

M. Rybak

‘BURNING STONE’: ESTONIA AND THE MENELLS

Many thanks to Esther Whitby (née Menell) for her help in assembling the material and for editing the English version of this story.

FOREWORD

Can stone burn? Of course not. Nobody would believe it if you said that it could. However . . .

In 1864, the villagers of Jõhvi parish in Estonia were digging ditches: deep ditches. As the brownish stone which they were bringing to the surface looked like limestone, they tried to use it to build a protective wall around their camp fire.

Unlike limestone, though, this stone could catch fire, so they called it the ‘burning stone’ (*põlevkivi* in Estonian). This, according to the memory of local people, is how oil shale was first discovered in Estonia¹.



Estonian oil shale. Source: Wikipedia

¹ This is just one of the legends. It looks as if the oil shale in Estonia was discovered much earlier, at the end of the XVIII century.

Today, the Estonian oil shale industry is one of the most fully developed in the world, with the very highest grade of the shale (known as *kukersiit*) having a conversion ratio of organic content into usable energy (shale oil and oil shale gas) ranging between 65% and 67%².

The first attempts to benefit from these oil shale deposits began as early as 1916, when Estonia was still part of the Russian Empire. In that year, the first tons of oil shale were sent from the Pavandu mines in north east Estonia to St Petersburg (then Petrograd) to be analysed for possible use in industrial production.

On October 30, 1919, the *Tallinna Teataja*, a serious daily newspaper reported:

It is only to be expected that such a treasure will attract capital investment and our government has already received proposals from foreign investors who wish to be granted concessions allowing them to exploit the oil shale deposits. These proposals have been rejected; firstly because the sums offered were derisory, and secondly, because we have not yet come to a decision as to whether the state will allow private investment in the exploitation of the oil shale reserves. In any case, the question is so important that it need careful consideration before a final decision is reached.

One of the first, if not the first, major concessionaires, was George Menell – formerly Mendel Grodzinski – who, though not born in Estonia, had a deep and enduring connection with the country in which he had lived since early childhood.

But, first things first.

GEORGE MENELL / MENDEL GRODZINSKI

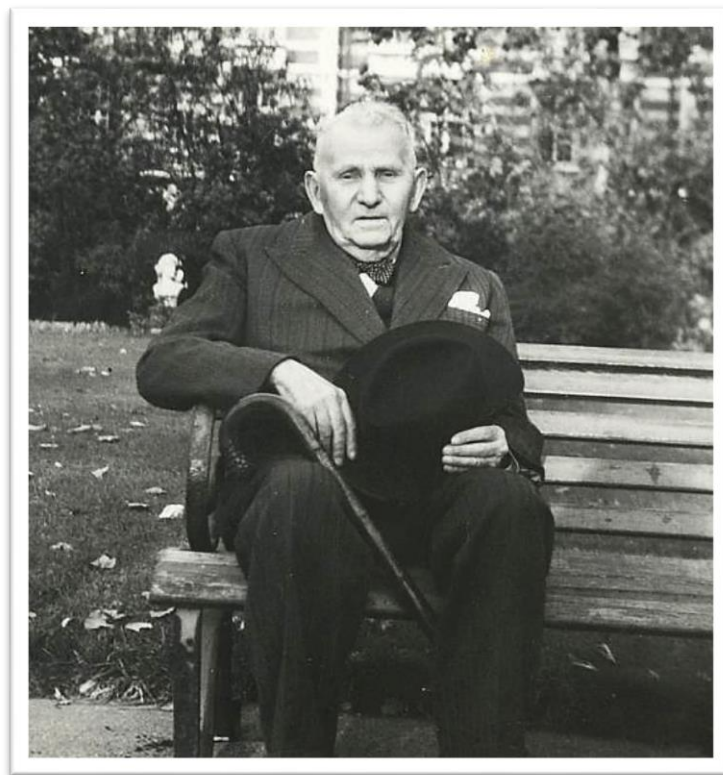
Mendel Grodzinski was born in Polotsk, Belarus, on September 15, 1870, to Michael and Deborah Grodzinsky (sometimes spelt Grodinsky). At that time, Polotsk was part of the Vitebsk *gubernya*, or province, of the Russian Empire which meant that it fell within the Pale of Settlement, the area in which Jews were allowed to live. In Polotsk Jews formed a majority of the population.

² Wikipedia “Oil shale in Estonia” (checked 9.11.2017)

We know disappointingly little of Mendel's early life. But we do know that he lost both his parents at a young age and was brought up in Estonia by an uncle. We have yet to discover who that uncle was, probably his mother's brother. We do know, however, that this uncle was a tailor and almost certainly lived in one of three cities: Narva, Rakvere or Viljandi. Later, when Mendel has become a major figure in the development of the Estonian oil shale industry, some newspapers speculated about his early years – favouring either Narva or Rakvere -- even though it was in Viljandi that he was to find his bride -- and stressing the fact that he could understand and even speak some Estonian, not an easy language for a child whose first language would have been Russian or Yiddish.³

The facts remain that Mendel was brought up in Estonia and inherited from his uncle not only exceptional tailoring skills but also an 'engineering mind-set': the first was to help him during his early years in London and the second made him 'one of the pioneers of the Estonian oil shale industry'.

In July 1888, at the age of eighteen, Mendel Grodzinsky leaves Estonia and heads for London where, before long, he is transformed into a respectable and respected English gentleman by name of George Menell.



George Menell in a London park.

³ "Uus Eesti Narva Uudised", N20, 13.6.1936 or "Esmaspäev" (Monday), 11.7.1936.

No one knows for certain why he chose George, but one of his granddaughters understood it was after St George, the patron saint, while another granddaughter had heard it was after the reigning king!

As for why he chose England and not America, which was by far the most popular destination at that time, we can only speculate. It could be that his uncle had connections in London through his tailoring business. What we know for certain is that for the first four years he worked in a clothing factory and somehow managed to bring his sweetheart – who came from a well-known family in Viljandi – to join him in London. Her name was Esther Hoff.

On May 15, 1892, George and Esther got married at the Stepney Green Synagogue in East London. By now, George was working for himself, at home, and very soon the young couple had two children: a son, Alexander Michael, born in 1893, and a daughter, Bertha, born in 1895.

A year later, in 1896, we find George employed by a ‘Ladies’ Tailor’ in Conduit Street. George had by now a growing reputation and was soon able to open his own shop in Upper Regent Street, no less. We know these facts from several sources, of which one is the *London American Register* where, on August 25, 1906, this purported letter (possibly an advertisement) appeared:

I must say that my friend, Lady B (than whom no one in London understands dress better) always gets her evening gowns at the International Ladies’ Tailor (306 Regent Street) where she always sees Mr Menell personally.



LADIES visiting London, desiring **PERFECT CUT** and **WELL-FITTING GARMENTS**, are requested to call at the ———

INTERNATIONAL LADIES' TAILOR.
Directed by G. MENELL,
One of the Leading London Tailors for the past Fifteen Years, who gives his personal attention to every Customer.

CHOICE SELECTION OF FURS.
Prices Moderate.

306, REGENT STREET, LONDON, W.

The business grew and George added furs to his merchandise, almost certainly imported from Estonia or Russia. The family grew too. There were now four sons and three daughters.

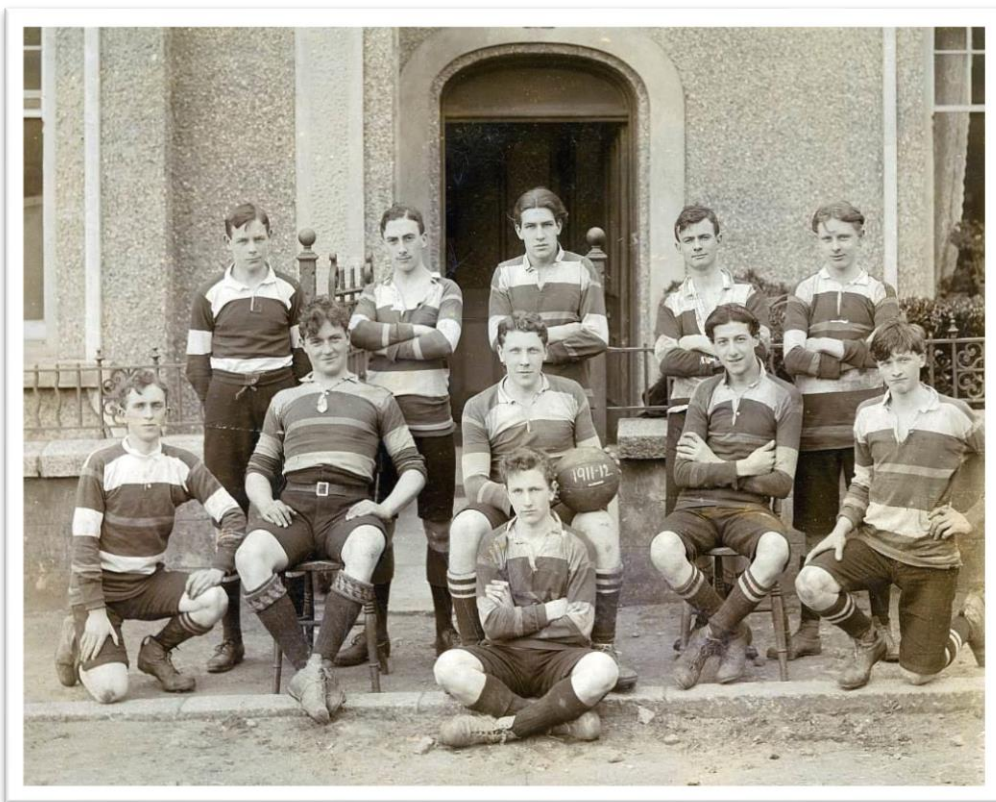
It is here that we will leave the thriving paterfamilias and shopkeeper and see what else is happening in the world . . .

The year is 1918. The Revolution in Russia is over. The war in Europe is still going on and, of particular relevance to our story, on the 24th of February, Estonia declares its independence.

It was at this point that George heard about the massive potential of oil shale deposits in Estonia and the need for serious investment to realise that potential. Apparently, the news came from a family friend, serving as first representative of the new Estonian government in London: probably a Mr Ants Piip, who was from Viljandi. And it reached the right person at the right time.

The right person in more ways than one for there is nothing to suggest that George Menell was in it for the money. It was, according to his granddaughter, Esther Whitby, his wife's family, the Hoffs of Viljandi, who provided the business acumen. George was a dreamer – an eternal optimist -- with a profound love of the country he had left as a very young man.

He is now approaching fifty. His two older daughters are grown up and can take over his tailoring business. He is still young enough and fit enough to travel and find out for himself what is going on. He even has some technical skills, thanks to the uncle who raised him. So, why not give it a try? To cap it all, his eldest son, Alexander, graduate of the Camborne School of Mines in Cornwall, was a fully fledged mining engineer.

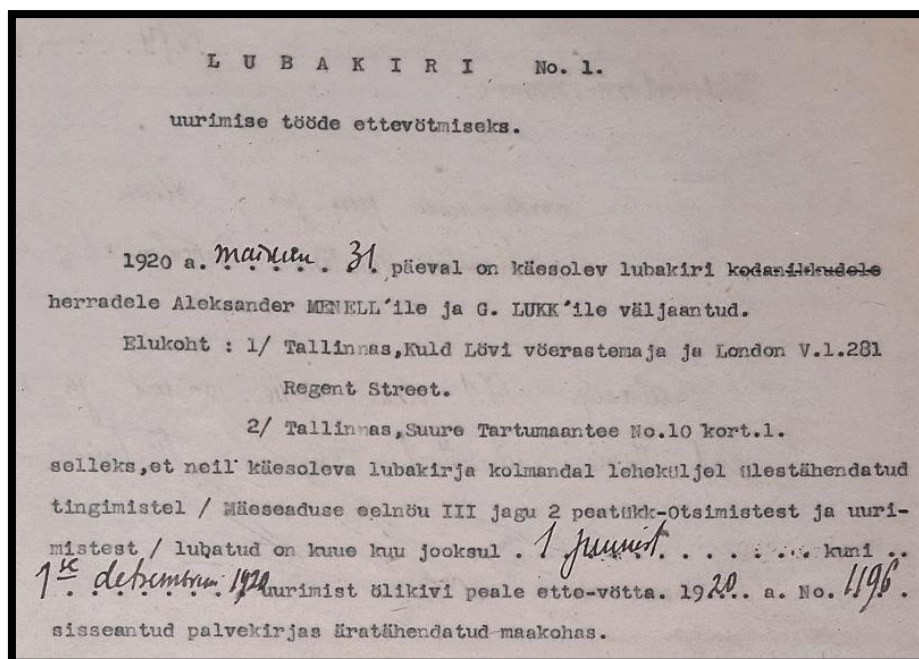


Alexander Menell (sitting at right) as a graduate of the Camborne School of Mines. 1912.

So, in 1919, two mining engineers, Alexander Menell and Gerhard Lukk (about whom, alas, we know very little) approach the Estonian government for permission to carry out a surface examination. In 1920, they receive the necessary permission – Permission Number 1 – but only for a period of six months from the first of June to the first of December. The land they are allowed to survey lies east of the Jõhvi railway station and is precisely 1.5 verst (or 1.6 km) wide⁴.

Only four months after the initial approach, on June 26, 1920, Gerhard Lukk writes another letter to the Estonian government⁵ from which these passages, originally written in Estonian, as required, are taken:

About a year and a half ago, we, Menell and myself, began to explore the opportunities of our oil shale industry. However, in order to collect the data necessary for establishing a large-scale plant, it was necessary to carry out more preliminary work, for which more capital was needed. To raise that capital Jõhvi Oilfields Ltd was founded⁶, in London, with an initial investment of £30,000. The mission of the new company was to gather experience and data for the industry at large



Permission N 1 for investigation of the oil-shale given to Aleksander Menell and Gerhard Lukk on 31.5.1920

⁴ ERA.1840.1.2

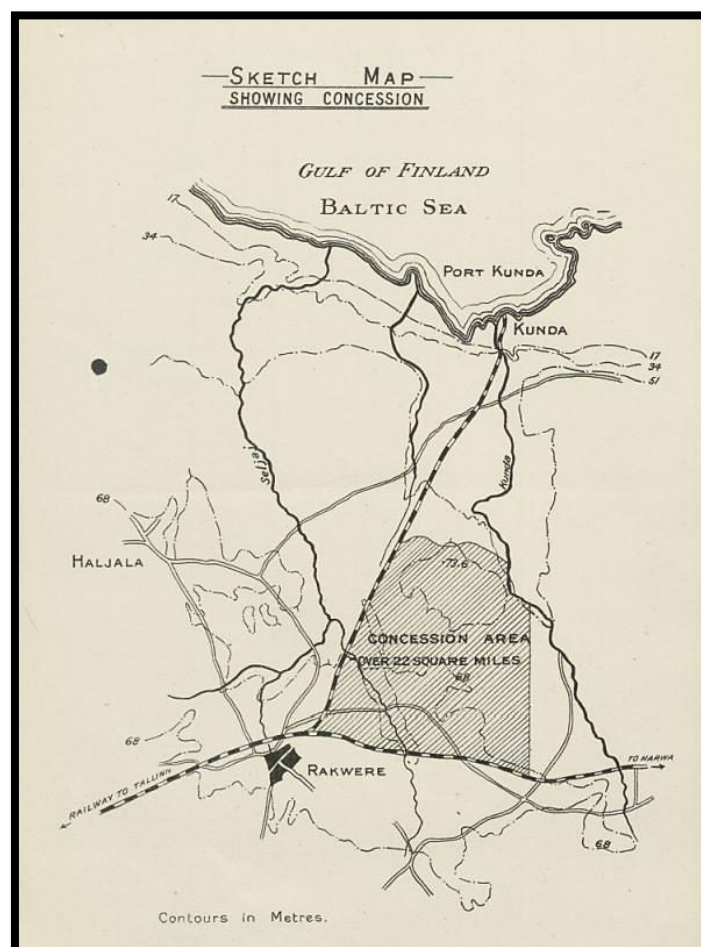
⁵ Several letters bear Alec Menell's signature, not Lukk's. But the letters will have been written by Lukk as he was an Estonian citizen and knew the language.

⁶ Jõhvi Oilfields Ltd was incorporated on 3.9.1920 [G. Menell naturalization document HO 144.13021].

This is why, at an early stage, we started negotiations with the biggest and most powerful oil producers and financial institutions in England in order to establish a large-scale industry for oil shale production in Estonia

As far as methods of reprocessing are concerned, we know of no other companies in England or Germany or, indeed, anywhere else, which can match our oil-shale specifications without modification or upgrading. There are individual methods which yield a higher or lower percentage of oil from the shale, with lesser or greater difficulty. As for ourselves, we have managed by means of heated steam and multiple changes in the retort details, to get up to 14-15% of oil from our stone

The Jõhvi Oilfields referred to above established to perform experimental work in obtaining oil from shale and set up with a starting capital of £30,000, was owned by George Menell, who was the director and his wife, Esther Menell. And the biggest problem the new company faced was how to build a more efficient retort for extracting oil from shale. After considerable time and effort, they succeeded and, in 1926, a patent for this invention was taken out in the name of George Menell.



The Vanamõisa mining concession area. [From G. Menell naturalization document HO 144.13021].

We learn more on this subject from George's naturalisation papers, which were compiled by the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police. They tell us that *'the applicant gave up his tailoring business in 1920 and then, with the knowledge of design which he had learned in the tailoring trade and his previous knowledge of engineering, he commenced to design a retort*

It is worth noting that the design method was repeatedly improved on. For example, the vertical retort was replaced by a horizontal one which suited local conditions better, and many new patents were granted in later years.

The retort and all the other developments in the industry were covered extensively in local newspapers and read by the general public. For example, In the September 2, 1920 edition of *Päevaleht*, a serious newspaper that still exists today, we learn that

the distilling equipment of the Lukk & Menell oil shale company is already on its way to Estonia. These businessmen have not yet got far enough with the mining enterprise to extract the necessary amount of oil shale they need for distilling, as the preliminary work is still underway which is why they are expecting to get the oil shale they needed from the state-owned mine. Knowledgeable people are saying that the credit for such speedy operational advance belongs to Mr Menell. We would like to recommend that our people take note of this because, apart from the Küttejõu Company, which is also doing research in this area, other concessionaires have done nothing as yet.

Or this, from *Waba Maa* for March 8, 1921

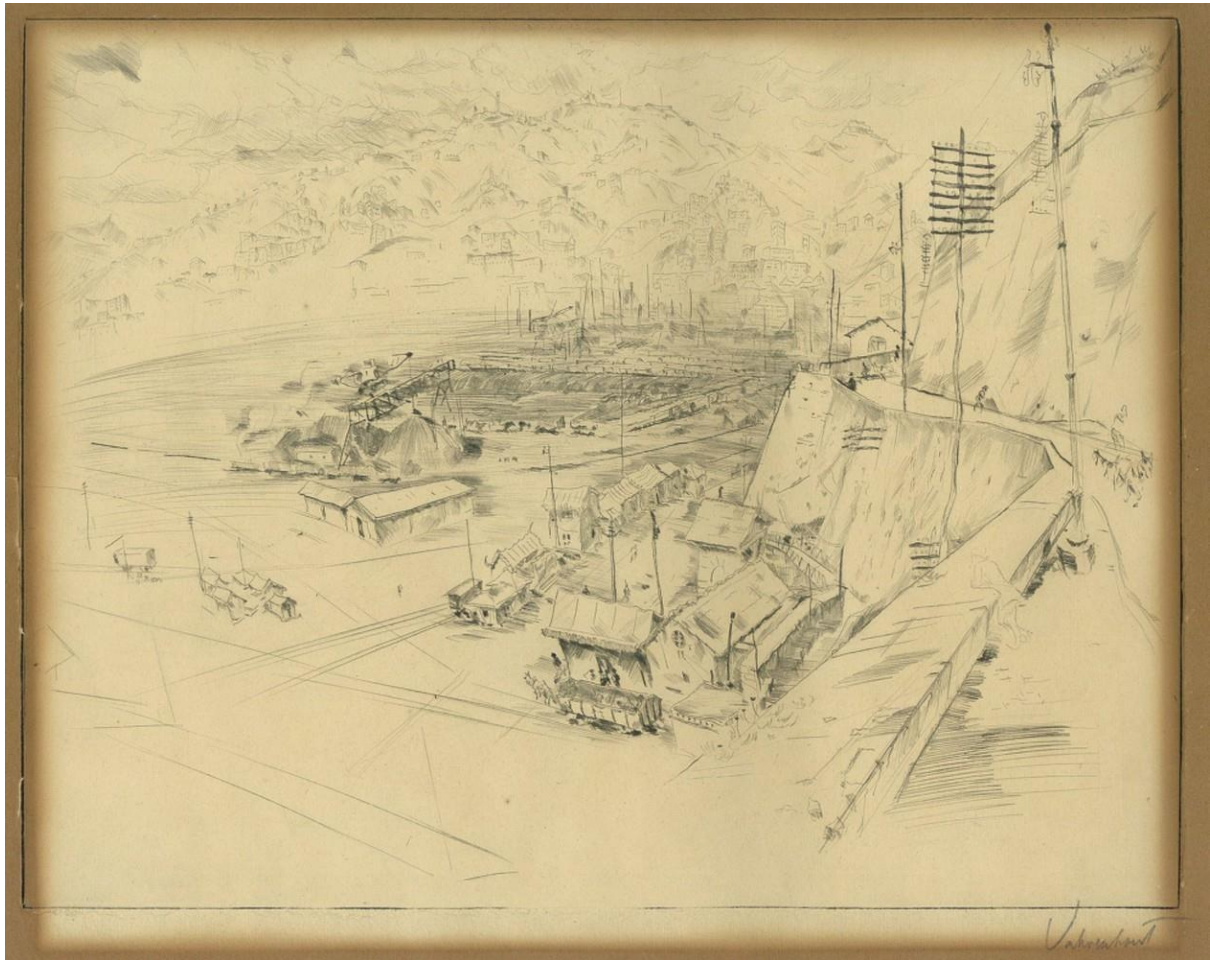
The first Oilfield Distillery of Jõhvi Oilfields Company Ltd commenced work about three days ago. Yesterday, the 7th, a distinguished Party visited the works at the invitation of the Company; it included the Head of State, Foreign Minister, Minister of Interior, Minister of Commerce, Members of Parliament, newspaper correspondents and the Company representative from England.

For a start, they are working two retorts a day, each one capable of treating about fifteen tons of shale. If the results are good, and providing they can get the necessary concession from the Government, they propose to erect works containing 200 or more retorts.

The Directors have great hopes for the future. The English Company has agreed to advance up to a million pounds for the necessary installation [about 100 million Estonian marks].

The Party were shown around the works by the Directors. The machinery and process of manufacturing were explained by Engineer Lukk. Afterwards the Party were entertained to lunch by the Directors and Members of the Company. During the lunch, Engineer Lukk went thoroughly into the question of oil production in Estonia and said it could be done, providing they could get Government support. The Head of State made a short address, which was replied to by the English Representative, Mr Watson, followed by Mr Menell.

For a long but amusing newspaper story which illustrates both George's sense of humour and his command of Estonian, see the description of a visit of various bigwigs to Vanamõisa in a 1927 issue of *Päevaleht* (Appendix 2).



The sketch of the Vanamõisa mining by Paul Vahrenhorst (1880-1951).

ALEXANDER MICHAEL MENELL

Let us take a closer look at the role of George Menell's eldest son, Alexander Michael (1894-1973) who was born shortly after his father arrived in England and who had received an English education. We have records of him being at school in Kilburn and of his having graduated, in 1912, from the prestigious Camborne School of Mines. Alec (for so he was called) was now happily married to Zosia, née Gutkin, born in Tallinn in 1905.⁷

Their daughter, Esther Whitby⁸, remembers that

*Vanamõisa was to become my father's' baby, and he spent many happy years there, only abandoning the mines to return to England at the outbreak of war. Determined to join up (though he proved too old for active service) he left Estonia at peace for a country at war. He was never to return. The mines were expropriated by the Soviet regime which succeeded the German occupation, and are now, as far as I know, the property of the Estonian government.*⁹



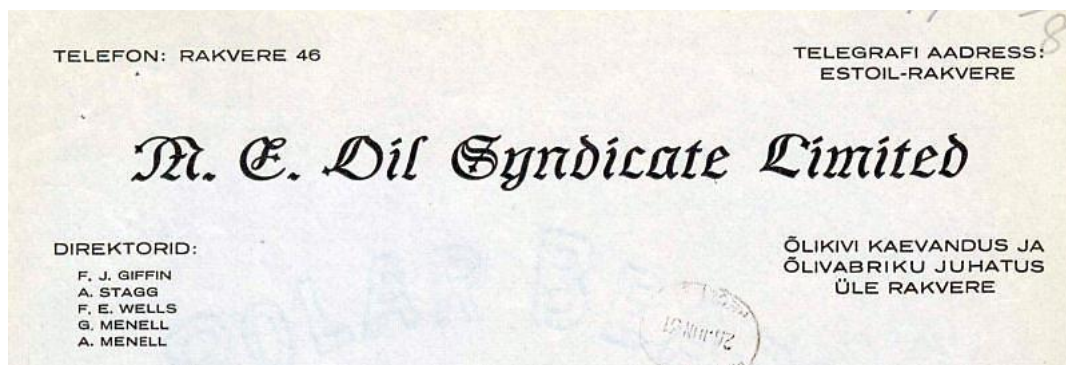
Alec Menell with his wife Zosja Gutkin

⁷ Zosia Menell (Gutkin) died in London in March 1966.

⁸ Esther Whitby, the granddaughter of George Menell and daughter of Alec Menell, who worked as a book-publishing editor, has written two books. *Remembering Tallinn: an Anglo-Jewish Memoir* (South Portland, 2008) is hard to get hold of. Her full memoir *Loose Connections: from Narva Maantee to Great Russell Street* (London, 2014, ISBN 978-0-9930087-0-2) is still available. It covers her working life as well as her family history. Both books are well illustrated. I recommend them! [M.R.]

⁹ Oil production on Vanamõisa mines stopped in 1931. Today nothing has remained of the plant nor even the mining area itself. See the end of this story for some pictures.

Although Alec was the son most closely involved with Vanamõisa, he was not the only member of the younger generation connected with the enterprise. In 1929, his Estonian brother-in-law, Harry Prensky (married to Bertha Menell), became the Estonian-based representative of M.E. Oil Syndicate Ltd.¹⁰ And in the years ahead, money was to pour in from South Africa, where Alec's brother Simeon (always known as 'Slip') had made a fortune, while yet another brother, Arthur, appears on the company letterhead.



Two directors are George and Arthur Menell. Arthur Menell was Alexander Menell's younger brother (b. 1903). Alexander Menell was employed by M.E. Oil Syndicate Ltd as a mining engineer.

But at the time of Harry Prensky's appointment, in 1929, all was not well. The world economic crisis of 1923-33 was having its effect in Estonia, and in December 1931, the work at Vanamõisa came to a halt. Yet the owners didn't lose hope. In fact, they kept their work force employed at the nearby Ubja mines, and even provided workers with free housing and free heating.¹¹ Meanwhile, in 1930, a new company called New Consolidated Gold Fields was founded. And the head of the Estonian branch, commonly known as Goldfields, whose offices were located at Vene 11a-5 in Tallinn, was the mining engineer Alexander Menell.¹²

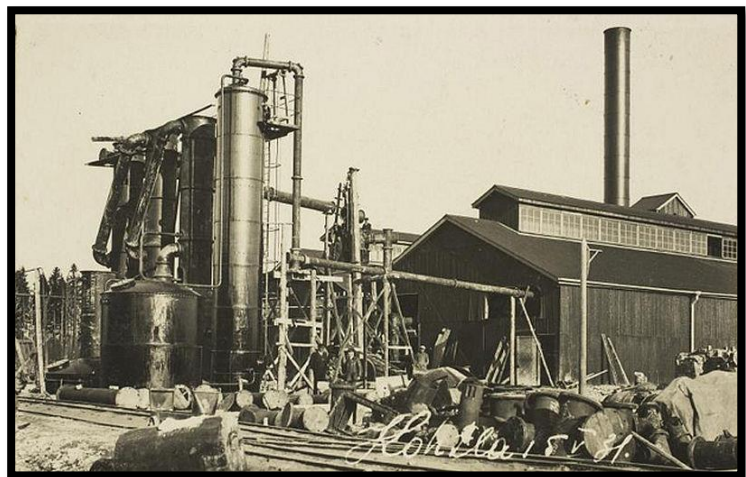
¹⁰ M.E. Oil Syndicate Ltd stands for Menell Estonia Oil Syndicate Ltd. It was established on 13.8.1926.

¹¹ „Postimees“ 22.5.1936

¹² „Waba maa“ 2.1.1931



The following year, this new company built a massive shale oil extraction plant at Kohtla-Nõmme, consisting of a crushing mill, laboratory, power plant, office building services, service facilities, etc. It was also equipped with eight rotating retorts, each capable of producing 15 tonnes of shale oil per day; by 1934, the company had doubled its production by building a second similar plant. Nationalised in 1940, the Kohtla-Nõmme shale oil extraction complex would continue to operate until 1961. And the underground mine remained operational – probably just digging for oil shale, but not producing oil or gas – until 2001.



Kohtla shale oil extraction plant of New Consolidated Gold Fields Ltd. (From Wikipedia).

There was, in 1936, an attempt to start Vanamõisa up again. Harry Prensky, now living in London, came to Tallinn to arrange for the re-opening of the mine, the ground having been prepared by the establishment (in London) of a new company – Vanamõisa Oilfields Ltd – which bought all the equipment from the M.E. Oil Syndicate and obtained the right to start afresh. However,

though there were several attempts to get up and running again, the plant remained inactive.

In the 1930s, two of Alec Menell's brothers, Slip and Arthur, became very successful businessmen in South Africa. Slip Menell was co-founder, in 1932, of the Anglo-Transvaal Group, one of South Africa's largest diversified mining and industrial companies, whilst Arthur was elected chairman of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

News of these activities provided plenty of material for gossip. As a result, a fair number of stories which were pure invention began to circulate about these wealthy sons of the patriarch George Menell who had remained true to his Estonian roots. One good example comes from the tabloid *Uudisleht* of June 6, 1936. It is headed:

ESTONIAN JEW – OWNER OF AFRICAN OIL SHALE

As we already know, the owner of the South African oil shale that was brought here for testing, is Engineer Menell, who is generally known as an Englishman. In reality, however, Menell was born in Narva where his father, a Jew Menell, had a hat shop at the beginning of the century. As trade was not too good, the father liquidated his business and went to South Africa with his family. There, thanks to favourable circumstances, he did well and was soon able to buy a large area of land near Johannesburg. Well aware of the value of underground assets, and knowing that this territory was still unexplored, he sent his oldest son to study the mining business, and he became a mining engineer and discovered the country's most valuable asset: oil shale. As the results showed that African oil shale is even better than Estonian oil shale, Engineer Menell has turned his attention to processing the South African oil-shale deposits. To accomplish this, he will obtain machinery for the newly built South African plant, from the Franz Krull plant in Tallinn. He will also be able to attract to South Africa experienced graduates of the Jõhvi mining school.

It is on this slightly sour note that our story ends. But not before reporting that, despite attempts to start the Vanamõisa mining operation up again, all activity there had ceased in 1931 and only an 800-meter-long hollow now marks where the mine once stood. During the '50s and '60s, this trench was filled with water and local people used it as a place to swim. Today, much of the area is thick with young trees and will soon revert to forest. In the meadowlands, one ruined factory building can still be seen: it is all that remains of a Jewish tailor's dream.



From „90 aastat põlevkivi kaevandamist Eestis“,
Geo Trail, 2008



Vanamõisa area today (2017). Photo: author.



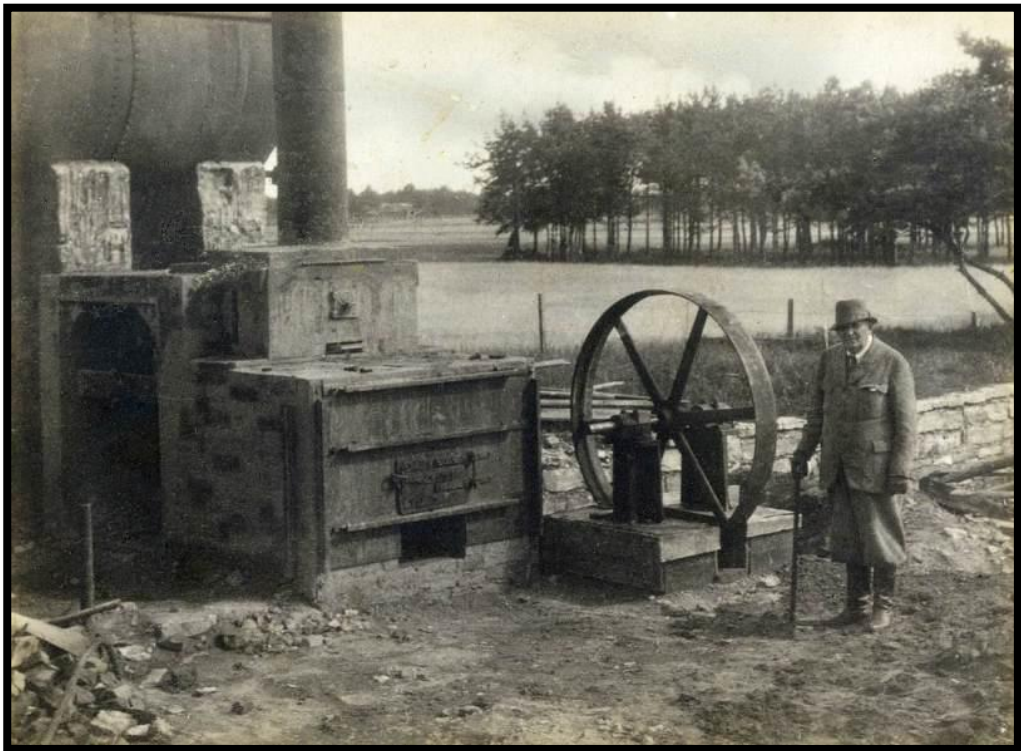
The remains of the Vanamõisa oil producing plant (2017). Photo: author.

Appendix 1.

Some Historical Views of the Vanamõisa mine



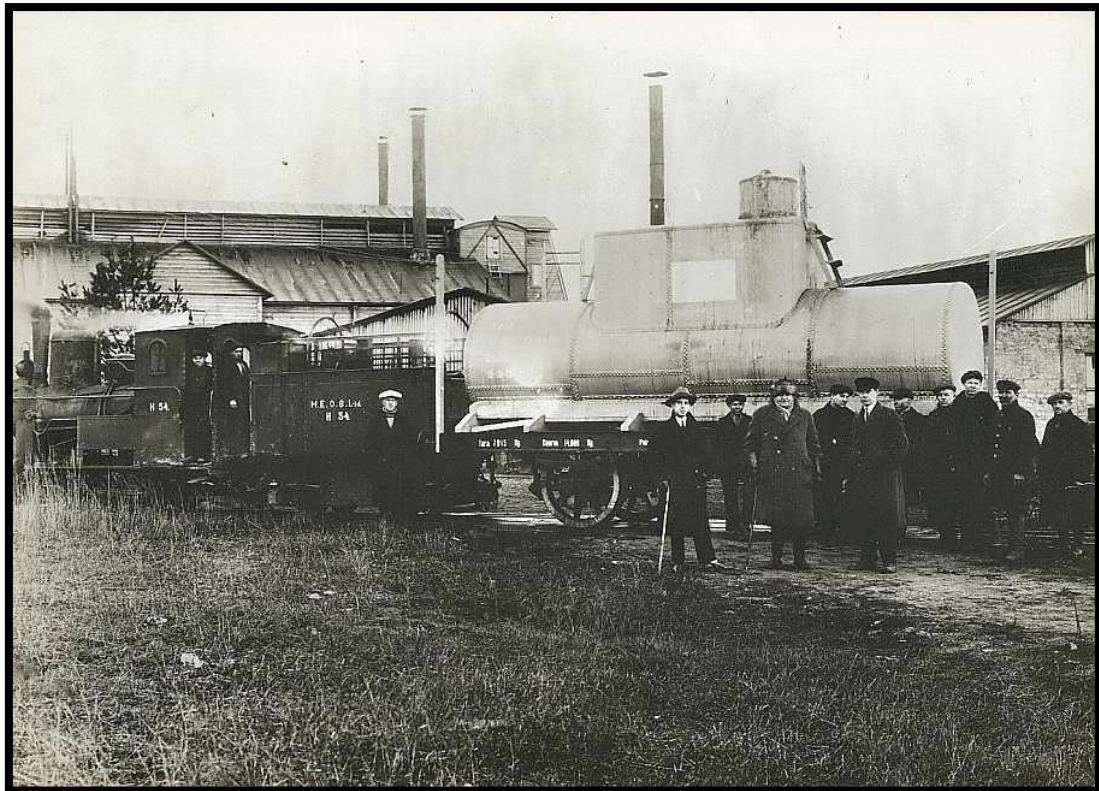
Alexander Menell (in the middle with cigarette) down the mine.



George Menell at Vanamõisa.

At Vanamõisa





Harry Prensky (left) with unknown colleagues at Vanamõisa plant.



The only remaining workers house (barrack) in 2011. Today (2017) - a modern, completely rebuilt house. The picture from "Pärandkultuur Sõmeru vallas" 2014. I. Pikkoja, M. Simkin



George Menell at the Plant.

Appendix 2.

Note on translation: Translations from the Estonian throughout have been tidied up. However, the Appendix 2 has been left in the exact form in which it reached Esther Whitby from her cousin Clive Menell, son of Slip, grandson of George, who had found it in the archive of Anglo-Transvaal, of which he was then Deputy Chairman.

Translation of article from Estonian newspaper "Päevaleht" dated 11 august 1927.

OIL SHALE: THE FUTURE OF ESTONIA

Fate of Estonian Oil-Shale Industry depends upon finding Suitable Retort. Four Industrial Towns of 40,000 inhabitants and four large oil-sale Factories are developing.

A VISIT TO VANAMÕISA OIL PLANT AND MINES.

From Tallinn to Vanamõisa.

The Vanamõisa Oil-Shale Works and their owner, Mr G. Menell, belong to that pioneer period in the oil-shale industry, when the careful tilling of the extensive Field of work, then laying fallow, had just begun. Therefore when we started on our Tuesday evening journey to the Vanamõisa Works in order to view the progress of the enterprise, we did so full of curiosity and high expectations.

We left Tallinn by the Narwa train at 3.30. We traveled in a separate compartment, Mr G. Menell himself, the Minister of Trade & Industry, Mr E. Kornel, the Engineers, Mr J. Kark and Mr H. Lukk, and three newspaper men who were glad of being able to flee from the dust of the town, be it only for a short lapse of time. Later on, however, it tured out to be a case of getting out of the frying pan into the Fire, for the dust of the Vanamõisa oil-shale, although perhaps less toxious for the lungs was still heavier than the dense and disgusting dust in the thick of the streets of the capital.

Mr G Menell, an Englishman, grown up at Narwa knows the Estonian language well enough to keep us in good humour during the whole of the journey. He is an excellent business man and joker, at the same time. When all topics were at an end, he related an amusing story about rich old Rothschild and his son. The story which is interesting enough to be related here, runs as follows: Mr Rothschild Junior employed always the same chauffeur, to which the old man's son liked to give good tips. Naturally, the consequence was that the chauffeur did all he could to get young Mr Rothschild as a fare. But one day he was obliged to take the old man himself, whose tips were much more modest: he expressed his discontent 'But what do you think', said Rothschild senior angrily to the driver, 'if my son pays well it is because he has a rich father.... I have no rich father and therefore my tips are less.'. We laughed with all our hearts at this rich father, who was as witty as he was rich, since he could explain to the driver the proportion of the tips in such a simple way.

Chatting merrily we soon reached Rakvere, where we alighted from the train and on a motor trolley proceeded to Vanamõisa. The way between Rakvere and Vanamõisa takes about ten minutes and we were soon in the mines and the quarries, afterwards paying a visit to the oil shale plant.

At Vanamõisa.



From „90 aastat põlevkivi kaevandamist Eestis” (90 years of the Estonian oil-shale industry) Geo Trail, 2008

All around are nothing but mines, in the centre the oil plant which, it is true, is only an experimental installation, but it is large and powerful enough to accomplish successfully the experiments commenced. Its working capacity is 16 tons of oil-shale a day. The shale is melted in the course of forty-five minutes at a heat of 540 degrees and yields an oil which is somewhat lighter and of greater quantity than elsewhere. The retort is heated from the outside and one of its advantages is that it takes the finest oil shale of the third grade, which cannot be used anywhere else and would otherwise be wasted. One ton of oil is said to cost 40 shillings whereas the market price is double. Under such conditions it is possible to work, make a profit and pay a reasonable dividend to the shareholders. The specific gravity of the oil is the lighter kind 0.84, the heavier 1.06, and an average mixture of 0.96 which latter is kept in stock. The patents have been taken for the second retort which, presumably, will be put into action for the working of the coarser shaloe.

The whole question of the industry depends upon building a large retort, to which end

experiments are going on at the present time. It is hoped that in the nearest future they will be successfully carried out and then an up-to-date oil factory will be established which will no longer serve for mere experimental purposes but will work on practical lines. The oil factory will be built at some distance from the present experimental plant near which the water necessary for working is not available.

Mr G Menell has been one of the first pioneers of the Estonian Oil-Shale industry. He has been working in Estonia as a concessionaire since 1919 and is the founder of the M. E. Oil Syndicate Ltd. All experiments carried out and the whole work done which came to tens and tens of millions were never tested and good preparation for the building up of a sound oil industry. It must not be forgotten that the Estonian oil-shale industry is almost the only one of its kind in the world and that it was necessary to begin from the beginning and carefully experiment at every step.

The experiments now being made, were begun by Mr G Menell on the 21st June of the present year. The retort worked successfully for 16 days yielding 20— 25% of oil but the bolts of the tubes being affected by the heat employed (about 600 degrees) burst.

Vanamõisa finds a market in Latvia and Lithuania in virtue of a treaty, the crude oil is imported free of duty. The market price is £5 per ton.

Estonian oil-shale is not yet known in foreign countries. The output is not yet sufficient to allow of speaking or even thinking of foreign markets, but after the construction of large factories it will not be long before its sale will enter the programme of the country.

Altogether the inspection of the plant gives one the impression that positive progress is being made, which impression is strengthened by the confidence and hearty participation in the work, shown by the managers of the enterprise.

At the dinner after our visit the time passed quickly until evening arrived when we returned to Rakvers on motor cars. We reached Tallinn yesterday by the early expres from Narwa.

Appendix 3.

The grave of the patriarch of the Menell clan George Menell (Grodzinsky) at London Liberal Jewish cemetery.

