

Core Strength: The Story of a Pilates Icon

Episode 22 of *Exile* with Mandy Patinkin

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MANDY PATINKIN: December 21st, 1935. Suhl, Central Germany. Fritz Sauckel, a high-ranking Nazi official, is visiting a factory at the heart of a mighty industrial enterprise. Until recently, this factory belonged to the exclusive supplier of firearms for the German army, where pistols and rifles used to roll off assembly lines under the name “Simson.” Sauckel looks out at the group of workers on the factory floor. He has an announcement to make.

FRITZ SAUCKEL: Dear fellow Germans, my dear comrades...

MANDY PATINKIN: ...Sauckel’s voice booms across the hall...

FRITZ SAUCKEL: ...you have gone from one disappointment to another!

MANDY PATINKIN: For decades, a Jewish family by the name of Simson has been running this factory. But as of today, they are no longer in charge. In fact, according to Sauckel, the Simson family are frauds who have been taking advantage of the workers and stealing from the Reich. But, he says, that betrayal is now over. He speaks of a brighter future under the Nazi regime.

FRITZ SAUCKEL: I want even more, in the name of the Führer, to take possession of your souls, of your entire humanity, of your hard work, of your good will! And thus, I say to you that never again will capitalists striving for profit be tied to the weapons produced in this factory!

MANDY PATINKIN: The crowd applauds—some workers more enthusiastically than others. Many have doubts about the new regime and all the promises being made.

Secretly, some are resolved to wait. Wait for the day when the Simsons come back. But a Simson would not come back for fifty years.

THEME MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: Welcome to "Exile," a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism. Today, one family's long journey to reclaim a stolen legacy.

THEME RESOLVES

MANDY PATINKIN: In the late 1800s, the historic town of Suhl emerged as a center of industry. For centuries, the town had been known for its mining and metal working. Many businesses evolved into arms manufacturers when industrialization paved the way for mass production. The Simsons ran one such company, starting out as a weapons parts manufacturer. The company was founded by two brothers, Moses and Loeb Simson, who bought a steel factory in the mid-19th century. Over the years, the family became a well-known and dependable employer in the region.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: We know very little about this early period. However, the company history shows that they were very smart businesspeople.

MANDY PATINKIN: Dr. Ulrike Schulz is an historian who has researched the Simson family's extensive history.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: We know of Jeanette Simson, who lost her husband very early on and then really is the "grande dame" of the company, the one who makes all the business decisions. So, until the sons are old enough, she continues to run the business very successfully. This was something special for the time.

MANDY PATINKIN: Jeanette Simson was the mother of seven children: five sons and two daughters. For more than 20 years, she steered the company and its dedicated, multi-generational workforce, building one of the most successful weapons

manufacturers in Germany. When Jeannette died in 1927, Arthur Simson and his brothers inherited the business. Arthur was the second youngest Simson son, but he was the most qualified to take over. He was 45 when he stepped into his mother's shoes, and, like every Simson, he'd been working at the factory his whole life. During World War One, the company became a firearms powerhouse, manufacturing weapons for the German Army. The Simsons had revolutionized Central Germany's industrial landscape with modern manufacturing techniques imported from the United States. But Arthur knew they needed to keep evolving.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: What they managed to do, before anyone else, is to take this American technological path. So instead of investing in specialization, they invested in expansion and diversification. That way, they were able to bridge economic downturns in the arms business, which is always booming in times of war, but not so much in times of peace, because they were producing and distributing other things.

MANDY PATINKIN: That diversification included a line of passenger cars. The company had been making utility vehicles for two decades, but luxury automobiles were Arthur's true passion. Among the new models was a race car, the 8-cylinder Simson Supra, which could reach the almost unimaginable speed of 75 miles per hour. Its powerful engine and sleek design earned it the nickname, the "Rolls Royce of Suhl". Arthur's car division gained traction in the roaring 20's, until the era gave way to a global economic depression.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: It was more of a love affair, an adventure really to produce automobiles. But at the beginning of the 1930s, he had to decide to end this path because it cost a lot of money and wasn't profitable.

MANDY PATINKIN: The company faltered. But Arthur's integrity was never in doubt. To his workers, he was a man of the people, a valued and much loved leader of the community. Dennis Baum is Arthur's great nephew.

DENNIS BAUM: Arthur worked closely with the employees on all levels. He apparently was a very strong, physically strong, person, and he was famous for his arm wrestling with the employees, and for his weightlifting. He ran the company, apparently, extraordinarily well.

MANDY PATINKIN: Everyone in Suhl knew the Simson name, including Fritz Sauckel, a member of the rising National Socialist Party. He was a high-ranking official who had Hitler's ear.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: A Jewish arms factory, which is the largest employer in the region of South Thuringia? Of course this was a real thorn in the side of the Nazis.

MANDY PATINKIN: Sauckel began his smear campaign against the Simson family, alleging that Arthur and his brothers were trying to defraud the German army. He believed the weapons business should be government-owned. And he was determined to seize the factory. As the Nazis rose to power, he had more tools at his disposal to help him reach his goal. December 1933 marked Arthur's first interrogation by Nazi officials. They accused the Simsons of fraud to the tune of 10 million marks. The investigation dragged on for over a year. Arthur couldn't ignore the writing on the wall.

FRITZ SAUCKEL: ...I say to you that never again will capitalists striving for profit be tied to the weapons produced in this factory!

MANDY PATINKIN: So Arthur and his brothers came up with a strategy to keep the company and its assets in the family. They would have to remove the Simson name.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: Then it is turned into the Berlin-Suhler Waffenwerke. That's one of the strategies. The name Simson is out to take away the sting, as much as possible.

MANDY PATINKIN: To appease officials, the company was also placed into, quote, "Aryan hands", including those of longtime Simson employee, Max Fischer. The

Simsons were forced to fade into the shadows. They couldn't set foot on factory grounds.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: It was a heavy blow for Arthur Simson because he couldn't work at the company in Suhl anymore.

MANDY PATINKIN: But in the end, these measures weren't enough. Late one afternoon in the Spring of 1935, Arthur was startled by a loud knock at his door. The Gestapo had come to arrest him. His nephew and coworker, Ewald, was also taken into custody. Ewald later recalled the day of his arrest in an interview.

EWALD MEYER: When the Nazis were ready to demand a contract to take over the factory, I was driven by the Gestapo in a Simson car from the Berlin headquarters to the notary's office. And Arthur was also there.

MANDY PATINKIN: Both Ewald and Arthur were held in what the Nazi officials referred to as "protective custody." The Nazis used this term to justify the arrest of anyone they deemed hostile to their interests. There was no warrant, no trial. And those they arrested did not actually receive any form of protection. It was clear that Arthur and Ewald were out of options. They were presented with a transfer agreement.

EWALD MEYER: After I heard the contents, I said to the notary, "Can I refuse to sign this?" And he pointed to the Gestapo man and said, "I don't recommend it."

MANDY PATINKIN: The notary's gaze rested on the officer's pistol. Both men understood. They had no choice but to sign the papers.

EWALD MEYER: Whereupon I signed the extortion.

MANDY PATINKIN: The top of the page was marked "Sales Agreement." Everyone at the table knew this wasn't a sale. The Simson family wouldn't profit from this transaction. And with two signatures, the company was no longer theirs. Upon signing, the men were released from custody, but the Simson family knew it was time to leave Germany. It would be foolish to wait for any more threats. A few months later, Arthur sat

alone, going over his plan one more time. He and his family were heading to Switzerland. Neutral territory. They would cross the border at four different points so they would not arouse suspicion. Arthur would tell the German border authorities that he was en route to the Swiss Alps to go skiing.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: They were very afraid that they would be detained again at the border and that they would be declared outlaws the moment their company was expropriated. But 1936 was still a time when many people were able to leave the country in this way.

MANDY PATINKIN: When the day arrived, Arthur awoke early and strapped his skis to the roof of his Simson Supra. Not sure what his future would hold, he climbed into the car he was so proud of, and he started to drive. Two weeks later, Arthur gave written testimony to the police in Zurich explaining the true circumstances of his entry into Switzerland. He wasn't really there to ski.

ARTHUR SIMSON: I entered Switzerland at the Konstanz-Kreuzlingen border point under the guise of a ski vacation. I proved my identity by producing an entry permit issued by my travel agency. I see myself as a political refugee.

MANDY PATINKIN: Arthur and his family applied for asylum, which was granted. They were safe for now. After seizing their factory, the Nazis went after the Simson family's reputation. They issued an arrest warrant for Arthur, and circulated a Wanted poster. Despite the fact that Arthur was nowhere to be found, the Nazis held a trial to charge him with fraud and exploiting the Reich. The trial lasted six months. In the end, they declared Arthur Simson a fugitive. The case was eventually dismissed. But the Nazis stripped Arthur of his German citizenship. The following year, Arthur, his nephew Ewald, and the rest of the family decided to move again, this time to America. Despite it all, they still considered themselves fortunate.

EWALD MEYER: Actually, one could almost say that Hitler did us a good deed. That he persecuted us in time, when we could still escape. What would have happened if we had stayed there?

MANDY PATINKIN: During this period, Officer Fritz Sauckel had taken control of the Simson factory. And in 1939, he renamed it again—this time after Wilhelm Gustloff, a Swiss Nazi who had been killed by a Jewish student and later elevated to martyr status by the party. The factory was now called Gustloff Works. It was the jewel in the crown of the newly created Gustloff Foundation, a state-owned trust set up by the Nazi government. Sauckel presented the factory as a gift to Hitler to serve what he called “the good of the German people”. But he didn’t know that the Simsons still had an ally on the inside. The Simsons kept a low profile once they settled in the United States. They didn’t speak of their persecution back in Germany. But they followed the developments of their factory in Suhl closely. Arthur was particularly curious about his workers. In 1946, he wrote a letter to his friend and former colleague Max Fischer, who was still the sales director at the factory.

ARTHUR SIMSON: Send greetings to Irma Triebel, Bodenschatz, Mrs. Topf, and many more. I could name hundreds whose wellbeing I care about.

MANDY PATINKIN: He hoped to one day see his colleagues again—and reclaim what was rightfully his.

DENNIS BAUM: We have a guest bedroom that we call the “Simson Room,” and that’s where I have a few things on the wall, pictures, old oils of the family, and some photographs of the family.

MANDY PATINKIN: Dennis Baum, Arthur Simson’s great nephew, has fond memories of his uncle. Arthur’s portrait is displayed in the aptly named “Simson Room” in his New York City apartment.

DENNIS BAUM: We lived on the West Coast. He lived together with his former secretary, and I met him perhaps two or three times. I remember meeting a very lovable old uncle who had a twinkle in his eye. He lived in good financial condition in LA. I was, as a young man, very impressed, because he had a black Cadillac and he had a chauffeur that made a big impression on me. He never

married, none of the brothers married, but he was a very easy person to communicate with.

MANDY PATINKIN: Also hanging on the wall is a newspaper article featuring Arthur's nephew, Ewald.

DENNIS BAUM: This was produced by the local newspaper in Suhl, and describes the Simson family and their inheritance in Suhl, and you'll see Ewald Meyer, and Eva Meyer, both of whom have passed. But Ewald was my co-trustee as I was retrieving all of these assets, and he's the one that was enormously helpful, but he didn't want to go back to Germany. Didn't want to have anything to do with going back to Germany.

MANDY PATINKIN: Arthur and Ewald never did go back to Germany. They tried several times to reclaim the factory from afar, but it didn't work out. Instead, it was Dennis who returned a generation later. He wasn't prepared for what he would uncover. In the years after the Simsons settled in the United States, ownership of their former factory changed hands several times. The Soviet Union had temporary control of it, and eventually it became one of socialist East Germany's "people-owned enterprises." Certain branches of the factory were dismantled along the way. But still, production continued. Everything from firearms to bicycles to baby strollers, which included the entire line once manufactured by the Simson family. This continuity was thanks to their old friend and employee, Max Fischer.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: So, for Max Fischer, who, after 1945, took over the fate of the Simson business as director, it was extremely important to rebuild the original production line and to maintain it, in the face of both the Soviet occupation and later. Because at the beginning, he always expected that the Simsons would return.

MANDY PATINKIN: While Max kept the factory on track, he had another plan. He petitioned the Soviet administration to officially reinstate the Simson name, arguing that

it was already a well-known and trusted brand. Arthur Simson was consulted about this change, as was his nephew, Ewald.

EWALD MEYER: We were asked if we would allow the Simson name to continue to be used for mopeds. And we decided that it was good to keep the name Simson and let it be used. The Simson factory was transformed into a state-owned enterprise.

MANDY PATINKIN: It was Arthur who granted permission over a telephone call. And in 1946, Simson and Company was reinstated. 45 years later, Dennis Baum finally got the chance to visit the city his family once called home. But there was yet another obstacle in his way: on the drive to Suhl, he got stuck in traffic. Inching along the highway, he looked out at the sea of cars ahead. And that's when he noticed something unexpected. On the back of the bus in front of him was a faded ad for a moped. And at the top of the ad, in big bold letters, was the name "SIMSON." It was the Simson Schwalbe.

DENNIS BAUM: It's kind of, sort of like vespas. And we weren't aware of how the Simson name popped up all over Germany.

MANDY PATINKIN: After World War II, the factory began to produce mopeds on the order of the Soviet Military Administration. They were wildly popular. The most sought after model was the Simson Schwalbe, or "swallow," part of a series that named each model after a bird. Available in a range of flashy colours, it featured an efficient engine and four different gears. The Schwalbe was so successful that the Simson brand became associated almost exclusively with mopeds. They're still an iconic collector's item in Germany to this day.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: In fact, these mopeds have survived. But nobody remembers that it was the name of this Jewish merchant family. But the product, and therefore the name Simson, is incredibly widespread throughout Germany, thanks to this moped.

MANDY PATINKIN: In 1957, the family finally received a settlement of more than 4 million marks as part of West Germany's post-war restitution efforts. But when Arthur

died in 1969, they still had not regained ownership of the one asset they really cared about: the factory. Almost a decade later, the family, now led by Ewald, filed an application for the return of ownership of Simson & Company. But it was hard to figure out what actually belonged to the Simsons. The company had changed so much in the intervening years.

ULRIKE SCHULZ: Simply because of this long period during which the company was expropriated, then passed into Soviet hands, then back to the GDR, then expansions were made, a lot of investments were made during the Nazi era. It was not so easy to find out what share the family actually still held in this factory in Suhl.

MANDY PATINKIN: The complicated application process did uncover many of the assets the Simson family had amassed. But nothing came of it. Years later, Dennis Baum was surprised to learn about the vast holdings the company once held.

DENNIS BAUM: I was astounded to find the amount of assets that were tied into this original factory that our family had been forced to abandon. Not only did we own the factories in Suhl, the family home in Suhl, but money had been used by the Nazis to buy assets in other cities around the country, in the Eastern zone, and we owned other factories. We owned villages that belonged to the workers. We own villas galore that belonged to the managers. We owned little garden plots. You know, these little plots that you see next to the railroads, very small pieces, all of which ended up belonging to the Simson company.

MANDY PATINKIN: But, as they discovered, not all of the assets were the kind you might want to get back.

DENNIS BAUM: One of the assets that popped up was in Weimar right next to the concentration camp, and that factory had been driven by slave labor, and it was ours to get back, to claim, because it had been purchased using our funds. When I brought this up to Ewald, I said I want to get it back and he said, I will

resign before I touch anything that has to do with slave labor. Give it back. I don't want to hear anything about it.

MANDY PATINKIN: There was one part of their history they both wanted to keep: the arms factory in Suhl. But, like Arthur before him, Dennis knew that in order to succeed, the business would need to evolve. Inspired by the Olympic Games, he came up with an idea.

DENNIS BAUM: The East German team that had won year after year after year in triathlons and other shooting events had all been supplied by our factory. And so, this was, in and of itself, phenomenal advertising. Can you imagine talking to customers and saying, “we are importing guns from the Olympic champion factory in Germany”? It would have been phenomenal. It would have been, I think, enormously successful.

MANDY PATINKIN: It was a risky bid. Dennis had the tenacity of a Simson, but he didn't know anything about the gun business. He needed a partner.

DENNIS BAUM: By pure coincidence, back in New York, I worked for a company called Bear Stearns, which is a Wall Street brokerage house that no longer exists. But I went back to their corporate finance departments. I said to them, “Do you know anybody in the arms and sports rifle business that I could talk to?” And one of the guys who was in that department had been dating a lady and the lady started dating another man called Tom Ruger. Ruger is a very famous name in sports weapons. And he said, I'm going to see if I can make an introduction for you, Dennis.

MANDY PATINKIN: Tom Ruger was the chief salesman for Ruger & Company, a prolific gun dynasty in the US.

DENNIS BAUM: I said to him, from my family's point of view, if you are interested, we'll give you 50% of this gun factory if you volunteer to run it. And he thought about it for a while, and he liked the idea.

MANDY PATINKIN: In 1991, Dennis and Tom took a trip to Germany to see the factory. When they arrived, the German government laid out strict financial conditions that they had to meet in order to take back the factory. They thought it would be an easy sell. But despite satisfying all the conditions, their bid was rejected. To this day, they don't know why. The weapons division of the Simson business was sold to a foreign conglomerate. It went bankrupt in 1993. The factory itself was eventually acquired by a German manufacturing company. They continued to produce parts for Simson mopeds and other vehicles, but they ceased production for good in 2002. Except for the years of the Nazi regime, the workers of Suhl proudly built products that bore the name Simson for over a century. Now those jobs were just a memory...as was the Simson name. There is a sepia-toned portrait of the Simson family in the LBI's archives. The matriarch, Jeanette, sits front and center, a symbol of strength, while a young Arthur and his brothers have their arms wrapped around each other, blissfully unaware of the turbulent years ahead. A family. Forged in steel, then forced to flee. Despite the upheavals and transformations, the Simson name endures as a symbol of resilience and community.

THEME MUSIC

ANNOUNCER: The LBI Archives hold much of the extensive documentation Ulrike Schulz used to create her history of the Simson company, which was published in German in 2013. Among the records available digitally at LBI are Arthur Simson's statement to the Zurich police after fleeing there in 1936, and a folder of clippings about the expropriation of the company. Learn more at lbi.org/simson. Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's narrated by Mandy Patinkin. This episode was written by Hana Walker-Brown. Our executive producers are Laura Regehr, Rami Tzabar, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our producer is Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf and David Brown. Voice acting by Manuel Mairhofer. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson. Theme music by Oliver Wickham. Special thanks to Jens Arndt for the use of the film *The Simson Suhl Vehicle Works*. This episode of Exile is made possible in part by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which is supported by the

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