



Dr. Elijahu (Eli) Rosenberg, Strasbourg, 2013

This edition is dedicated to  
Dr. Elijahu Rosenberg, ז"ל, who accompanied my research over the years attentively and promoted it generously and who followed in the footsteps of his great grandfather, Chaim Kahan. Rosenberg was a geologist, a pioneer in oil and gas explorations in Israel. It was he who discovered, in June 1999, Israel's first offshore gas field, *Noa* (as part of the *Tethys field*), the beginning of many gas discoveries in the Mediterranean Sea.



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# Acknowledgements

The idea to write about the history of the entrepreneurs and oil wholesalers, the Kahan dynasty, was born in the context of the project “Charlottengrad und Scheunenviertel. East-European Jewish Migrants in Berlin, 1918–1939” at the Free University of Berlin. During a research trip to Israel as part of the project, I was introduced to descendants of the family. They came from Eastern Europe, had lived in Weimar Berlin and therefore fitted into the research field. In the exhibition “Berlin Transit,” which our project organized together with the Jewish Museum Berlin, one room was dedicated to the Kahans. During the preparations for the exhibition, I met Jonah Gavrieli and saw the Haimi-Cohen family archive, which he kept. Jonah encouraged me to write about the history of the Kahans. The resulting book was published in German by Wallstein Verlag in Göttingen, but the descendants in Israel and the United States could not read it. Jonah initiated and took over the job to organize the translation project.

The research took me to fourteen countries and to numerous state archives—in Russia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, Denmark, England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, the USA and Israel. Above all, however, my findings are based on the Haimi-Cohen archive. My special thanks therefore go to Jonah Gavrieli.

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Many thanks to Uri Themal for his translation, which I was pleased to collaborate with, for the wonderful cooperation.

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# Preface

Jonah Gavrieli

The Book *Die Kahans aus Baku* is an intricate story that goes back to my maternal grandmother, Rachel Haimi-Cohen (Rosa Kahan née Rosenberg). Rachel was a direct descendant of Chaim and Malka Kahan, the founders of the Kahan “tribe,” which this book is all about. Since her childhood Rachel was very much involved in the family affairs, and during her entire long life span (1896–1981) she collected and stored every piece of written family material that came her way. The written material was in Russian, German, Yiddish and Hebrew. The accumulated huge bulk of papers was stored without any explanation, description, or classification in a classic nineteenth-century traveling trunk kept in the living room.

My mother inherited the trunk and my father, after his retirement in 1985, tried, without much success, to make sense of the documents.

After the passing away of my mother in 2006, my brother and I inherited the trunk. My brother made it clear that he had no interest in that part of our joint inheritance, which led to me storing the content of the trunk on specially built shelves at my home. My wife, Michal, consistently asked: “What’s the purpose of the storage?” and I consistently answered: “One day I will find use for the material ...” not knowing what to anticipate.

And then:

The Jewish Museum in Berlin (JMB) decided on a temporary exhibition to portray the Jews from Eastern Europe who had made their way to the West, making Berlin a transit location. The exhibition was to take place in March 2012. In preparation for the exhibition, Ms. Miriam Goldmann, a curator of the JMB, and the historian Prof. Verena Dohrn came to Israel in 2010 looking for relevant artifacts. Prof. Mira Zakai had connected Verena Dohrn through Daphna Cohen-Mintz with Efrat Carmon, and thus contact was established with the descendants of Chaim and Malka Kahan.

Since I am two generations removed from the time the Kahans’ descendants who lived in transit in Berlin, I was considered a minor information-source,

thus, only a brief meeting with me in Kiryat Tivon was scheduled. As was anticipated, I was not able to provide historical stories nor meaningful artifacts handed down from the Berlin days of the family. Just before their departure, I invited the guests to look into the stored boxes.

And that was the beginning of the book:

Instead of continuing that evening to another information source, Miriam and Verena spent the evening until late that night and continued into late the following morning, looking through the content of the boxes.

At this point of time Verena Dohrn decided that the story of building and maintaining an international oil producing and distributing business by Chaim Kahan and his wife Malka, and the involvement of their descendants in the business, was a historic tale worth investigating.

The visit was concluded with thirteen kilograms of cramped papers being sent to Berlin.

The exhibition took place as scheduled and was very successful. The museum devoted to the Kahan family a full room in which artifacts and a small part of the available documents were put on display. After the exhibition the documents were given/loaned to the Jewish Museum Berlin to be kept for historians and for future generations of the Kahan family.

Verena Dohrn spent years of thorough academic research, learning the content of thousands of documents and traveling to numerous locations, in order to put together as a book the story of the “Kahan family from Baku.”

The publishing of Verena’s book caused great joy and pride within “the tribe” of the descendants of Chaim and Malka Kahan, but since it was written in the German language, a language no longer spoken by members of “the tribe,” very few members could read the story of their family’s history. So, in order to make the family story available here and now and for future generations in Israel and in North America, an English translation was necessary. I decided to take the initiative and accepted the challenge of making a translation become a reality.

For the translation, both a reliable and knowledgeable translator in German and English language, in Jewish traditions and scripts, as well as financial means to pay the translator for his work had to be found.

An outstanding translator, who happens to be a very good friend of Michal and myself, Rabbi Uri Themal, was found. Uri was available and willing to do the job, and indeed, a very good job he did.

The project was generously financed by various family members I approached with a request for donations.

Dr. Eli Rosenberg, the only member of the Kahan “tribe” that followed in Chaim Kahan’s footsteps as an entrepreneur in the energy field by finding the Israeli offshore gas deposits, was keenly interested in preserving the historical heritage of the Kahans and supported the translation of the book to English at its first steps. Thanks to his daughter Dr. Noa Rosenberg, the publishing of the English translation of the book before you, *The Kahans from Baku*, was made possible. The book is dedicated to the memory of Eli Rosenberg (who passed away in May 2020) in honor of his great contributions.

In conclusion, I wish to thank:

- Verena Dohrn for the great work she did in investigating and putting in writing the story of my family, the Kahan family from Baku.
- Rabbi Uri Themal for a wonderful translation into English of the book written by Verena Dohrn.
- All family members that contributed and made the translation possible.



# In Memoriam Elijahu (Eli) Rosenberg

Noa Rosenberg

It is very moving for me to be writing an introduction to a book about the history of my family, beginning with the family's patriarch, my great-great-grandfather, Chaim Kahan, who passed away a century ago, though the memory of his deeds and incredible work still lives on in the minds of his descendants, six generations later. It begins in the late nineteenth century with a small refinery and petroleum trade in a competition with the large company Branobel, the enterprise of the brothers Ludwig and Robert Nobel, in Czarist-ruled Baku, goes on with the purchase of the Petrol oilfields in Baku in 1912, the establishment of the Nitag oil company in Weimar Berlin by his children and the integration of this company into a European cooperative networks of oil companies with their own fleet of shipping tankers. The history of both the business acumen and the involvement of the Kahan family with the Zionist project is recounted by historian Verena Dohrn in her recently published book, *Die Kahans aus Baku: Eine Familienbiographie*.

I was privileged to be entrusted with writing an introduction to the English translation of this book, a translation that was envisaged and initially financed by my late father, Elijahu Rosenberg, one of Chaim Kahan's great-grandchildren. This will also serve as an apology and homage to my dear, beloved father, whose heart gave out a few months ago at ninety-two years of age, just a few months before the completion of the translation.

Dr. Elijahu Rosenberg reestablished Nitag in Berlin in the early 2000s, after the Kahan family was driven out from the original firm with the rise of the Nazi regime. As a geologist, my father was involved in oil explorations all over the world. His occupation as a geologist was worldwide. The Nitag company he set up in Berlin was intended to extend the scope of his search for oil and gas to Europe. It turns out that geology, deep down in the ground, has no borders—unlike up on Earth's surface.

It is easy to point out quite a few aspects of resemblance between Chaim Kahan ("Grandfather Chaim" to all his descendants) and his great-grandson,

Elijahu Rosenberg. Both of them, being persons of vision and enterprise, were pioneers in the energy market (oil and gas), and in this market they both made their fortunes: Chaim Kahan, a shtetl-born Jew, who in the second half of the nineteenth century already traded with oil from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, was a pioneer in spreading light to Russia, while his geologist great-grandson was a pioneer of gas exploration and discovery in the Mediterranean. Both were generous people, open-hearted and open-handed, who saw their wealth as an opportunity to give unto others, very often quietly, away from the limelight. Both never forgot their own periods of economic hardships. Both were honest, open and truthful, and their good name preceded them.

Elijahu Rosenberg was born in Berlin and presented his doctoral thesis in geology to the University of Zürich and to the federal technical college ETH Zürich. Decades later, he had heard from the historian Verena Dohrn that she intends to write a book about Chaim Kahan's—and his seven children's—role both in the oil market and in Zionism and Hebrew revival. Although the German was his spoken language, familiar to him, my father offered to help her book translated from German into English—for the benefit of Chaim Kahan's younger descendants, most of whom live in Israel while a few families live in the USA. True to his word, Rosenberg was the first who generously contributed towards the realization of his fondest wish—to commemorate the work of the various Kahan generations and to pass it on to all of Chaim Kahan's descendants, from now on.

It is only right that this book—though he never saw it completed—be dedicated to him.

I vividly recall a conversation with my father, a few years ago, when he stumbled upon two consecutive articles about Chaim Kahan, his great-grandfather, printed in 1917 issues of the Hebrew quarterly *Heavar*. My father was thrilled and seemed to be overflowing with a keen sense of intimacy and perhaps with a sense of the resemblance between the two of them. When I told him that his thrill may be due to his noticing that resemblance and to the realization that this grandparent was the source of his own inspiration, he quickly and humbly rejected this view on the spot.

However, my father explained to me how Grandfather Chaim was “a visionary, who was ahead of his time in realizing the potential of petroleum, following the first oil drillings in America,” and told me of his extreme generosity, his frequent donations and his inspired spirit. He quoted from the article on Chaim Kahan: “Many were aided by him, but the relationship between them remained casual and simple, so that it was impossible to tell, who was the

benefactor and who the beneficiary” (Meir Aronson, *Heavar* 1 [1917]). My father also said that Chaim Kahan sometimes made donations against his sons’ judgement. I smiled. My father then told me a story that used to run in the family, about the occasion when Grandfather acquiesced to a request for a larger donation, just when a huge fire devoured much of his property and fortune. His sons were alarmed when they realized that their father keeps making donations to the needy, despite the fire. Grandfather Chaim’s response to his sons was: “True, a lot of money went up in smoke, so you just go ahead and imagine that a little more was burnt.” This lesson in family tradition made me realize just how much my father admired his great-grandfather’s values and way of life, and how much he made them his own, perhaps even getting a sense of intergenerational epigenetics. Furthermore, his thrill in telling me this made me think of his own generosity, and of the deep, unseen link between him and his great-grandfather. I sensed a subterranean link to a deep, ancient geological layer which tied them both together: my father Elijahu Rosenberg and grandfather Chaim Kahan.

Elijahu was born in 1928 in Berlin to Shulamith (Sulamith née Hurwitz) and Nahum Rosenberg, Chaim Kahan’s grandson (on his mother’s side). At the age of five, he immigrated to the land of Israel with his beloved family (his parents and his eldest brother, Michael).

Verena Dohrn’s book concludes with the observation that of all of Chaim Kahan’s descendants, it was his great-grandson, Rosenberg, who carried on his grandfather’s work in the field of energy sources, oil and gas. Rosenberg was a geologist, a pioneer in oil and gas explorations in Israel’s Exclusive Economic Zone of the Mediterranean Sea. He founded the oil and gas exploration company Avner (the Hebrew acronym of his full Jewish name, Elijahu Son of Nahum Rosenberg). It was he who discovered Israel’s first offshore gas field, Noa (the harbinger of further gas finds, as part of the Tethys field). A thrilling climax came on Hanukkah, December 25, 2003, with the beginning of gas production from deep within the Earth, in the middle of the sea. The gas flowed from the offshore platform towards the Israeli shore and to the Ashkelon power plant, and lights went on in Israel’s central district. Eli Rosenberg’s thorough understanding of the geological and geophysical wonders of gas reservoirs, and his unique interpretation of singular phenomena in the deep-sea electric diagrams, were what provided Israel with gas for electricity. “It was thanks to Eli that Israel came out of darkness and into light,” as was said of him in an obituary, upon his death in May 2020.

In conclusion, I would like to add one more trait to the list of resemblances between Chaim Kahan and his great-grandson, Elijahu Rosenberg. As described by Meir Aronson in his account of Chaim Kahan in *Heavar*:

“He was never consumed by the majority, by the crowd, nor did he assimilate into it. Rather, he stood off to one side, apart from the group. He was looking for those single persons, those individuals closest to his heart, with whom he would confer away by the corner, because he was ‘solitary’ and ‘self-possessed,’ of deeply-rooted noble spirit, and his soul yearned for ‘the solitary.’”

A half-century later, Israel’s third president, Zalman Shazar, turned to Eli Rosenberg, who was trying to retire by the corner, inviting him from the crowd to take his place by the president, and said with heartwarming determination: “Even though you are a geologist, do not hide yourself behind the rocks.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 A paraphrase of a well-known sentence addressed King Shaul in the Bible: “Do not hide yourself behind the tools.”



# Translator's Foreword

Uri Themal

**M**y wife, Geraldine, and I first heard about this project from our good friends Michal and Jonah Gavrieli, over a series of Shabbat dinners, when Jonah would entertain us with snippets from his family's history, as they came to light through Verena Dohrn's research. Little did I know how intimately I would become involved in it.

When the book was published in German, Jonah lent it to me to read. I found it fascinating and was delighted when he asked me to do the translation. I considered it an honor and accepted with great pleasure.

The translation itself posed a few challenges. First, there were the names of people and places. The book, by its very nature, contains a large number of those and they needed to be transliterated into an acceptable English spelling. Where the original name was in Cyrillic, I was working from a transliteration into German. With some place names that was easy, for example, *Brest-Litowsk* is already known in English as *Brest-Litovsk*. People's names posed a greater difficulty and we had to agree on a formula for those, especially where it involves the guttural *ch*, as in *Chaim*. Like in this example, the German spelling is usually kept in English texts, but in other cases, *kh* is used, like in *Kharkov*, which is known as such in English.

Secondly, there were the various foreign-language words, idioms, or quotes in Yiddish, Russian, or Hebrew, which were left in their original with a translation in square brackets. In some cases, I needed to see the original text, which added to the excitement of working on this project.

Thirdly, there were the original texts of letters or documents, quoted in the German book. The German translation tried to be true to their original style, including imperfect use of language. Withstanding the temptation to iron those out, I tried to convey the content and style as accurately as possible. So, for example, Chaim Kahan's letters, which are written in his own kind of shorthand, with scant regard for interpunctuation or grammatic accuracy, appear as such in the translation.

However, all these challenges were managed with relative ease through the great collaboration with Verena Dohrn, who had accepted the role as editor of the English translation. Our discussions were always enjoyable as well as enlightening and I am truly grateful to her.

I would also like to thank my wife Geraldine for acting as a subeditor, ensuring that any typing, grammatical and idiomatic errors were eliminated.

Finally, my sincere thanks go to Jonah and the descendants of the Kahan dynasty for entrusting me with the task of making their family history available to the English-language reader.

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