

Beauty made in Sprendlingen

## The Ellen-Betrix-Story (1959 – 1989)

Part 1 by Barbara Simon, October 2020 translated by Julie Lord



Since 2018, the mighty, glass office building of MHK Group's European headquarter has become the landmark of Sprendlingen, a small town south of Frankfurt am Main, Germany. However, just a few years ago, another building complex, "Business

Forum Dreieich" (see photo above), used to be the greatest high-rise building at the town's gateway. Today, offices, companies, a gym, and a shop for baby products occupy the building. However, Sprendlingen locals and people from surrounding regions know that the complex was originally the home of *Ellen Betrix – Cosmetic International*, a global manufacturer of beauty products. While most people know about the company's mega-success and its rather abrupt ending in 1989, only few are familiar with how it all began in a cellar in the 1930s in Frankfurt...

### A Small "Startup" in Frankfurt's Westend

In the Fall of 1934, entrepreneur Fritz Segner (see photo on the right) decided to start the small cosmetic business "Henry M Betrix" in Frankfurt. His daughter-in-law, Juliane Segner, recalls, "My father-in-law started off his career making lotions at a perfume store in the Goethestraße, a high-end shopping mile in Frankfurt. Because his products became more and more popular, he began thinking about a brand name. During a business trip to New York City, he met a man named Henry Betrix and decided he wanted to use this



extraordinary name for his cosmetic label. However, he realized that "Henry" was not a fitting name for feminine beauty products, but the gentleman Henry had a sister named Ellen!"

Just one year later, in 1935, Segner registered "Ellen Betrix" as a trademark at the *Reichspatentamt* (the State Patent Office). The label was sought to resemble "the signature of a lady" and was completed with a five-pointed crown (see photo on the left) to symbolize a certain "elegance". And it worked, both the company's impeccable name and the label proved to be timeless.



property in close proximity to the city and eventually found something in 1958. Juliane Segner remembers, “an old acquaintance of ours had a business in Sprendlingen and suggested to move our company out there too”. The town had a huge site available right by the Frankfurter Straße, the town’s very accessible main avenue, and made Ellen Betrix the offer to move there. It was a win-win situation, both the company and the town benefitted from re-locating the business to the suburbs. In a proposal, Ellen Betrix impressed the magistrate by promising a huge success. They issued a statement saying, “We manufacture cosmetic products, which we supply to 700 to 800 depots in the Federal Republic of Germany”. During the negotiations, the company promised to relocate not only their production but also their administration to Sprendlingen.

Mayor Banse turned down many other applicants because he had high hopes for transferring the big business from Frankfurt to the small town. The city of Sprendlingen eventually sold the 6,500 square meter property at the end of the Frankfurter Straße in the fall of 1958 for 3.50 DM per square feet (equivalent to today’s standard land value of € 240), a common price back then. And with that, the next chapter (which would last thirty years) of Ellen Betrix began.



**How did the story continue in Sprendlingen?**

**Stay tuned because Part 2 of our ELLEN-BETRIX-STORY is coming soon.**

**Until then, you can check out Old Ellen Betrix ads on YouTube:**



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcKaD9bLJ80>

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## The Ellen-Betrix-Story (1959 – 1984): Cocktails, Sunscreen, and Three New Towers

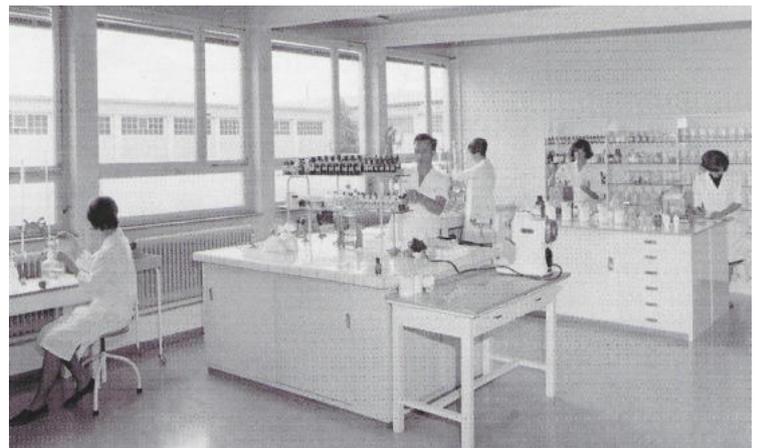
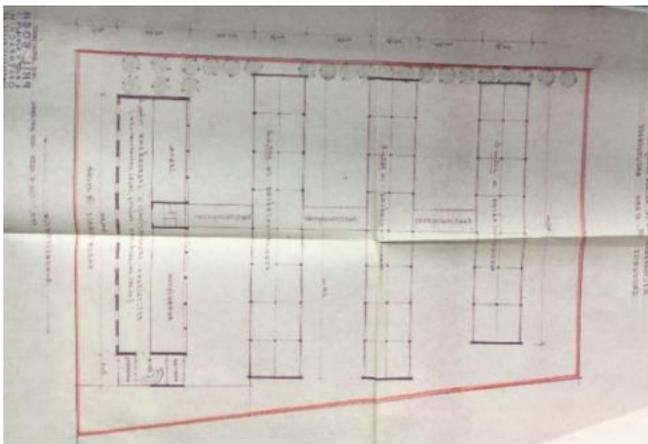
Part 2 by Barbara Simon, August 2021 translated by Julie Lord



*Ellen Betrix – since 1959 in Sprendlingen – a company that only knew how to move up the ladder. The headquarter was located in a community, an area, a country, that recovered bit by bit and eventually reached prosperity and luxury. These conditions, together with efficient company policies, allowed Ellen Betrix to become an international competitor in the cosmetic industry.*

### 1959: The move to Sprendlingen

Laboratory Manager Gisela Ihne had a sigh of relief. Finally, the cosmetic manufacturer Ellen Betrix moved from Frankfurt into the new buildings in Sprendlingen. Ms. Ihne recalls, “In the end, there was no room in the Nidenau lab that we kept on getting bruises”. The spacious property in Sprendlingen even allowed for some visual creativity. From an aerial view, the buildings formed the letter E.



In the 60s, Ellen Betrix consolidates, but also develops itself further. In 1960, the first subsidiary opened in Italy, followed by foreign establishments in Austria, Sweden, Spain, Luxembourg, and Switzerland.



### 1969: The first out of many company expansions begins

How fast the economy was booming becomes evident when one considers the fact that after only 10 years, the new buildings had become too confined once again. Therefore, the first expansion took place in 1968 at the Robert-Koch-Straße. In the EB-Report of 1969 general manager Ernst Student presented the outcome: “After a one-year construction period, seven new levels with 5,000 square meters of additional operating space were built”. It was affordable because “in 1969, we reached a 25% increase in sales compared to the previous year”. This meant EB was ahead of competition but was also riding the wave of success of an entire industry that was able to generate an average of 10% growth.



In 1971, EB Ellen Betrix continued to work their way up and symbolized that success with two mighty high-rise towers. The Segner Family lived in the rooftop penthouse of plant #1. Plant #2 was located at the Offenbacher Straße, and plant #3 at the Luise-Meitner Straße. In 1979, the new management- and production building was inaugurated at the Frankfurter Straße. The construction was one of the most impressive ones in Sprendlingen in the 1970s. In 1986 a modern high-rack warehouse was placed into plant #3. A [map](#) shows the location of the three Ellen Betrix plants in the industrial area of Sprendlingen.



## 70s – The Sales increase and soccer is played at the B3

In the Beginning of 1973 around 5 million DM were invested in a new building with 7000 sqm. This meant that the administration, operation, and warehouse space was now 28,000 sqm in total. That year, the annual press report emphasized that no outside capital investments had been used for this purpose. Juliane Segner (widow of Klaus Segner) explains her late husband's and father-in-law's careful approach: "They were both very conservative businessmen. For them, loans were simply not an option. They would only spend money after they had earned it."



When asked about the company culture, many former employees describe their time at Ellen Betrix as a "family atmosphere". They say that their boss was very generous and already accommodated his female employees with part-time jobs back then. We know that today many firms use a different approach; for example, by providing an in-house daycare. Teamwork was not only present inside the office but also outside of it. The all-men EB Team played soccer at the B3 (where the Haus des Lebenslangen Lernens (*the house of the lifelong leaning*) is located today) and regularly competed against other company teams. The photo on the left shows the company boss Klaus Segner throwing in the soccer ball during a game between the 1. FC Ellen Betrix and the Chilean Consulat on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1978 in Frankfurt.

Unfortunately, Ellen Betrix's growth curve, which has always been on an upward trend, experienced a brief dip in the 1970s. In 1973 the Dreieich-based manufacturer had to accept a deterioration in earnings for the very first time. Juliane Segner recalls, "The prices for raw materials went up and the entire industry was having growth difficulties at that time". There were also signs of distortions due to mergers in the retail network, and many smaller stores had to give up. Nevertheless, Ellen Betrix remained as the Nr. 1 among the depot cosmetics in Germany was able to achieve a revenue of 72,7 million DM.

## Happy Hour at 5 o'clock: To see and be seen at the legendary Press Conferences

In the “fat” years, Ellen Betrix was so popular that you could speak of social events whenever the company held a press conference. In addition to the presentation of business figures, new make-up products and fragrances, the catering of appetizers and cocktails, the photoshoots with celebrities made the events extra glamorous. The party fever of the 70s also came at Ellen Betrix to live. Invitations for the members of the press began with a “5 PM cocktail” agenda. The locations also went hand in hand with major events and trends: In 1972, the conference took place in Munich during the Olympics, because of the subsidiaries there were also meetings in Madrid and Barcelona or in 1982 because of the collaboration with Laura Biagotti in Venice.



*Photo top left: from the EB report on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1972: successful German athletes were among the VIP guests at the press conference in Munich. Perhaps the most notable Olympian to people from Hessen is soccer player Jürgen Grabowski (center) who played for the Eintracht Frankfurt*

*Photo top right: Not only athletes, but also comedians performed and entertained, here 1973 Jürgen Scheller from the Lach – und Schießgesellschaft*

## Leadership Change

The 1970s also saw a change of management within the company: in 1974, son Klaus J. Segner took over the business and managed the company for another 15 years. The entire Segner Family lived in Dreieich by now and shows their appreciation for the town not only through lavish business taxes but also time and again in the form of generous donations: whether it be an expensive police motorcycle or an artsy plastic sculpture in front of the city library. The company’s in-house creations of that time could certainly compete with other big brands. They included but were not limited to typical fragrances of the 70s/80s with chypre accords or oriental notes in the matching bottle and packaging design. But beyond this good craftsmanship, Ellen Betrix had to work on its "branding" and began to buy internationally known "names" and fragrances such as Hugo Boss or Laura Biagiotti through its subsidiary Eurocos.

## 1984: Ellen Betrix turns 50

For the 50th anniversary, Ellen Betrix rented out the Bürgerhaus (community center) and celebrated together with VIP guests the success of the company. The 1984 balance sheet was also impressive: 200 million in sales, No. 1 in depot cosmetics for 12 years, almost 1,000 employees in Germany and another 400 at subsidiaries abroad. At that time, while everyone was celebrating, no one knew that the last five years of the company were already underway. To be continued in our third and final part of the Ellen-Betrix series...



*The big anniversary of 1984 also included a fashion show in the outfits of the last 50 years. The two gentlemen are company founder Fritz Segner (left) and his son and successor Klaus Segner, right.*