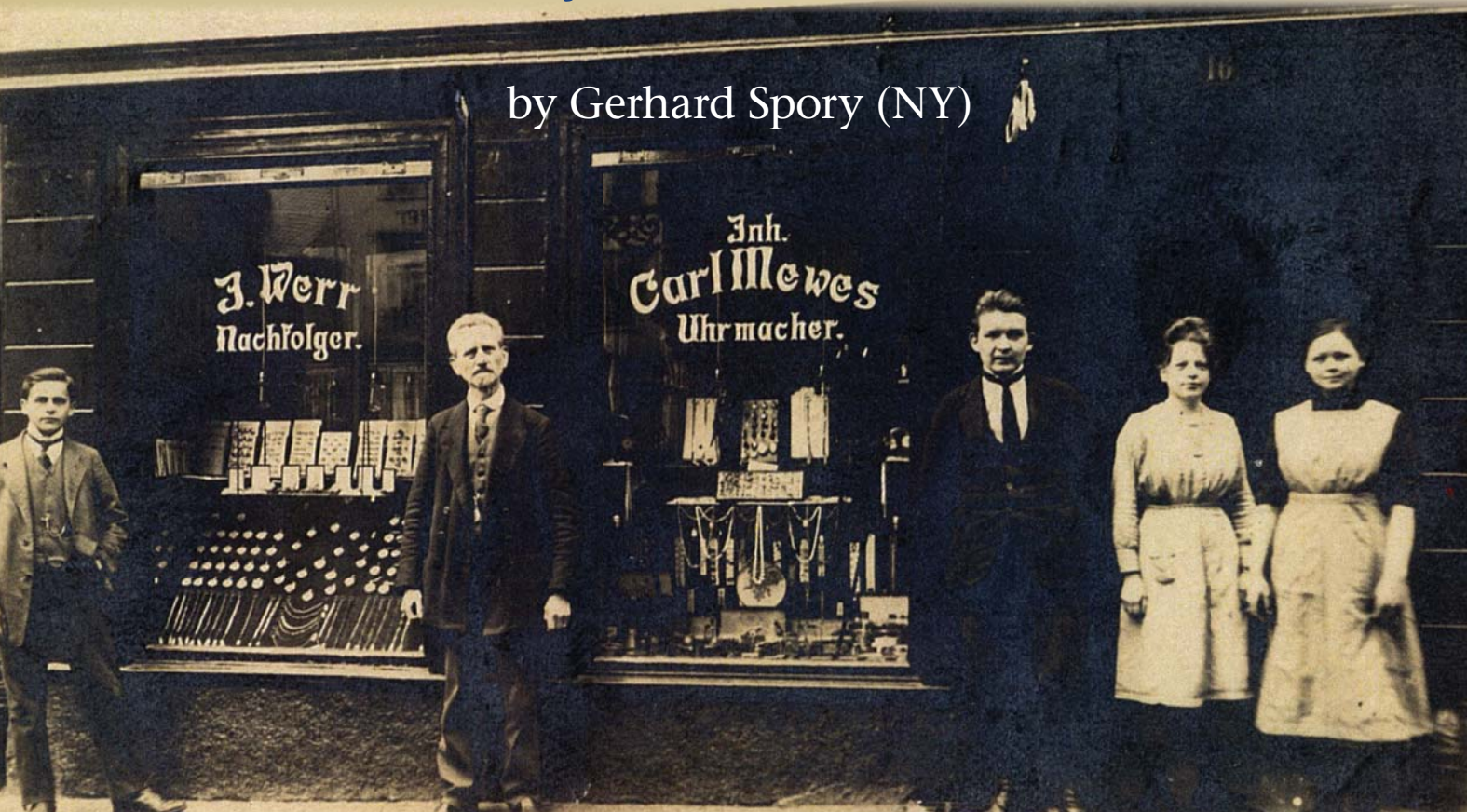


# Memories of my father, Philip Spory, a watchmaker

by Gerhard Spory (NY)



**Figure 1.** Philip Spory at left, ca. 1918, in front of Carl Mewes Jewelry, Wetzlar, Germany.

My father was born in 1902, the fifth of eight children, to a struggling self-sufficient family whose sole occupation involved agriculture. They were the ninth generation of Sporys in the rural town of Hermannstein on the outskirts of the old imperial city of Wetzlar, Germany. Most houses in town were of timber frame construction and were separated from one another by courtyards that opened to the street. A barn at the rear of the yard was attached to the house and the barn of the neighbors. Several cows were kept in the barn and only saw daylight when they were taken out to pull farm equipment into the field. Two or three pigs and a goat or two were also there, and a run of chickens was everywhere. A manure pile occupied one corner of the courtyard, and its size quickly determined the success of the owners. There was no running water in the house or central heating. Electric utilities were also absent, and sleeping in the barn's hayloft was common during cold winters.

From an early age father was responsible for milking

the cows. Formal education in the family extended only as far as grade school. The demands of the farm had priority to almost everything else, and it was from such an early life that father decided that an agricultural existence in Hermannstein was not suited for him. Along the way he started to develop an interest in mechanics, and at the age of 12 was taken on as an apprentice/journeyman under the tutelage of Wetzlar jeweler and watchmaker Carl Mewes. Though it was an hour's walk from home, father remained there for four years to complete his internship, finishing at age 16. It was during this time that he also made some of his tools that he used in his future trade.

These were also the war years, 1914-1918, and father had no desire to enter the military. In the 1870s Wetzlar became well known as a center for optics, especially in building microscopes. Following his apprenticeship father was taken on in the optic division of Ernst Leitz, which specialized in manufacturing microscopes and telescopes. One of his jobs was setting the cross-hairs

(reticles) within telescope eyepieces by using spiderweb silk. However, father saw little future for himself by remaining in Germany. Heavy demands for war reparations on Germany set the stage for hyperinflation in the 1920s and the paralyzing effect on its people. An uncle had previously emigrated to New York where he developed a successful butcher business in Brooklyn. With father looking to leave Germany, his uncle offered to become his sponsor in America and in 1925 father emigrated to the United States.

Even though he knew little English, his uncle set him out almost immediately to look for work. Manhattan was the jewelry center in the eastern United States, especially prestigious Fifth Avenue and the jewelry district of West 47th Street. It was here that father sought work.

In time he learned English through the use of a dictionary and, as he said, reading *The New York Times*. Eventually in 1926, he obtained employment in watch and jewelry repair at Bennett Bros. at 485 5th Avenue. He remained there until 1937. In 1931 father became a naturalized U.S. citizen, and through the depression years that followed he was always proud to have had employment. His desire, however, was to become independent and eventually return to Germany and then Switzerland. There he hoped to enter the jewelry trade and import German and Swiss watches to the United States. Though committed to my mother just prior to leaving Germany in 1925, it was seven years before he made it back to Hermannstein. They married in 1932 and both almost immediately returned to New York. By 1934 father had saved enough money to put a down payment on a six-family house on Covert Street in Ridgewood Queens, along the Brooklyn border. Having miscarried her first child mother made one last trip to Germany in 1938 to be with her parents and give birth to me in 1938. Politics in Germany did not suit father as he made his last trip there in August of 1938 to bring my mother and me back to New York.

It was on Covert Street that he did most of his work as a jeweler and watchmaker. As a family of three we lived in a four-room, second-floor, walk-up apartment. A coat closet 3' x 6' at the entrance to the apartment was converted into a work space. His workbench consisted of a modified lady's vanity open in the center and bearing full-length drawers on either side. The dresser was raised to a workable height by wooden blocks under its legs. It was awkward looking, but it allowed him to sit erect while he worked. His lathe was fastened to the left side of

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the bench while a small vise was attached to the far edge on the right. A long fluorescent light hung over the work area. I do not remember where most of his everyday tools were kept. However, I do recall that he had several flat boxes that each contained small vials of jewels, crowns, screws, balance staffs, springs, and a number of trays holding glass crystals.

Larger tools were kept in one or more of the side drawers. At some date father had the opportunity to buy out a retiring watchmaker's entire bench, including tools. The inventory listed over 80 different items, many in multiples. This was absorbed into the closet and the old vanity was replaced with a real jeweler's bench.

Father's actual work area took place on a white shallow porcelain tray. After coming out of the case, a watch was examined and disassembled as it sat on one of a series of bamboo ring stands. This raised the watch about one-half inch above the top of the tray. After removal, the parts were kept together in small shallow triangular plastic trays. Watch parts were initially cleaned of oil by being placed in either one of two glass-covered dishes; one contained an aqueous ammonia solution and the other benzene. Jewels were cleaned with pointed orange wood staves. Those that were broken or worn were replaced with new ones. A couple of oilers and their probes were close by. As he worked, he would have a piece of a white bed sheet on his lap with the ends tacked to the side opening of the bench. It was not uncommon for an errant spring or part to get loose and hopefully land on the bench or the sheet.

On occasion he was on hands and knees looking for the lost part on the floor. Most of his work was done on watches, an occasional carriage clock, as well as a singing bird box. When he was not at his bench, a curtain was pulled over the entrance to the closet.

I can remember that most of his work came from one of two jewelry houses: Bigalgie & Eckert Company, an importer of chronographs at 527-5th Avenue in Manhattan, and the more local Isaacs Jewelers, on Myrtle Avenue in Ridgewood, Queens. Twice a week—usually Tuesdays and Thursdays—father put on a starched white shirt, tie, jacket, and hat. With some of his tools in his attaché case he headed for the local subway to go to Manhattan. This routine occurred 12 months of the year. Repaired watches were delivered and those in need of repair were returned. While in the city he usually went to West 47th Street, the jewelry and diamond district of New York, to purchase new material from the various supply houses. His book

contained a list of over 25 suppliers with whom he did business. On these days he also made house calls to the homes of wealthy clients. Minor adjustments were made to expensive clocks in addition to simply winding them. During the summers while school was not in session I was occasionally allowed to go along with him. Father tried to avoid clocks to take back home because they were too cumbersome to carry back and forth through a crowded subway. However, exceptions were made for private clients. On occasion he did come home with a large clock movement, but the cases were always left behind. Because there was little room in our apartment for a tall clock, father had set up a clock stand in the hall at the top floor stairwell leading to the roof. The movement was hung on the stand after first having been worked on either at his bench or, if very dirty, in the basement. At least once a month a Special Delivery package from the postal system containing one or two watches was delivered to the house. These watches were repaired on a day's notice and quickly shipped back again. On alternate days mother walked the eight city blocks to Isaacs Jewelers to pick up watches that needed repair and return those that had been repaired. Most of these watches were completed within one week.

As I got older, perhaps starting at age 11 I was permitted to make these trips. For this I received 25 cents, a good sum for someone who had little outside money. This was also a time when kids in the city could quickly move throughout the neighborhood by wearing roller skates attached to their shoes. I was one of them, as I lived on skates while outside the house. So, rather than walking to Isaacs I skated there and into the store on my steel-wheeled skates, usually creating a lot of noise on their tiled floor. I picked up a bag of watches and delivered a bag of repairs in return. Hardly a word transpired between us, because they knew my purpose. I am sure that the owners wished that I would leave quickly or disappear entirely, especially when customers were present. It was a wonder that I was entrusted with carrying hundreds of dollars worth of watches back and forth. There was never any real problem. I was fast on skates and was always able to evade a local bully on the way and avoid falling, which would have been a disaster.

Repairing watches is a delicate and demanding job. Our house was old and it did not take much to set up vibrations that interfered with father's work. I was often reprimanded for being too noisy in the apartment, and as a result, I was rarely allowed to have friends over. I also

believe that father did not want peering eyes looking and wondering what he was doing in the closet. Little things would sometimes annoy him while at work, especially when a watch was giving him problems. Our six-family house was separated from the neighbors by a 12-foot-long alley. Usually during the day and in nice weather when windows were open, someone could often be heard singing or playing a radio. It was a loud radio that annoyed him. When his patience wore thin, he would retrieve his high-voltage/ultraviolet light apparatus. When electrified it would generate a continuous arc and produce static within any radio in the vicinity. Crackling sounds would come from one or more windows. Sometimes it took several minutes before the neighbors gave up. I believe that father got a bit of enjoyment from this because it got him from his bench for a few minutes. As far as I know, no one ever identified the source of their radio's problems.

Father returned favors to people, sometimes strangers. While I was in school, possibly third grade, I had gotten sick in the classroom. The teacher walked me home during her lunch hour—five city blocks from school. Father reciprocated by cleaning and overhauling her watch.

The tenants over us were also clumsy on their feet and while climbing the stairwell. When they eventually vacated the apartment, we moved up one flight to occupy once again four rooms. This time father built an L-shaped 4' x 8' partition out of plywood approximately 6' high. His work area now occupied what was formally the eating

area of our kitchen. The new tenant who moved into our former apartment was a hobby watchmaker who used father's old work space as well as his old bench. They became life-long friends as father gave the man support as needed and both enjoyed talking about watches.

Father's routine was to rise about 6:30 a.m. seven days a week. This was usually followed by the routine of winding and regulating watches and clocks that had been repaired the previous day(s). This often took a good hour. Timing took place from an expensive pocket watch that always hung over his bench. Watches were intentionally timed one-half minute fast per day. His

reasoning was that it was beneficial for the owner to be early for a train or meeting rather than possibly late for one. Father had no real personal wristwatch of his own, and we had only one wall clock in the house. It was an eight-day spring-wound New Haven banjo clock that hung on the living room wall. An eight-day double-faced Waltham table clock occupied the bedroom nightstand. Father wore customers' watches that he had recently repaired. It was simply to check on their timing, especially

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if they had given him a problem or were self winding. At times he could be seen wearing two watches on each arm.

Watch cases and bands were cleaned in our bathroom sink. These were scrubbed with a soft bristle brush dipped in an aqueous ammonia solution, rinsed in hot water, and if the cases contained gold, they were dipped and scrubbed with an aqueous solution of potassium cyanide. There were always two glass jars on the sink, one containing ammonia and the other cyanide. Gears and anything else that could be strung onto thin steel wires were likewise cleaned this way. As I got older, I was allowed to do this myself. For this I received 10 cents for each watch.

Occasionally, a watch part got loose of its wire and washed down the drain. There was usually a plumber's wrench under the sink and once again father, on hands and knees, opened the trap and usually retrieved the part that escaped. I don't recall what happened when a part was completely lost. However if a stone (diamond) got lost, it was replaced from a collection of small stones that he had on hand. A colored stone was another thing. One time a small emerald got lost. Since he did not have one that would fit, he improvised by polishing a comparable size color and shape from a broken 7Up bottle. A closed container filled with potassium cyanide nuggets occupied the far corner of the bathroom, and there was usually the faint odor of cyanide fumes in the room. This odor, I believe, I could still identify today.

Gold watchcases, after getting a bathroom cleaning, were polished with jeweler's rouge rubbed on narrow one-inch boards covered with felt. He made these from strips of his old hats that were glued to the boards. Some time after moving to the third-floor apartment father purchased an LR Masters cleaning machine. This allowed him to clean up to three watches simultaneously with the parts of each watch separated in wire baskets. The baskets were stacked upon one another and immersed and slowly spun in various cleaning solutions.

Father was always so busy with work that mother's watch rarely got looked after or repaired by him through the conventional way. When necessary, she went to Isaacs and included her watch with those of customers. Her watch was never recognized as hers, and only when the bill was not paid was the plot divulged.

The workday often ended at 10 p.m., but Sunday afternoons were usually free for him. However, when company came for a visit a watch was at times examined. Summers were particularly busy for him, because people who frequented local beaches often got either sand or water in their watches. This added work prevented any long vaca-

tions for the family. The timing and regulation of a watch were hastened when father purchased an electric "Watch Master G7." This large heavy instrument bore a sensor that picked up the beat of a watch and transferred it onto a graph on a revolving cylinder. Many watch brands had different beats, hence different graphs. Father taught this to me and I would run each watch through its cycle and in less than a minute indicate how fast or slow in minutes per day it ran. Father would make an adjustment and the procedure was repeated again till the watch ran to his satisfaction. For this I received 10 cents per watch.

Father's fees were based on several things, the quality and complexity of the watch, its size, and what kind of work was done to it. The following fees were recorded in 1953:

- 17 and 19 jewel—basic clean, oil and regulate: \$3.25
- 17 and 19 jewel—clean, oil and regulate and new balance staff: \$5.00
- 17 and 19 jewel—clean, oil and regulate and new stem and crown: \$4.25
- 17 and 19 jewel—new balance staff only: \$3.00
- 17 and 19 jewel—new stem and crown: \$1.75
- 21 jewel—clean, oil and regulate: \$3.75
- 21 jewel—clean, oil and regulate, regular grade automatic: \$4.25
- 21 jewel—clean, oil and regulate, higher grade movements, Rolex, Tudor, Omega, Longines, etc.: \$4.00
- 21 jewel—clean, oil and regulate Rolex and Tudor automatic: \$5.00
- Very thin wrist and pocket watches: \$3.75 to \$4.75
- Chronographs—Heuer, Vacheron, Patek etc.: \$6.75 and up
- Alarm watches: \$4.75 and up.

These may have been paltry sums; however, we lived well as a family but not extravagant. The local subway fare to Manhattan was only 15 cents at that time. Currently, the same ride costs \$2.25.

When a watch was repaired for whatever reasons, the time date and his code were engraved into the inside of the case. Sometimes over the years he received the same watch several times for repair. It also avoided possible problems regarding guarantee of work. Watches that were regulated were all run through a demagnetizer. This saved him extra time if afterward the watch did not run properly. Those watches that had fluorescent dials and hands were reconditioned as part of the repair job if it was not too extensive. With a thin flattened probe he would pick up a small amount of radium paste from a small metallic vial and heat it to a liquid with his alcohol lamp. This was then applied to the hands and numbers on the dial. Bro-

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ken or badly scratched crystals were at first replaced by glass crystals glued to the bezel by using DUCO cement. Later on he purchased a large collection of Lucite crystals as a part of the "Magic Crystal" system sold through Dutcher Bros. of 47th Street. The bezel opening was carefully measured and a properly sized crystal pressed into the opening. Usually no cement was used to make a seal. His fee was \$1.

When I learned how to do this job, I received 10 cents for each crystal.

At home certain house functions were controlled by clocks. The building's hall lights were turned on and off during the night and day. This was done through a weight-driven longcase eight-day clock located in one of the basement bins.

While the house was still heated by coal, father had the dampers of the furnace open and close at the proper time during the night to adjust the draft. Through two eight-day key-wound Sessions shelf clocks a special cut gear on each clock tripped a weight, which as it came down pulled on a chain and with a pulley either opened the damper or closed it. However, the weights had to be lifted again the following day and the system set up for another cycle. This seemed to work only on a one-day basis. Besides, father still had to shuffle coal and remove the ashes. But it saved going up and down three flights of stairs in the middle of the night.

In 1950 father bought a building lot outside of Northport, Long Island, and subsequently had a small cottage built on it. This became a wonderful retreat for the whole family. Father, however, still made the Tuesday-Thursday trip to Manhattan and now an hour's drive was added to his previous schedule. At the cottage he set up a second workbench in one of the bedrooms. With all of the tools that he had this was no problem for him.

However, when he traveled, there were certain tools that he always took along. One night while speeding toward Northport he was stopped by highway patrol. At that time a New York State driver's license had one's occupation written on it. The officer in charge questioned father about his business and followed up by showing him his personal watch, which required some attention. With a searchlight on the hood of the patrol car father, with loupe in eye, diagnosed the problem. Needless to say, both parties went away satisfied.

There was no watch that he could not repair. His pride was in working on complex chronographs and very small ladies' watches. Over the years he developed more and more wealthy private customers both in Manhattan and Long Island. Sometimes he made a personal call just to look after an expensive clock or take a watch back with

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him for repair. It was his desire that this would become a source of income in retirement.

Father was a proud man who had a respect for his status in life and for that of a watchmaker. One time while making a Park Avenue call to a top floor client, the hotel doorman directed him to take the freight elevator to his floor. Father refused and it took a call to the client to set the doorman straight. Father went up in the normal passenger elevator.

Father had always hoped that I would take more interest in the jewelry and repair trade. However, this never really happened. At times we found it difficult to work together and my interests also went in a different direction.

Father never belonged to any horological organizations nor were there any reference books on watches or clocks in the house. Because he spent basically six days a week on watch repair, he appeared to have had little time or interest to continue this as a hobby. He saw the future of the traditional watchmaker waning as throw-away watches like Timex were coming more and more to market. Occasionally, he received such a watch for repair. These he returned either as nonrepairable or not worth spending his time on. His last years were tiring. When he could no longer make the subway trips to Manhattan, mother did this for him. He worked at his bench almost to his very last day in 1959, when he died of cancer at the age of 57. I wonder if the stress of being a watchmaker and any or all of the toxins that he worked with had an effect on his early passing. He preceded all of his siblings by ten or more years. However, he enjoyed his life's profession and was proud to be known as a watchmaker.

### *About the Author*

Gerhard Spory has engaged in basic clock repair over the years. This amounted to little more than disassembly, simple cleaning, and assembly again. He has also collected numerous clocks but basically stopped as space diminished and clocks accumulated on the floor and in closets throughout the house.

His education took him to Marietta College for a BA degree followed by the Ohio State University where he received MSc and PhD degrees in zoology. His main interests were in the field of parasitology and the study of parasites in black birds. He went on to teach biology at Farmingdale State University of New York. He has been a member of NAWCC since 1985 and had always hoped to become more involved in clock and subsequent watch repair. Gerhard Spory may be reached at sporygr@yahoo.com.