

## KROCH, HEINZ JUSTUS (Henry) (1920 - 2011), engineer and businessman

**Name:** Heinz Justus Kroch  
**Date of birth:** 1920  
**Date of death:** 2011  
**Spouse:** Margot Emma Natalie Reece (née Kohlstadt)  
**Child:** Anthony Kroch  
**Child:** Ian Kroch  
**Child:** Maggie Kroch  
**Parent:** Lily Kroch (née Rummelsburg)  
**Parent:** Isaac Kurt Kroch  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** engineer and businessman  
**Area of activity:** Business and Industry  
**Author:** Rhys David

Heinz Kroch was born on 28 October 1920 in the German city of Leipzig to Jewish parents, Isaac Kurt Kroch (b. 1884), a lawyer, and his wife Lily (née Rummelsburg, 1891). After training as an engineer in Switzerland, Kroch took up a position with a mechanical engineering company in Manchester in 1939, no doubt fearing for his future due to the virulent Antisemitism in Germany at the time. It was probably at this time that he adopted the English name Henry.

At this stage there was no indication that Kroch would come to be one of the most important figures in post-war Welsh life, creating a multinational electronics company that would employ thousands of people, and serving on the boards of several important Welsh institutions.

The decisive break that led to this new direction came with his move in 1951 to a small family company, AB Metal Products, employing no more than 100 people, which had been persuaded to move to Abercynon in the Cynon Valley as government sought to find new light manufacturing operations to absorb miners losing their jobs as the south Wales coalfield contracted. Kroch became a director of the company in 1959, rising to managing director in 1964 and chairman in 1978.

Under Kroch the company's emphasis shifted into the fast-growing electronics industry, building a strong reputation as a reliable source of components, with a particular emphasis on the then thriving UK consumer electronics industries - radio, television, and record players. The company later expanded into other sectors, supplying Acorn and Sinclair in the nascent computer industry, and later becoming a major contractor to the instrumentation and control gear, and defence industries.

At its height, the company employed 5,500 people in Wales and across the rest of Europe but defence cuts in the 1980s and 1990s saw the stock market quoted company's fortunes falter. By now renamed AB Electronic Components to better reflect its product speciality, it was merged in 1993 into Surrey-based TT Electronics, but as of 2024 retained a substantial manufacturing presence in Wales in Newport and its original Valleys location, Abercynon.

Kroch had been behind the company's move in the 1960s into exporting, which was seen to offer a counter to fluctuations in demand in Britain resulting from economic downturns, hire purchase restrictions and tax changes. Expansion into Germany followed with the setting up of an AB subsidiary to assemble components sent from Wales, and new sites were opened in other parts of south Wales, including Cardiff. Kroch was also one of the first businessmen in Wales to champion entry into the European Economic Community (the forerunner of the European Union). At AB Metal Products he had begun to recognise the need for much larger markets to justify the heavy capital expenditure required to automate processes and remain competitive.

In 1956 Kroch married Margot Emma Natalie Reece (b. 1922 in Magdeburg, Germany). They had two sons, Anthony and Ian, and one daughter, Maggie.

In the 1980s Kroch began to devote more of his time to roles in public life in the country he had grown to love. His son Ian said at the time of his death that his father had at first hated his new life in Wales and did not want even to unpack. 'He soon became fond of it. The beautiful landscapes were similar to those of Switzerland.'

His subsequent determination to put something back was reflected in his assuming the role of first chairman of the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA) when it was launched in 1987 by a group of leading Welsh business people. Colleagues credited him with offering inspirational leadership, ensuring that firm foundations were laid during the think tank's first five years. At the outset, mirroring business practice, weekly early morning meetings were held in Cardiff to get the fledgling institution on its feet.

Kroch had recognised how important it was for Wales to have an independent body that could raise the level of debate and provide input on major issues facing Wales. Very early in its life the IWA saw that revitalisation of the Valleys of south Wales was a major priority. Kroch chaired the Steering Group in 1988 when it produced its first report, *The South Wales Valleys: An Agenda for Action*, and became a passionate advocate for the document's recommendations. In the foreword he wrote: 'Most of my working life has been spent in the Valleys and nowhere is now closer to my heart'. Many of its suggestions were adopted by the then Secretary of State for Wales, Peter Walker, in his Valleys Initiative of the late 1980s.

Fittingly for a native of a city closely associated with many German composers, Kroch became a patron of the Welsh musical scene, serving on the boards of Welsh National Opera and the Welsh Chamber Orchestra. He was also a member of the pre-devolution Welsh Council that offered policy advice on Welsh matters.

A founder member of the Welsh Livery Guild, Kroch was awarded OBE in 1968 and CBE in 1983. He was the first Freeman of Rhondda Cynon Taf borough, which he is reported to have considered his proudest achievement. He lived in Penarth in retirement where a Welsh miner's lamp hung in the study in which he carried out many of his activities. Henry Kroch died on 6 July 2011.

### Author

Rhys David

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