

Ira Rischowski: refugee engineer.

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How did one of Germany's very first female engineers end up working in Britain during World War 2? The little-known story of Ira Rischowski is certainly not one of espionage. Hers is instead a drama of escape from Nazi persecution and narrowing opportunities until she was able to join the UK's Women's Engineering Society (WES).

Our previous blog post showed that by 1935 WES attracted members outside Britain, and in fact from several continents. Ira Rischowski's case shows how a talented migrant could swiftly rise to a position of eminence on WES's Council. Her personal papers at the [LSE Women's Library](#) and in the [Imperial War Museum's](#) (IWM) oral history collection give us an opportunity to reconstruct some aspects at least of her extraordinary life.



Photograph of Ira Rischowski (courtesy of Ceryl Evans)

Unlike in Britain, an aspiring engineer in early twentieth-century Germany needed formal qualifications to enter the profession, and by then many technical universities accepted women to study engineering. In 1919, after six months' experience in a repair shop for agricultural equipment (arranged through her father's industrial connections), Ira Rischowski enrolled as the first ever female engineering student at the Technical University in Darmstadt.

The chaotic situation in Germany after World War 1 created employment major challenges for the first women to qualify as engineers. One exception was [Melitta Schiller](#), an aeronautical engineer who graduated from the Technical University of Munich in 1927. She secured prestigious work as an experimental aviation researcher until Nazi officials learned of her grandfather's Jewish heritage. Later Schiller served in wartime as a Luftwaffe test pilot.

In 1928, after further workshop training at the electrical company Siemens-Schuckert, the newly-qualified Ira Rischowski found employment. Two years later she became a member of Germany's central engineering institution: the Verein Deutscher Ingenieure (VDI). By 1933 there were as many as 618 female mechanics and engineers registered in Germany, and accordingly the VDI set up its own special women's section. But Rischowski refused to join this women's group since the VDI had by then become completely Nazified.

Soon her own Jewish parentage and socialist politics became the cause of persecution by the Nazi regime. So Rischowski moved with her family to Czechoslovakia. Yet even in Prague, conditions were difficult so in 1936 she escaped to the UK under the only visa scheme permitted to her: to work as a [domestic servant](#). While working unhappily in various menial roles, Rischowski was invited by Caroline Haslett to attend some meetings of the Women's Engineering Society, and became an Associate Member of WES in November 1939. For WES's 21st anniversary she wrote a piece on Women Engineers in Germany for the WES house journal *The Woman Engineer*.

WOMEN ENGINEERS OVERSEAS. In Germany.

By Mrs. I. RISCHOWSKI, Dipl. Ing.

Before the War the Women's Engineering Society was proud to include in its membership women from many countries of the world including Germany, and delighted to welcome them to meetings and conferences. We look forward to such a renewal of relationships when real peace blesses the earth; in the meantime we are honoured to provide hospitality for women engineer exiles in this country.

During the Great War women in Germany, as in probably all other countries, took over all kind of male work. They went into the ammunition and armament factories, they became tram, 'bus and taxi drivers, and they were to be found in nearly every branch of the engineering trade. The great slump that came after the years of the inflation threw all women out of these jobs, except where the most unskilled and cheapest labour was required. The widespread employment of women in engineering, which would have resulted of necessity in the development of many trained and qualified women engineers, came to an end.

The initial barrier had, however, been broken, and many women had penetrated into positions hitherto regarded as reserved for men. German legislation, too, recognised the right of women to every kind of work, at least in theory. Strangely enough, though quite a number of women were to be found who took up chemistry and architecture, and although there were a few well known women of outstanding ability—for instance Hilde Mollier, the scientist, and later Elli Beinhorn, the airwoman—engineering proper, that is to say mechanical, electrical and civil engineering, did not seem to attract women in Germany. Engineering careers were not easy, either. For although according to the legislation the colleges and universities could not refuse to enrol women as students, it was extremely difficult to find a place as trainee in an industrial workshop, a precondition of the engineering examinations.

So very few women indeed took to engineering. When I started studying at the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt in 1919, I was the only woman among several hundred male students of electrotechnic; when in 1928 I passed my last examinations and took my degree, there was only one girl besides myself. When in 1930 I became a member of the Berlin Branch of the Verein Deutscher Ingenieure—(V.D.I.)—one of the two representative engineering organisations—I was told that I was the first and only woman member of this Branch, which was the biggest and most important Branch in Germany.

There were, however, a few other women engineers. I knew of an electrician who worked in the research laboratory of the post office, and I heard from several girls who worked as draughtsmen in the draw-

ing offices of important firms, and of others working in research laboratories. They all had had great difficulties to overcome, first of all in their studies, where they were opposed by the general body of opinion, then after finishing their studies, in getting a job. But most of them succeeded in winning the esteem of their colleagues and superiors and so gradually destroying the prejudice against women. But in contrast to the position in England, there was no connection between them; they were quite unknown to one another, and it was by mere chance that I discovered that there were other women engineers besides me. But their number gradually increased. In 1933 or 1934 a women's group was founded inside the V.D.I., but by that time I could no longer join it, and was not willing to do so.

National Socialism has arrested all the progress made so far. Although women were not immediately forbidden to enter male professions, the whole tendency of National Socialism is in this direction. According to National Socialist ideals, a woman must not concern herself with anything but the three Ks: Kinder, Kueche, Kirche (children, kitchen, church). Gradually it was made impossible for women to take up university and other technical careers, they are even forbidden to enter professions long since open to women everywhere in the world, such as medicine, teaching, etc.

Of course, the war will make a difference on the surface, since women are urgently needed to replace the men who have become soldiers. Already today we find women working as 'bus drivers, and in the munition factories. But while they are doing men's jobs, they are told that this can be but an emergency measure and is not their proper place. And as for qualified women, under National Socialism they have no outlook whatsoever.

What a contrast!

While in Germany all forces of progress are defeated, and persecuted, in England the Women's Engineering Society is celebrating its coming of age.

My most sincere wishes go with it, as embodying one of the ideals of progress—the solidarity of women in their struggle for one of the most fundamental rights of mankind, the right to choose one's life work and career unhampered by prejudice, in accordance solely with one's choice and capabilities.

IRA RISCHOWSKI.

The first of two pieces written by Ira Rischowski for *The Woman Engineer*, this from a March 1940 issue that included pieces from women engineers in Eire and the USA.

When World War 2 broke out in September that year, as a German citizen, Rischowski's position once again became precarious. Deemed to be an enemy alien after an unfortunate misunderstanding with the UK's Home Office, Ira spent a year in the Rushen internment camp for women on the Isle of Man. Resilient as ever, she [flourished in such adversity](#), leading many activities, but was yet again denied opportunities to practise engineering.

Once returned to civilian life in 1942, she worked for two years as a draughtswoman and planning engineer at Tuvox Ltd., Middlesex, Rischowski was also then invited to write another piece for *The Woman Engineer* on women in German engineering before the War. While cherishing about Germany's willingness to welcome women into technical careers on a greater scale than in interwar Britain, she lamented the reversal of this liberal German trend under the reactionary Nazi ideology that recast women's place to be 'in the home'. As a naturalized refugee from Germany, Rischowski sharply denounced all aspects of Nazism.

After the War, Rischowski's position in the UK Women's Engineering Society advanced in 1948-9 to full membership and service on its Council until 1977. Her meticulously preserved records of WES Council meetings show that Rischowski keenly supported efforts to open up British women's horizons to engineering. For example, she kept very full notes of a WES-sponsored conference for school teachers on 'Careers for Girls in Engineering' in July 1957.

Latterly Rischowski took part in numerous gatherings for women eminent in science and engineering in both Europe and the Americas, notably of the [International Conference of Women Engineers and Scientists](#) (ICWES) that met every three-four years from 1964. These were initiated by the US-based Society of Women Engineers (SWE), and Rischowski herself worked closely with them to organize the second ICWES gathering at Cambridge in 1967.

Intriguingly in the [Proceedings](#) of the first ICWES she is listed as 'Mrs. Ira. Rischowski, Dipl. Ing., VDI, Elliott Process Automation Ltd. (Elliott Bros. Ltd.) London.' Neither standard histories of electronics nor of the Elliott companies in particular record her contributions to computing. Indeed information from the LSE library indicates only that from 1944 Rischowski worked as draughtswoman for James Gordon Ltd in London and then Head of the Projects Department from 1956 until retirement. Is there perhaps a mystery here...?

Suffice to say that details of Ira Rischowski's actual work in engineering are scant; without such information it might be a challenge to memorialize Ira Rischowski in Wikipedia as an engineer, *per se*. Nevertheless, upon her death in 1989, the WES President Dorothy Hatfield recalled with admiration Ira Rischowski's work as a major ICWES organizer and indeed that for WES itself she had been 'an inspiration to us all'.

Primary Sources on Ira Rischowski

Records of the Women's Engineering Society: papers of [Ira Rischowski](#), 1939-1988.
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<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80004266>

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V&A donation in her memory

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70728/cup-and-cover-hauer-hans-paulus/>