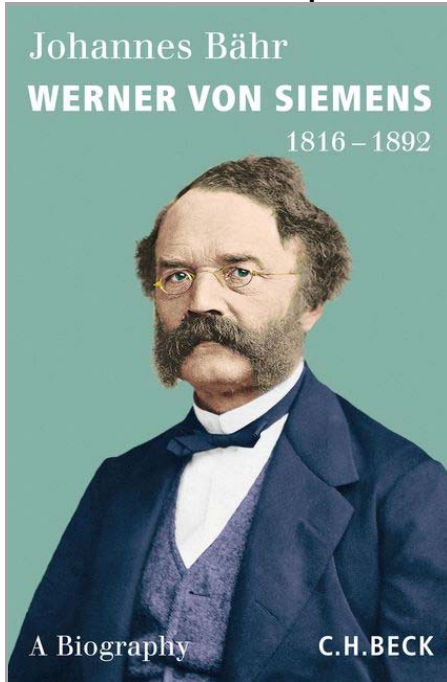


Unverkäufliche Leseprobe



Johannes Bähr
Werner von Siemens
1816-1892
A Biography

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Johannes Bähr

WERNER VON SIEMENS

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WERNER VON SIEMENS

1816–1892

A Biography

Translated into English

by Patricia C. Sutcliffe

C.H.Beck

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Contents

9	Introduction
	Chapter 1
15	Origins, childhood, and youth A family with a bourgeois heritage 15 – Idyllic childhood and troubled youth 22 – School years 31
	Chapter 2
39	Setting the course early on The young lieutenant 39 – The tragedy of Menzendorf 48 – Separate paths for the orphans 57
	Chapter 3
63	“The damned money” Initial experiments 63 – “Invention speculation” 70 – Legal guardian for three brothers 83
	Chapter 4
91	“Halske’s Workshop” To bet it all 91 – The first Siemens pointer telegraph 98 – The founding of the company 104
	Chapter 5
115	Telegraph lines for Prussia In times of revolution and war 115 – The first long-distance lines 125 – Unsuccessful abroad 135 – The “Nottebohm crisis” 141

151	<p>Chapter 6</p> <p>“Family genius”</p> <p>The band of brothers 151 – Achieving love through reason 157 – Marriage and a move 164 – Russia or France? 167 – Crimean War boom 172</p>
187	<p>Chapter 7</p> <p>In the shadows</p> <p>Mathilde’s illness 187 – In search of new fields of business 191 – Difficult beginnings in London 198 – Mathilde’s death 208</p>
217	<p>Chapter 8</p> <p>“Headed for a great time”</p> <p>“For a unified and powerful Germany” 217 – A new love 226 – The dynamo machine 234 – To fade away or globalize 241</p>
257	<p>Chapter 9</p> <p>Megaprojects</p> <p>The Indo-European Telegraph Line 257 – Private business and family matters 274 – Transatlantic cables 280 – Siemens Brothers & Co. Ltd. 292</p>
299	<p>Chapter 10</p> <p>At the zenith</p> <p>The businessman and his principles 299 – Lobbyist for patent protection 312 – Family life with Antonie 319 – New times: Telephones and electric lighting 327 – The first electric railways 338</p>
351	<p>Chapter 11</p> <p>“To sustain the position achieved”</p> <p>Challenged by the Edison system 351 – Berlin versus London 371 – The transition to a major enterprise 383</p>
391	<p>Chapter 12</p> <p>The legacy</p> <p>The next generation 391 – A promoter of research 402 – Ennobled against his will 410 – The final years 417</p>

427 **Focused and determined in a time of change – a summary**

439 **Appendices**

Notes **439** – Primary sources and bibliography **542** –

Image credits **563** – Index of names **564** – Index of places **572**

Introduction

During his lifetime, Werner von Siemens contributed as an entrepreneur, inventor, and technician to making the world change more profoundly than ever before. The founder of today's Siemens AG, born in 1816, grew up when industry was on the rise. As steam engines and railroads became more widespread, an epoch of heretofore unparalleled technological innovations began. As a pioneer of electrical engineering, Werner von Siemens helped to found a sector without which our modern world would be inconceivable. Other inventors at that time also used new knowledge in the natural sciences about the principles of electricity, but only a few recognized the economic potential of this new technology so successfully, and only a few industrialists were also active on the international stage so early on.

Today, Werner von Siemens is more famous than almost any other German entrepreneur from the early industrial age. This is due not only to the fact that the company he founded counts among the great brands in the electrical engineering industry, but also to his achievements as an inventor, a founder of professional associations, and a promoter. Already shortly after his death, as the "father of electrical engineering" he had become an icon of a national culture of memory that valued scientific and technological achievements above entrepreneurial ones. This image began to fade in the last few decades, along with public interest in Werner von Siemens. Only heads of the Siemens Corporate Archives or the Siemens Forum have written noteworthy biographies of him in the last 70 years.¹

Nonetheless, taking up the study of Werner von Siemens today is exceptionally rewarding if one examines his life story in all its complexities and without trying to glorify him. Along the lines of current approaches to historical research, the present biography offers a complete picture of his personality, including information about his family, business, and social spheres, for the first time.² Alongside the entrepreneur and inventor,

Werner von Siemens the citizen, the husband, the brother, the family father and neighbor, but also the parliamentarian, the association chairman, and the member of the Akademie der Wissenschaften [Academy of Sciences] will also be described. In order to clarify the temporal contexts, this biography is divided into chapters for the individual phases of his life, and these, as much as possible, are comprised of sections on various spheres of activity.

One focus, which can be regarded as a key to Werner von Siemens' biography, is his exceptionally important relationship with his siblings. He always saw himself as part of a league of siblings. This is especially true of his close relationship with his brothers Wilhelm (William) and Carl, who can be regarded as his most important life companions. The two of them also shaped the development of the companies Siemens & Halske and Siemens Brothers in which they took part. Private and business matters went hand in hand in the relationship between the brothers Werner, William, and Carl. Their loyalty to one another was an important factor in their business success and decisively influenced Werner von Siemens' ideas of what a family company should be.

The close ties between the brothers have not previously been systematically explored in any Werner von Siemens biography. When the national economist Richard Ehrenberg wrote the first history of the Siemens firms in 1906, he was still aware that it was about "undertakings of the Siemens brothers."³ Later, this connection was pushed to the background. Only more recently was it rediscovered by Martin Lutz in his biography of Carl von Siemens. Lutz's biography, at the same time, presents a new image of the brothers by placing their work in the context of nineteenth-century globalization.⁴ In the past years, kinship history, a field emerging from historical anthropology, has discovered the Siemens family as a field of inquiry. David Warren Sabean sees an example of a "kinship" system in this form of family relations; such systems helped to promote the development of the German economy in the 19th century.⁵ At the same time, little is yet known of how the solidarity among the Siemens brothers and within the entire family was shaped. The present biography pursues these questions both in relation to Werner von Siemens as well as in relation to his family context.

Werner von Siemens' behavior as an inventor and business owner/entrepreneur in a new sector based on knowledge forms another focus of the book. He counted among the entrepreneurs of early industrialization in Prussia. Firms at that time – like Siemens & Halske – were overwhelm-

ingly owner-managed or family companies. Rather atypical, by contrast, was the path Werner von Siemens took to found his companies. Together with the mechanic Johann Georg Halske, he founded a workshop as an officer without any experience in manufacturing in order to market a telegraph device he had invented. His rise as an entrepreneur and business owner went hand in hand with that of the new sector based on knowledge from the natural sciences. This required a different procedure than in the older industrial sectors, primarily a greater willingness to internationalize the business and consideration of the risks associated with the utilization of technologies that were not yet fully mature. The transition to large-scale operations and the establishment of the electrical engineering industry changed the conditions of business and required a rethinking of many things. The dominant retrospective image of Werner von Siemens as an industrial baron derives from this later period, but it does not do justice to his entire biography.

Just how difficult it is to use general explanatory models to describe Werner von Siemens' activities becomes apparent from the various assessments of individual aspects of his actions in historical research. In his classic study of the development of the operational organization at Siemens & Halske, Jürgen Kocka established that Werner von Siemens adhered to the models of an owner-operated private company even when the company had long since become too large for this sort of framework.⁶ Studies in the history of technology and science paint a completely different picture. In these, Werner von Siemens is described as a far-sighted entrepreneur who, as the inventor of the dynamo machine, recognized the potential of heavy-current technology early on and, in the promotion of research, implemented future-oriented innovations.⁷

The present biography is based mainly on letters from and to Werner von Siemens. It is very fortunate for business history research that these sources, which are quite informative, have survived in such large numbers. The correspondence between Werner von Siemens and his siblings alone comprises about 6,500 letters. The large number derives above all from the constant communication with his brothers William and Carl, who led the Siemens companies in London and St. Petersburg. In their letters, the brothers shared information about business matters and technical questions as well as about private events and assessments. It is quite rare for a tremendous source of this kind to have survived from the nineteenth century; it can likely be explained by the fact that the Siemens Historical Institute today has one of the oldest German company archives at its disposal.

The first comprehensive presentations of Siemens history already relied on the letters of the company founder.⁸ Many of them were published in books edited by Conrad Matschoss (1916) and Friedrich Heintzenberg (1953).⁹ Neither collection, however, included the corresponding letters to Werner von Siemens, which are no less revealing. In the meantime, the basis of correspondence that has been gathered and transcribed has grown broader. Thanks to the digitalization of the letters initiated by the Siemens Historical Institute, they can be analyzed in a much more targeted and comprehensive way. This Werner von Siemens biography is now the first to have utilized these possibilities. To complement the letters, the relevant data files of the Siemens Corporate Archives and the materials from the archive of the Siemens family foundation in Goslar were also analyzed. Very few related files can be found in the holdings of the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz [Secret State Archives Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation].

In his memoirs *Lebenserinnerungen* [Recollections], Werner von Siemens left his own account of his career and his personality, which long remained the dominant narrative of his biography after his death.¹⁰ Most of his biographers have borrowed heavily from the presentation in his memoirs, or adopted it without question. Within the company, the autobiography had achieved the status of a dogma. “In Siemensstadt no one wants to know anything about anything that somehow goes against the words of the ‘Lebenserinnerungen,’” the historian of technology Franz Maria Feldhaus determined in 1940.¹¹ If one compares the descriptions in Werner’s memoirs with the surviving letters about the respective events, then one cannot help but notice that the autobiography is not a chronicle. In writing it, Werner von Siemens pursued the entirely legitimate memoirist’s aim of imparting messages and interpreting his life in the way he wanted to be regarded for posterity. Seen as the author’s attempt to position himself, the memoirs are a source of the highest value. Yet one can more reliably discern how this life proceeded from the letters.

The large distribution of the *Recollections* may have contributed to keeping the number of biographies quite small at first and not at all commensurate with the degree to which the “father of electrical engineering” was known. When the first biography of Werner von Siemens was to appear on the 100th anniversary of his birth on December 13, 1916, Conrad Matschoss, an engineer and historian of technology, was commissioned “to present a picture of [Werner von Siemens’] great life’s work for the groups of engineers.”¹² In the following period, as well, the literature on

Werner von Siemens tended to be hagiographic, making a hero of the inventor and engineer.¹³ The brother, husband, and family father only came into view decades later in the biography by Conrad Wandrey (1942), which ends with his first marriage, and in the correspondence collection edited by Friedrich Heintzenberg (1953).¹⁴ The Werner von Siemens biographies that have appeared in the last five decades by Sigfrid von Weiher (1970) and Wilfried Feldenkirchen (1992), in turn, once again put the inventor and entrepreneur in the foreground.¹⁵ The present biography paints a new, up-to-date picture of Werner von Siemens for his 200th birthday, for the first time conveying the entire personality of this man. This biography makes it clear that the older presentations need some supplementing and correction, and that it was precisely his versatility that made Werner von Siemens special.

That this biography could be produced in the present form was also a team effort. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Martin Lutz for the many helpful hints with which he accompanied the work on this manuscript. Particular thanks are due to Dr. Ewald Blocher, Johannes Dill, Max Gedig, and Konstantin Götschel for their excellent support concerning archival research. Without their tireless efforts, many things would not have made it into the book. I am very grateful to Dr. Christoph Wegener, director of the Siemens Historical Institute and the initiator of this book project. Dr. Frank Wittendorfer, the director of the Siemens Corporate Archives, deserves thanks for important tips about the sources and his outstanding supervision of the entire project. I would also like to express my appreciation to Sabine Dittler for her support in finalizing the manuscript, Christoph Frank for the illustration of the volume from the rich stores of the Siemens picture archive, and Ute Schiedermeier for the preparation of additional letter holdings. My special thanks go to Dr. Patricia C. Sutcliffe for the excellent translation and to Dr. Tanja Roos for editing the translation with great care and thoroughness. Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to all the employees of the C.H.Beck Publishing House, who participated in making this book.



Menzendorf im Mecklenburgischen.

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Leipzig

Plauen

Wittenberge

Stendal

Brandenburg

Magdeburg

Quedlinburg

Nordhausen

Weißenfels

Leipzig

Plauen

A family with a bourgeois heritage

Werner von Siemens, whose birth name was Ernst Werner Siemens, was born on December 13, 1816, in Lenthe near Hanover, in the middle of the northern German countryside. As he was not raised to the nobility until his final years, he will be referred to here as Werner Siemens. Later pictures of Werner's birthplace, the leased house on the Obergut [Upper Estate] farm estate in Lenthe, show an impressive building. It would have looked this way when he was born, as well; after all, it served the cultivation of a feudal manor, the history of which extended back into the Middle Ages. Werner's parents, Christian Ferdinand Siemens and Eleonore Siemens, née Deichmann, were not wealthy and the times were bad. Werner's father had leased the estate without much capital; its cultivation had suffered under the Napoleonic Wars, and in the year of Werner's birth, all of Central Europe had experienced poor harvests and famines. Werner was the fourth of a total of 14 children born to his parents. One year before his birth, the family had lost a two-and-a-half-month-old son with the same name. The name was passed on to him as the next-born son.¹ His first given name Ernst, which he always wrote next to the name he went by in official documents, was the name of his godfather, as was the custom at the time. The christening took place on January 13, 1817. The godfather was Calvary Captain Ernst von Poten, a brother-in-law of his mother's.² Despite the difficult material circumstances, Werner's parents raised their children with love and care. Werner described his father in his memoirs as a "clever, well-educated man" and his mother as having had literary interests.³ In bourgeois families, the education of the children was of great

Left: Map of northern Germany around 1850

importance. Werner's parents did not neglect this. They taught their children the bourgeois virtues: industriousness, integrity, orderliness, conscientiousness, diligence, and helpfulness.⁴

In Werner's generation, it was quite unusual for an industrialist to come from the family of a tenant farmer. Most entrepreneurs of his time were the children and descendants of manufacturers, merchants, or bankers.⁵ Werner's ancestors, too, had not always lived in the countryside. The family had a long bourgeois heritage that its members were proud of.⁶ The ancestors had been respected citizens of the city of Goslar for many generations as craftsmen, merchants, and councilors. This heritage shaped the guiding principles and values that Werner's parents conveyed to him and his siblings at home. One symbol of the family's origin is the Siemens house in Goslar that the merchant, brewer, and city captain Hans Jürgen Siemens had erected at the end of the 17th century. It is one of the largest and most magnificent town houses of the early imperial city. The builder had his motto written on the portal: "ORA & LABORA HANS SIMENS ANNO 1693."⁷ The well-documented ancestral line of the Siemens family extends back to the first mention of the name in the year 1384. At that time, Henning Symons and his wife Catharina registered a mortgage on a property in Goslar.⁸ Their descendants worked as shoemakers, beer brewers, traders, and merchants. The progenitor of the line Werner descended from was Ananias Siemens, who lived in the 16th century. At that time, the family rose into the upper echelon of Goslar society. By the end of the 18th century, they had produced four mayors there. In an edition of the family tree that first appeared in 1935 and has since been revised several times, the genealogy of the descendants of Ananias Siemens is documented. All of those who carry the name Siemens, that is, the members of

Entry of the birth and christening of Werner Siemens in Lenthe church register (duplicate)

G. am 13.^{ten} December ist geboren und am 13.^{ten} Januar 1817 getauft
 Ernst Werner.
 Vater Herr Christian Ferdinand Siemens, fünfter Leibarzt
 Mutter Frau. Gellina, Frau Eleonore Henriette Deichmann.
 Taufeltern, Herr Albrecht Peter von Dörmann.



Tenant house on the Obergut farm estate in Lenthe, undated

the family born to a male Siemens, are entered here according to their birth year and branch of the family. Ananias Siemens bears the number 1, and Werner bears the number 244.⁹

How did it happen that Werner did not grow up in a proud bourgeois house but rather in a tenant house on an agricultural estate? Already in 1715, this branch of the family had begun to move into agriculture. One son of the builder of the Siemens' house at that time received the lease for the Ohlhof estate, which was located outside the gates of Goslar; it remained in the Siemens family for 110 years.¹⁰ Soon other leases were added. The men of the two following generations were almost all tenants of the estates and domains (state-run estates). They managed to avoid the decline of the city of Goslar caused by fires and mismanagement that occurred at this time and use the opportunities that opened up as a result of profound structural changes in agriculture. This reorientation, however, led to a certain decline within the mercantile middle class. Even though tenant farmers were certainly well-respected and often quite wealthy, these generations of the family were no longer able to produce such wealth as their ancestors had as merchants, nor did they have the influence of councilmen.

In his memoirs, Werner left his own interpretation of his heritage.

In his view, he came from “a family which had lived since the Thirty Years’ War on the Northern slopes of the Harz mountains, and engaged for the most part in agriculture and forestry.”¹¹ This is not wrong, but nor is it the whole truth. His ancestors had only become farmers about 100 years before his birth, and, as tenants, they were basically agricultural economists. In northern German agriculture, the estate and domain tenants formed a new class – positioned between the noble lords of the estates and the farmers – from about the middle of the 18th century.¹² They embodied a new type of farmer that had emerged alongside market-oriented agriculture.¹³ Most tenant farmers, like Werner’s ancestors, came from the bourgeoisie. They were characterized both by a stronger profit-orientation and business rationality than the noble lords of the estates and the administrations of the state domains. Gustav von Schmoller, one of the most important national economists of the 19th century, saw in the tenant farmers of this time “well-to-do bourgeois entrepreneurs.”¹⁴

Werner’s grandfather Johann Georg Heinrich Siemens is a good example of this. He had grown up on the Ohlhof estate, leased the Schauen estate near Wernigerode and later the domains of the Duke of Stolberg-Wernigerode, today a district in the municipality of Nordharz.¹⁵ As a

Motto on the door of the Siemens house, 2013



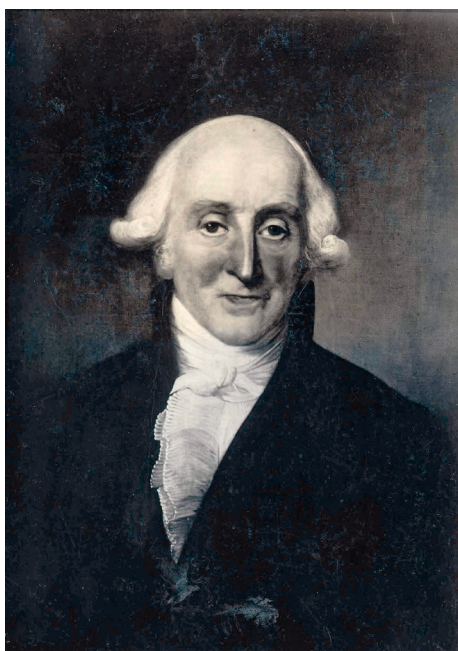


Siemens house in Goslar, undated

domain tenant, he bore the title of “Amtmann,” a title deserving tenant farmers, too, typically received after five years.¹⁶ Some information about his wealth can be found in a letter by his son-in-law Ferdinand von Grote, who also praised the bourgeois virtues of this man:

“The Amtmann Joh. Georg S., when he became a tenant farmer in Schauen in 1762, began with only 2,000 thalers, although he later inherited 8,000 thalers, so 10,000 thalers; but when he left the lease in 1792, he had 40,000 thalers in wealth, thus having acquired 30,000 thalers by means of the Schauen tenancy in 30 years and actually even more if one considers the tremendous sum he must have spent for the very good education of his 12 children, especially his many sons. He deserved it because he was an up-right man.”¹⁷

Johann Georg Heinrich was a model to his sons. Five of the seven sons became estate and domain tenants, four of them acquired the title of Amtmann. One daughter, Werner’s aunt Sabine, married the owner of the Schauen estate, the Reichsfreiherr [Baron] Ferdinand von Grote.¹⁸



Johann Georg Heinrich Siemens,
undated

Werner's father Christian Ferdinand was the youngest of the 15 children of Johann Georg Heinrich and his wife Sophie Elisabeth. He grew up on the estates of Schauen and Wasserleben that were managed by his father.¹⁹ In the spring of 1804, his parents sent him, now 16 years old, to the monastery school of Ilfeld, a flagship classical Gymnasium [secondary school] that was closely associated with the University of Göttingen. That the youngest son received this sort of education even with so many children says a great deal about the value of education in this family. After one and a half years, Christian Ferdinand had to leave Ilfeld because his father had died. A relative acting as his guardian made it possible for him to register at the University of Göttingen in the spring of 1806 – at that time having an Abitur [classical high school diploma] was not an obligatory prerequisite for studying at university. Christian Ferdinand studied cameralism for three semesters, a combination of national economics, agricultural economics and administrative science. It is unclear what he did in the following years. According to Werner's memoirs, his father had gotten involved at that time in "the weak attempts of certain visionary youths who still strove to offer resistance after the prostration of Prussia."²⁰ From about 1810, little is known about Christian Ferdinand's career. He worked as an



Christian Ferdinand
Siemens, undated

economist on the domain of Bokeloh near Wunstorf, about 20 kilometers west of Hanover.²¹ The domain belonged to the lease of the Amtsrat [senior administration official] Ludwig Deichmann in nearby Poggenhagen, today a district of Neustadt am Rübenberge. Deichmann cultivated the estate of the Duke of Schwiecheld there.²²

The oldest daughter of the tenant, Eleonore Deichmann, 18 years old at the time, had charmed Christian Ferdinand. He managed to enter into a relationship with the apparently highly sought after young woman.²³ As Werner's brother William later reported about his mother, Eleonore "was of delicate figure." She had enjoyed "a good general education; was high-minded and self-sacrificing" and "very gentle and amiable in character."²⁴ The couple married on June 11, 1812, in the church of Bordenau; Poggenhagen belonged to its parish.²⁵ It was probably an emergency marriage, since three months later the first child was born, named after his grandfather Ludwig.²⁶ In the Siemens family, the circumstances of this marriage were not talked about later, not even by Werner. Apparently, it did not fit the family's self-image that the couple married and had a child before they had established a middle-class livelihood for themselves.²⁷ Eleonore and Christian Ferdinand, of course, did not have to be forced to marry. Both



The Deichmann family (Eleonore in the middle), silhouette, undated

married for love. All of the surviving letters and descriptions suggest that they had a good marriage based on partnership and remained very close in their love for one another until they died.

Idyllic childhood and troubled youth

After the birth of their son Ludwig, the young family at first lived with the Deichmanns on the Poggenhagen estate.²⁸ Christian Ferdinand now applied to receive the lease of an estate, supported by his father-in-law and his connections. The landlord of the state of Poggenhagen, High Commissioner Haccius, told him the estate was seeking a tenant and immediately wrote a letter of recommendation to the owner of this estate, the Hanoverian State and Cabinet Minister Ernst Ludwig Julius von Lenthe. In the letter, he pointed out Ludwig Deichmann's integrity and gave his son-in-law "testimony of his particular magnanimity and uprightness of character."²⁹

Von Lenthe was one of the most important ministers of the electorate of Brunswick-Lüneburg, which was governed at that time by the British royal family. For ten years, from 1795 to 1805, he had led the German chancellery at the London Court.³⁰ The letter of recommendation from Haccius obviously made an impression on von Lenthe. Already two weeks later, on February 19, 1813, Christian Ferdinand was able to sign the lease contract. In it, he obligated himself for a period of ten years to pay an annual lease of 2,700 thalers and also to provide a deposit in the same amount. In addition, 1,000 thalers were needed to acquire the furniture.³¹ It is difficult to reliably calculate what the value of this sum would be in today's money. No doubt, it was a rather high amount. According to a statistic provided by the German Federal Bank, the purchasing power of 2,700 thalers in the year 1813 would correspond today to the purchasing power of about 93,000 euros.³²

When Christian Ferdinand assumed the lease of the Obergut in Lenthe on June 1, 1813, the young family seemed to be well on the way to success. With the advocacy of his father-in-law and the family von Lenthe, Christian Ferdinand had good prospects of later becoming a respected Amtmann, like his father and several of his brothers. In April 1814, their daughter Mathilde was born; a year later their son Werner who died after a few months was born, and in December 1816 Ernst Werner was born. Two other sons, Hans and Ferdinand, were added in the next few years. Lenthe, now a district in the city of Gehrden, had about 300 residents at that time.³³ The Siemens family lived in an ancillary house of the Obergut, but they were probably able to use the main building as well, since the Lenthe family – which still owns the estate today – did not live there.³⁴ Werner grew up comfortably here with his siblings. He only described one episode in his memoirs from the first seven years of his life; in and of itself, it is unimportant, but it says so much about its author's perception and sense of himself that he must have placed it at the beginning of his memoirs quite intentionally. When Werner was about five years old, his older sister Mathilde was taught how to knit in the parsonage of Lenthe. One day, an aggressive gander at the gate of the parsonage supposedly prevented her from entering for her knitting lesson. Mathilde was bitten and did not know how to defend herself. After that, Werner's father asked him to chase the gander away with a stick. Gathering up all his courage, he managed to fight off the gander and free the path for his sister. Almost 70 years later, he had this to say about it: "[N]umberless times in difficult situations the victory over the gander has unconsciously stimulated me,

not to yield to threatening dangers, but to overcome them by a bold confrontation.”³⁵ This episode offers a further moral to the reader that forms a leitmotif throughout the memoirs: Werner was supposed to protect his siblings, and he did this to the best of his ability. His father had given him the task of fighting off the gander, not his brother Ludwig, who was four years older and actually would have had an easier time with the gander. It was not Ludwig but Werner who was the chosen protector.

That Werner and his older siblings were given tasks early on resulted not only from the growing number of children but also from the economic and financial problems that were weighing on their parents. When Christian Ferdinand received the lease for the Lenthe estate, there was a war on. At that time, Lenthe still belonged to the kingdom of Westphalia that had been created by Napoleon. A few months later, the Battle of the Nations took place in Leipzig; farmers had to provide for the armies passing through, and their horses were often requisitioned by the military. Christian Ferdinand soon fell into arrears in paying his rent. Ernst Ludwig Julius von Lenthe was quite lenient considering the external circumstances and allowed the tenant to defer payment.³⁶ After the war and French rule had come to an end, the earnings situation improved. Two bad harvests in the years 1816/17 drove up the prices for rye and wheat, which secured good income for the farmers but also led to a famine. But then the situation for agricultural prices – which was a decisive indicator of the economy’s health – reversed itself. Dramatic price declines set in because the cultivated areas had been enlarged everywhere in Europe during the Napoleonic Wars. In addition to overproduction, a few good harvests also pushed down prices. All in all, the rye and wheat prices in Germany declined by 60 to 70 percent between 1817 and 1825.³⁷ Whereas the majority of the population profited from the reduced prices, the producers experienced a crisis. From East Prussia to East Frisia, a large portion of the estate owners went bankrupt. Estate tenants like Christian Ferdinand had to try to compensate for the downward pressure on costs with clever accounting and by improving production techniques.

Christian Ferdinand had to struggle with other adversities in Lenthe as well. The fields that he cultivated were repeatedly damaged by wild game. After the rape fields were devastated in the winter of 1819/20, he sued the forestry office of Wennigsen for damages, thus causing the authorities in Hanover to turn against him.³⁸ The relatively new kingdom of Hanover, which had come into being at the Congress of Vienna, was governed from London, by the British King George III, like the earlier electorate had been.

The authorities under him were interested in offering attractive hunting grounds to the British nobility. At that time, it was said that the punishment for killing a stag in the kingdom of Hanover was greater than for killing a person.³⁹ Christian Ferdinand's suit against the forestry office led to a legal dispute that lasted for years. The relationship between Werner's father and the authorities was now broken, and the relationship to the estate owner and his administrators had also clouded over. After Ernst Ludwig Julius von Lenthe died in the year 1814, the estate had transferred to his son Friedrich Ernst Otto von Lenthe, a councilor in the chamber of commerce.⁴⁰ The son was less lenient toward the tenant than his father had been. This became clear when it came time to extend the ten-year lease at the end of its term in May 1823. The estate owner wanted to raise the rent on the extension. At first, Christian Ferdinand was not willing to pay a higher rate.⁴¹ In December 1822, he gave in, probably because his wife was expecting another child in the meantime and he had not yet found another lease elsewhere. He offered to pay rent of 3,100 thalers for another ten years – instead of the 2,700 thalers he had paid up until then.⁴² Von Lenthe and his administrator declined the offer. Now Werner's father came under tremendous pressure. His father-in-law Ludwig Deichmann, who might have been able to give him the necessary support, had died. The Siemens family was in danger of losing its social status through the loss of its home – a thought that must have been unbearable to Christian Ferdinand, who was so concerned with integrity.

It was not only the agricultural crisis and the stags from the nearby Deister Mountains that were to blame for things proceeding to this critical juncture. Christian Ferdinand had also exacerbated the situation. He found the way the authorities treated him deeply unjust. Affronted by this, he had entered into the mentioned legal dispute over a rather small sum and, in so doing, had overestimated his chances. He had previously acquired the lease for the Obergut in Lenthe because he had been recommended to the estate owner as a noble-minded and reliable character. He had now wasted this credit. The estate owner did not want to give the unruly tenant a new contract even for a higher rental rate. Conrad Wandrey said of Werner's father in his Werner von Siemens biography that Christian Ferdinand had "something of the Lower German stubbornness of the legal zealot Michael Kohlhaas" about him.⁴³

In March 1823, Christian Ferdinand rushed around Holstein, Schleswig, and Mecklenburg in search of a new lease.⁴⁴ Obviously, after the many years of conflict, he was determined to leave the kingdom of Hanover. In

Menzendorf, east of Lübeck, he finally found something. The tenant of the domain there, Andreas Meyer, had too many debts and was seeking a successor to be released from his contract.⁴⁵ The lease amounted to 1,840 thalers – much less than in Lenthe –, but Christian Ferdinand had to come up with a sum of 10,650 thalers to pay a deposit on the lease, an offset for the inventory he was taking over, and the legal fees incurred. It is unclear how he managed to do this, even if one considers that he got back the 2,700-thaler deposit for Lenthe after the contract there had run out.⁴⁶ Apparently, his older sister Sabine Grote lent him some money; she had become a widowed Reich baroness in the meantime and lived with her brother August in Kölleda and received a handsome pension. He also received a loan from the family of his brother-in-law Georg Mehliß, who was a respected court physician in Clausthal.⁴⁷

On May 6, 1823, Andreas Meyer surrendered his right to the lease for the domain of Menzendorf to Werner's father.⁴⁸ The domain office had agreed to the transfer; Christian Ferdinand had made an impression there of being "an orderly, reasonable, and very experienced man in agriculture."⁴⁹ In a rather lengthy letter to his oldest brother Johann Georg, who meanwhile as the tenant of the Hayn domain near Stolberg in the Harz had managed to rise to the rank of Oberamtmann, Christian Ferdinand reported about the acquisition of the new lease on May 11, 1823. His relief at having found a solution to save him as the "provider for 6 children and the most fearless woman" infused every line: "I am now out of the most frightful situation of not knowing where to lead my family." Filled with this feeling of good fortune, he praised the domain of Menzendorf as a true Elysium. He was not concerned with the fact that the last tenant had become overindebted. He was convinced that "this charming little spot of land together with the Eutin region were the happiest corners of the earth."⁵⁰

The family's departure from the Obergut, the site of Werner's early childhood, occurred in a very burdensome and downright ugly manner. Christian Ferdinand had had to neglect the cultivation of the estate during his search for a new lease. On account of this as well, further lease debts had also probably been incurred. The estate owner von Lenthe and the senior administrator Hagemann were determined to collect these debts before the departing tenant left the area.⁵¹ Von Lenthe brought in the royal judicial chancellery in Hanover in order to force an auction to take place. On May 28, 1823, there was an announcement in the *Hannoversche Anzeigen* that the equipment from the Obergut in Lenthe was being sold to "the highest bidder for cash payment for the purchase": "secretaries, sofas, tables,

Sept. 11th May. 1823.

Mon H^{on}ble K^{on}tes,

[illegible][illegible]

Idyllic childhood and troubled youth

chairs, chests of drawers, bed frames, copper, tin, and all sorts of household and kitchen gadgets.”⁵² The proceeds were seized by the royal judicial chancellery for payment of the unremitted lease payments.⁵³ The conflicts about other claims, including the renovation of the tenant housing in Lenthe, went on for a long time.

Christian Ferdinand set great store in being remembered in Lenthe as a righteous man. At the beginning of June 1823, on the occasion of handing the key over to the new tenant, he wrote a letter to the administrator Hagemann in which he asked him “to be disposed to remember a man favorably for whom [you] will provide a reference: that integrity and yet another right of a more fragile nature that will only be valid before God shall have been his guidepost, and he was not lacking in human interest and unselfishness.”⁵⁴ For Christian Ferdinand, this self-image was very important. This was how he wished to be seen – as a righteous man who had become the victim of unjust circumstances. He could interpret the disastrous end of his almost ten-year activity in Lenthe from this self-image as an act of liberation.⁵⁵ His son Werner later took this perspective as his own. He, too, was able to present the bitter departure from Lenthe as an embarkation toward freedom.⁵⁶ However, it was a humble move to the highly praised Mecklenburg. After the forced auction of the household goods, the Siemens family was not able to take much along when departing Lenthe on June 17, 1823.⁵⁷

The children of Christian Ferdinand and Eleonore Siemens⁵⁸

	Date of birth	Place of birth	Date of death	Place of death
Ludwig Georg	9/1/1812	Poggendorf	Jan 1871 (?)	(unknown)
Mathilde Georgine	4/17/1814	Lenthe	8/25/1878	Kiel
Werner	8/24/1815	Lenthe	10/7/1815	Lenthe
Ernst Werner	12/13/1816	Lenthe	12/6/1892	Berlin
Hans Dietrich	12/3/1818	Lenthe	3/28/1867	(unknown)

Ferdinand Julius	7/24/1820	Lenthe	9/8/1893	(unknown)
Sophie Henriette	9/22/1821	Lenthe	10/13/1821	Lenthe
Carl Wilhelm (William)	4/4/1823	Lenthe	11/19/1883	Sherwood/ Kent
Friedrich August	12/8/1826	Menzendorf	5/24/1904	Dresden
Carl Heinrich	3/3/1829	Menzendorf	3/21/1906	Menton
Franz Ernst	2/5/1831	Menzendorf	4/23/1840	Menzendorf
Walter	1/12/1833	Menzendorf	6/11/1868	Tbilisi
Auguste Caroline Sophie	12/29/1834	Menzendorf	12/6/1922	Probstdeuben
Otto	11/7/1836	Menzendorf	10/10/1871	Tbilisi

Menzendorf (formerly spelled Mentzendorf), at a linear distance of about 20 kilometers east of Lübeck, is a modest village built around a green. The community today has around 300 residents and was smaller than Lenthe at that time, too. The domain was naturally an impressive estate with 119 cows and 14 horses.⁵⁹ The Siemens family was able to move into the spacious detached tenant home, which had been built in the style of a northern German farmhouse with a steep thatched roof. Menzendorf at that time was part of the principality of Ratzeburg, a section of the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. The area bordering on Lübeck around Ratzeburg and Schönberg was separated from the heartland of the duchy with its royal seat of Neustrelitz. In Mecklenburg-Strelitz, one of the smallest and poorest states of the German Federation with around 75,000 residents at that time, late feudal conditions still prevailed; the influence of the noble estate owners was quite powerful.⁶⁰ In the principality of Ratzeburg, by contrast, there were only a few feudal estates. The cultivated land was owned in about equal portions by sovereigns and free farmers. The domain leased by Christian Ferdinand was also a state-owned estate that



Tenant house of the domain of Menzendorf, 1910

was subordinate to the domain administration of the grand duchy in Neustrelitz.

After the bad experiences with the previous tenant of Menzendorf, the domain office must have had clear expectations of Christian Ferdinand. Yet conditions remained unfavorable. The agricultural prices dropped to an all-time low. In 1824, the price of wheat in Germany was only one-fourth the level of 1817.⁶¹ Already in the fall of 1825, Christian Ferdinand was admonished for being behind in his rent payments. The domain administration considered carrying out an enforcement against him, but the local authorities asked the administrators to refrain from doing so.⁶² In the following years, the earnings situation in Menzendorf improved, but there was no real boom, even though the agricultural crisis had ended and producer prices were on the rise. When a drought once again led to a poor harvest, Christian Ferdinand poured out his heart in a letter to his sister Sabine in September 1827. "My struggle with fate is, unfortunately, not yet

over,” he wrote in it. Only the “return to prices of some years prior” could release him from his debts.⁶³ The lines of this letter reveal a stricken man who seemed to have bad luck chasing at his heels. The ongoing hardship, meanwhile, was tearing away at the family man’s self-esteem: “It humbles me greatly; I seem despicable even to myself.”⁶⁴

The above-mentioned loans from Sabine Grote and the Mehliß family amounted to a total of 5,000 thalers in September 1827.⁶⁵ The other siblings and brothers-in-law, who were all quite well situated, apparently did not prop up Christian Ferdinand. Some support may have come, however, from Eleonore’s mother Eleonore (“Helene”), who had meanwhile been widowed.⁶⁶ She moved in with her daughter’s family in Menzendorf. “We are healthy, but there is no cheerfulness in our house,” Christian Ferdinand wrote in his letter to Sabine Grote on September 14, 1827.⁶⁷ Werner described this period differently in his memoirs: “The childhood years of my brothers and sisters were happy ones in Menzendorf, growing up among the village youth tolerably free and unrestrained.”⁶⁸ This is no doubt how he would have experienced this rural idyll as a boy. Yet unlike in Lenthe, Werner was now of an age at which he was aware that his father was often desperate and that “cheerfulness” was absent in the family. In a letter to his bride Mathilde Drumann from the year 1852, Werner did indeed describe his childhood quite differently than in his memoirs:

“Namely, my youth had been filled with bitterness since the days of my childhood. I shared the cares of my beloved parents deeply. The household suffering in the parental home that arose from them and the sorrow of my mother, beloved above all else, soon stifled the youthful naturalness and cheerfulness appropriate to my age, and my Philistine earnestness made me a laughing-stock to my classmates.”⁶⁹

[...]

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