies collected by C. Kimberling in 1980 and preserved in Göttingen, only two pretend explicitly that this photograph was taken in 1932: those of Michael Weyl and of Bernhard H. Neumann.

In a letter to Kimberling from 5 May 1980, Michael Weyl claims that “all evidence points to the last summer Hermann spent in Göttingen: 1932.”\(^8\) This is misleading because many documents prove that Weyl was in Göttingen at least until the end of July 1933. For instance, on 20 July 1933, Weyl sent a letter from Göttingen to his friend Erich Hecke.\(^9\) Moreover, at the end of July 1933, Weyl was part of the doctoral examination committee of Ernst Witt’s.\(^10\) Even more explicitly, in his 1935 tribute to Emmy Noether, Weyl refers to the first weeks of the summer of 1933 he spent together with Noether in Göttingen:

> A stormy time of struggle like this one we spent in Göttingen in the summer of 1933 draws people closer together; thus I have a particularly vivid recollection of these months.\(^11\)

Nor is B.H. Neumann’s testimony more conclusive. In a letter to Kimberling dated 8 October 1980, he strongly denies that the young lady on the picture whose identity will finally remain undetermined is his wife Johanna Neumann (1914–1971).\(^12\) Then he simply states without evidence that the photograph must have been taken at the latest in 1932. In a nutshell, M. Weyl’s testimony is based on an erroneous assumption and Neumann’s is not connected, even indirectly, to the event represented by this photograph.

Furthermore, if the picture were indeed taken in 1932, one would have to explain Artin’s presence in it. Peter Roquette has tried to do this in a 2008 article on Weyl and Noether:

> There is a nice photo of Noether with Weyl and family, together with a group of mathematicians posing in front of the “Gasthof Vollbrecht”. The photo is published in [Brewer et Smith, 1981] and dated 1932. Since Artin is seen as a member of the hiking party, it seems very probable that the photo was taken on the occasion of Artin’s famous Göttingen lectures on class field theory which took place from February 29 to March 2, 1932.\(^13\)

\(^7\) [Kersten, 2000, 158] and [Schappacher, 1993, 66].

\(^8\) Letter of Michael Weyl to Clark Kimberling from the 5th of May 1980, SUB-Göttingen, Cod. Ms. Kimberling 42.

\(^9\) Letter of Hermann Weyl to Erich Hecke from the 20th of July 1933, ETH-Bibliothek, Zurich, Hs : 91 598b. For a commentary about this letter, see [Eckes, 2016].

\(^10\) [Kersten, 2000, 158].

\(^11\) Reproduced in [Dick, 1981, 132].

\(^12\) Born von Caemmerer.

\(^13\) [Roquette, 2008, 306]. Several copies of the transcription of Artin’s lectures on class field theory by Olga Taussky are preserved at the University of Göttingen.
But this hypothesis is plainly contradicted by the ladies’ short-sleeve dresses and the leaves on the trees. Furthermore, we do not know of any other visit of Artin’s to Göttingen during the summer of 1932. This suggests considering the alternative dating of the photograph, to July 1933.

Evidence for dating the photograph to July 1933

Two direct witnesses of the scene have independently dated this photograph to July 1933: Hermann Weyl and Ernst Witt. Weyl mentions the picture in his correspondence, which we have recently discovered, with his childhood friend, the geographer Carl Rathjens, also a native of Elmsbourn (1887–1966)\textsuperscript{14}. Rathjens renews contact with Weyl at the end of World War II. Rathjens, who was an opponent of Nazism, belonged in 1946–1947 to a denazification commission at the University of Hamburg. It is in this context that he inquired about Weyl’s opinion on Witt’s opinion on Witt\textsuperscript{15}. Weyl responds to Rathjens’ request as follows:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

There can be little doubt that Weyl describes here the group photograph in front of the Gasthof Vollbrecht. Moreover, he clearly says that Artin visited Göttingen during the summer of 1933.

Witt’s testimony is consistent with Weyl’s claim. In a letter to Kimberling dated 11 November 1980, Ernst Witt answers Kimberling’s questions about the photograph as follows:

\begin{quote}
Das Bild wurde auf einem Ausflug zum “Kerstlingröderfeld”\textsuperscript{17} gemacht, im Juli 1933, im Anschluß an einen Vortrag von Prof. Artin über die Klassifikation einfacher Liegruppen. Über diesen Vortrag gibt es eine Ausarbeitung von Heinrich
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14}The letters of Hermann Weyl to Carl Rathjens and the copies of Rathjens’ letters to Weyl are preserved in Carl Rathjens archive, \textit{SUB-Hamburg, Carl von Ossietzky}, NRA : Ba : W 174-191. We have discovered this correspondence in March of 2015, while studying the correspondence between Hermann Weyl and Erich Hecke. Erich Hecke and Rathjens both made their career in Hamburg. For more details about this discovery, see [Eckes, 2016].


\textsuperscript{17}The Gasthof Vollbrecht is located at Nikolausberg, North-east of Göttingen, not at the Kerstlingröder Feld, which is due East of Göttingen. Both places were common destinations for hikes from Göttingen, which may explain Witt’s confusion.
Witt provides here an important clarification: in July 1933, Artin was actually lecturing at the University of Göttingen on the classification of simple Lie groups, a theme of particular interest to Weyl. These lectures are similar to a 1933 article by van der Waerden on the same topic and they took place between the 13th and the 15th of July 1933. A copy of the lecture notes by Heesch and Witt is extant in the library of the Göttingen Mathematics Institute. Moreover, at the very beginning of a letter to Helmut Hasse from 21 July 1933, Emmy Noether clearly refers to Artin’s lectures on Lie groups at the University of Göttingen which took place “last week [vorige Woche]”. In addition, Weyl alludes to Artin’s presentation in the second part of his lectures on Lie groups and Lie algebras at the IAS in 1934–1935. A clear reference to Artin’s lectures can also be found in [Witt, 1941, 290].

To sum up, Artin lectured on Lie groups at the University of Göttingen between the 13th and the 15th of July 1933. Moreover, Weyl and Witt attended these lectures and they both independently relate this event to the group photograph in front of the Gasthof Vollbrecht. These are very good reasons to date the photograph to July 1933.

Références


19. H.G. Bigalke mentions Artin’s lectures on Lie groups in [Bigalke, 1988, 82] without giving any precise date. P. Roquette and G. Frei also allude to Artin’s lectures on simple Lie groups in [Roquette et Frei, 2008, 301] and in [Roquette et al., 2014]. They erroneously date these lectures to 1931 or 1932.

20. [Hawkins, 2000] and [Eckes, 2014].

21. van der Waerden, 1933.


23. [Weyl, 1935, 93-94].

24. This article is reproduced in [Witt, 1998, 213-252] with a detailed commentary by Ulf Rehmann.


