

# Telecommunications Heritage Journal

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*ATEA and World War II*  
*Mercury one2one*

ATEA was an artisanal telephone company, founded in Antwerp in 1892, In 1926 ATEA came under the control of the Theodore Gary group (who also controlled Au-tomatic Electric Chicago and ATM Liverpool) and it was converted into an industrial company manufacturing telephones and Strowger telephone exchanges.

When the Germans occupied Belgium on the 10th of May 1940, ATEA's General Manager Joe Janssens escaped to the USA and Chief Design Engineer Rudolf Stehlik (an American citizen) was appointed as ATEA's General Manager.

On the 7th of December, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. As a result, the Americans declared war on Japan and Germany. This decision caused some changes in occupied Belgium. An American citizen was considered as an enemy by the occupying Germans, so Rudolf Stehlik had to step down as General Manager of ATEA at the beginning of 1942. The Board of Directors had a difficult choice to make: either leave the decision to the occupying Germans, and let them assign a "curator" who had little knowledge of the telecommunication business, or find themselves a German citizen who had knowledge of the telecommunications business and put him in charge of the company as he would be trusted by the occupying Germans. They chose for the second solution. The German company Siemens was contacted and a Siemens manager Eugen Merkel was appointed as general manager on the 1st of April, 1942.

## Who was Eugen Merkel?

Eugen Merkel (1892-1949) was a Department Director of the Siemens subsidiary PROTOS Telefon GmbH. At the same time he was a high-level member of the upper Berlin management of Siemens & Halske ("a Generalbevollmächtigter"). He was given leave of absence to take over the management of ATEA Antwerp as of the 1st of April, 1942. In that position, he might benefit from his position as "Generalbevollmächtigter" in having good connections to the upper Siemens management in Berlin. On the 3rd of September 1944 (one day before the allied forces liberated Antwerp), he escaped to Austria. In October 1944 he wrote an extensive report about his activities in ATEA, which is the basis of this article. Eugen Merkel died on the 20th of April 1949, he was only 57 years old

## German assistants of Eugen Merkel

Eugen Merkel brought two assistants from Siemens: one was called Fuhr, who was a financial controller, the other one was called Ostlinning, who had worked in Berlin as a manufacturing engineer in a "Werkstatt" (Workshop). The 88 year old former ATEA employee Maria Weyninx remembers general manager Eugen Merkel very well. She could not judge his management capacities, but she was very

well pleased in the way he treated people. She also knew the German Mr. Ostlinning. She told me he had a patch over his eye and walked with a limp. Rumour had it that he had returned from the Russian front but we were not able to verify this story.

## ATEA under Siemens management (April 1, 1942 – September 3, 1944)

Eugen Merkel was appointed as the new general manager and implemented efficiency improvements, such as higher worker efficiency, flexible movement of people within the organization and stock management improvement. Also Siemens products were introduced and manufactured. He worked together with the existing Board of Directors, who were members of the "Société Générale". Siemens financed their orders themselves and gave logistical support and tooling, so ATEA's risks were minimized.

## 1942: The Beginning

The traditional local customers such as the National Telephone Operating Company and the Railway Company started to reduce their orders due to the war circumstances. However orders came in from Siemens, but the standard German manufacturing cost was much lower than that in ATEA, therefore the manufacturing processes had to be changed to improve efficiency. Using Siemens knowhow and tools, adjustments were made and thorough staff training was carried out. A lot of money was invested in production facilities and in buildings such as in the construction of shelters against air attacks.

## Production Telephony

One of the problems that were encountered was that the knowhow of manufacturing the Strowger switches was in Liverpool, UK, and was not available. ATEA engineers succeeded in doing reverse engineering, and created their own version. Siemens were given large orders for switching equipment. The standard ATEA phone was also delivered in quantities to Siemens.

ATEA was market leader in Belgium for electrical meters, but its production environment was outdated and needed to be improved urgently. There was technical support from Siemens, and the biggest buyer was also Siemens. From the Siemens Archives in Munich, we learned that an agreement was made to manufacture watertight manual exchanges and dials for Siemens. Transfer of tooling had to be organized from Vienna and Berlin. As a sideline, the company produced also zippers, which was a profitable business. This department was mostly considered as a buffer for the company. If the sales in electro technical equipment was low, there was still the zipper business.

**Financial result 1942**

Telephony	28,384,820	65.11%
Meters	4,783,018	10.97%
Electricity meters	2,433,581	5.58%
Zippers	7,817,031	17.93%
Miscellaneous	177,854	0.41%
Total	43,596,304	100.00%

Figure 1: Invoice distribution 1942  
 Figures in local currency, Belgian Francs.



Figure 2: Assembly of meters on ATEA in the 1940s.

**1943: At Cruising Speed**

After the 1942 reorganization, benefits were obtained in 1943. The orders from the local customers decreased further as expected, but the civilian Siemens orders came in big quantities. Siemens did not order military equipment, which could have provoked sabotage. Because of the war, adjustments to production materials and manufacturing processes had to be made frequently, for example, brass used in manufacturing of zippers, had to be substituted by zinc, and later on by iron.



Figure 3: Calendar ATEA August 1942

**1944: it becomes more difficult**

To Siemens/Berlin:			% Siemens	% not Siemens
Telephony	39,284,000			
Meters	6,500,000	45,784,000		
To Siemens/Brussels				
Telephony	2,600,000			
Meters	800,000	3,400,000		
Totally to Siemens		49,184,000	78.84%	
Railways, RTT, private				
Telephony		4,100,000		6.57%
Meters		1,300,000		2.08%
Zippers				
Germany	5,200,000			
Holland	1,400,000			
Belgium	1,200,000	7,800,000		12.50%
			78.84%	21.16%
Grand total		62,384,000	100 %	

Figure 4: Production 1944 (up to August, 31)  
 Prices in Belgian Francs

The factory could have run at full capacity, but because of air attacks during the war, there were limitations to production as there were interruptions in electricity and gas supply, and disruptions caused by resistance activities. Many hours were lost and supplies of material were hampered. As a consequence, a number of unfinished products had to be stored because parts were missing.

During the war bomb shelters had to be built, camouflage systems needed to be installed and working hours were extended. The working environment was improved by adding new washrooms, toilets, canteen, and installing a medical service, with the most advanced equipment. A public address system for service announcements and music was fitted that continued to operate in the bomb shelters during an air raids. Cultural activities were also provided to workers including yearly visit to theatre, opera, activities for children including Christmas parties. The war conditions were hard for the families, so it was common to help the workers in purchasing difficult to get basic items such as potatoes and coal.



Figure 5: “Collateral damage” in November 1944 caused by a V2 bomb

In a second article, which will be published in the following magazine, we will explain about ATEA people in Berlin and about resistance on ATEA.

We need your articles

BRITISH TELEPHONY

Share your interest

Write now!

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## National Vintage Communications Fair

Warwickshire Exhibition Centre  
Leamington Spa, Warwickshire  
Sunday 11th May 2014

10.30am to 4.00pm • £8 admission  
(early entry c.9.00am @ £25)

OLD TELEPHONES • KIOSK SPARES  
VINTAGE WIRELESS SETS • TRANSISTORS  
CRYSTAL SETS • VALVE AMPLIFIERS  
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## ATEA people at work in Siemens Berlin

**Introduction**

The use of forced labor in and throughout German-occupied Europe during World War II took place on an unprecedented scale. It was a vital part of the German economic exploitation of the conquered territories. In the beginning of the war, a lot of Germans had to go to the army. However the war lasted longer than expected. A lot of them were killed in action (approximately 150,000 troops), and they had to be substituted by other men, so German industry had a hard time to recruit new people, and to fulfill all the required orders for the "Wehrmacht", although highest priority was given to military orders.

**ATEA Workers in Berlin**

One of the ways to get workers was to tell companies in occupied countries to send a percentage of their workers to Germany. Although ATEA already worked for Siemens, they had to send workers to Germany. Mr. Merkel arranged that those people could work for Siemens & Halske in Berlin. In the given circumstances, this was an advantage for both parties. ATEA workers knew where they would end up, and Siemens got skilled telephony workers. Civilians like the ATEA workers got a salary which was comparable to German workers.

They had to work for the Siemens & Halske division "Wernerwerk F", which was the telecommunication department, located at several places; mostly around Berlin.

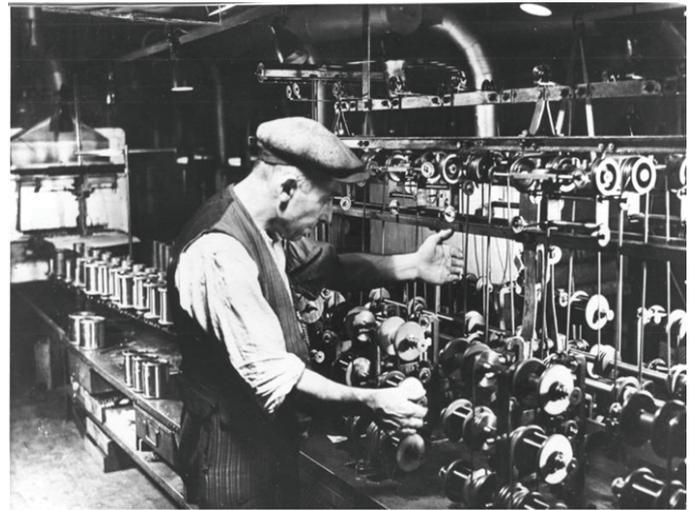


Figure 1: Postcard of one of the Siemens "Wernerwerk F" buildings in Berlin

An ATEA human resource manager visited Berlin, and the life and working conditions of the Belgian workers was reasonably good.

Zwangsarbeit-forschung states that records about forced labor in the Berlin area show that there were about 3500 "lager" (places where workers were lodged) in the Berlin neighborhood.

Female ATEA workers were housed in downtown Berlin and the men in a nearby town. In 1944 there were about 50000 foreign workers at Siemens Berlin. In those figures the number of ATEA people (100 to 200) is very small, so we could not find any details about them.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R40003

Foto: o.Äg. / August 1943

Figure 2: Belgian at work in Siemens & Halske's coil winding department (1943) Source: German "Bundesarchiv" via <http://www.v-like-vintage.net>

**Resistance at ATEA**

During World War II, resistance activities were deployed everywhere in occupied countries and also within companies. An important resistance man: Lucien Kesteleyen



Figure 3: Lucien Kesteleyen (1897-1974) Source: ATEA archives

One of the important resistance men at ATEA was Lucien Kesteleyn. The Siemens manager Merkel assigned him as HR manager during the war. As HR manager he had to work very close with the (German) general manager, but he was also very active in the resistance. At the outbreak of the war, the 43 year old Kesteleyn wanted to join the Belgian army, but he was rejected because of his age, so he became a lieutenant in a resistance movement under the nickname "Richard" (nobody knew his real name). His wife knew he was doing "something", but knew almost nothing for security reasons. After the war, and even after he retired, he documented everything. His 82 year old daughter gave me access to this unique document.

### **Thwarting the occupying Germans**

#### **Delivery of a bad cable**

An important German headquarters was located in a Brussels hotel. The Germans needed a special 63 wire cable for a strategic application. A bad cable was given, and the installer put acid on the cable, which led to bad quality in the long term.

#### **Delay in service**

The Germans required a direct telephone connection between two airports through ATEA exchanges. When they were asked for an expert, they were sent to several faulty addresses before they obtained their expert.

#### **Sabotage activities**

Students who were assigned to the company were sent on holiday, so over 11000 work hours were lost.

ERLA was a factory repairing German airplanes in the Antwerp area. The telephone exchange was sabotaged by ATEA maintenance people.

In 1944 a lot of actions were taken against the occupying Germans. There were the allied forces air raids, but also resistance activities on the ground.

This had the following consequences for the ATEA production: some piece parts did not reach the company, so there was a huge stock of non-finished products, and a lot of workers could not reach the company.

#### **Gathering important information**

ATEA had a number of telephone exchanges installed at companies. So its person-nel had access to all those companies for maintenance purposes and could gather information how things were going at those locations.

#### **Assistance with the progress of the allied forces**

Resistance movements gathered a lot of information, and forwarded it to London, to prepare for the liberation. ATEA people sent information regarding the status and availability of the Belgian public telephone network to the allied forces.

### **Collaboration?**

Here we come to a sensitive point: collaboration. We hope that 70 years later, the events will be considered differently than they would have been during hostilities.

ATEA's traditional customers reduced their orders due to war circumstances. There was also a problem of raw material supply and goods reaching export markets. There were many reasons for reduced production and a strong chance that people would be laid off. Unemployed people were sent to Germany, out of reach of the Belgian industry. Belgian companies tried to keep people employed, but during the war, it was difficult.

The German industry, especially the electro-technical sector, desperately needed workers. Belgian companies hesitated to do subcontracting for the Germans, for political reasons.

What was the attitude of employers? They could just refuse to work with the enemy, and close down - a very patriotic stance and having taken that stance, their business would have been completely lost after the war.

When the war finished, there was an investigation by the Belgian court into ATEA's co-operation with Siemens. In a letter of July 1946 of the American embassy in Brussels, we read: "A group of experts is examining the case from two angles: (1) the type of products furnished to the Germans by the firm, and (2) the profits or losses of the firm. (These matters are of interest, as the criteria established in Belgium for determining whether there has been economic collaboration where there has not been direct furnishing of articles of war are whether the products furnished were the normal products of the company or if the company changed its type of products to comply with the needs of the enemy and secondly, whether the company enlarged its production and increased its production thereby)."

We know that the investigation, which was opened after the war against ATEA on the grounds of Economic collaboration "has been terminated by a decision of non-prosecution ('non lieu')".

#### **The sources of investigation**

OMGUS files

OMGUS stands for "The Office of Military Government, U.S. Zone (Germany)", a US Army organization working from 1945 until 1949. There was - among others - a "Finance External Assets Investigation Section" which investigated the financial aspects of German companies during World War II. Report "M1922" concerns Siemens & Halske activities which were originally "secret" but were "declassified" in 1977. This was the basis of our research

#### **Access to court archives in Belgium.**

After some research I found out that there was a file at the Brussels courthouse archives. Although I was able to obtain access to the US archive files and the Siemens archives on this matter without any problems, the Belgian court refused

to give me access to their ATEA file.

### Bibliography

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Feldenkirch, Wilfried, "Siemens 1918-1945", Ohio State University Press, 1999.

OMGUS report as described in <http://www.archives.gov/research/microfilm/m1922.pdf>

"Memoires" of Lucien Kesteleyn about the resistance, manuscript in possession of his daughter H el ene Kesteleyn.

The archives of "The friends of the ATEA-museum"

Thanks to all those who helped in writing this article, in particular: Dietrich Arbenz (Ex- Siemens), Frank Wittendorfer (Siemens Archives) H el ene Kesteleyn (daughter of resistance man

who allowed me access to memoires of her father) and John Mulrane (translation and help to check the English version).

### Milton Keynes Telecommunications Day

John Chenery

On Sunday 27th April the Milton Keynes Museum opened its doors for a special Telecommunications Day. The new museum Telecommunications Gallery was looking splendid with plenty of volunteers on hand to help. The THG had its usual stand in one of the buildings close to where the outdoor events were taking place. The Post Office Vehicles Club had arranged a display of vehicles that did not disappoint. The whole day was well attended, despite the rather inclement weather and everyone who attended looked as if they were enjoying themselves. All in all, it was well managed event and congratulations to the staff of the MK Museum and the Post Office Vehicles Club for putting on a great show.

