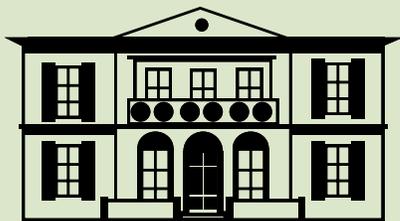


# In Touch

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN FRIENDS OF THE  
JEWISH MUSEUM HOHENEMS, INC.

ISSN: 1559-4866 • April 2023



[www.afjmh.org](http://www.afjmh.org)

**Stephan Rollin**  
*Founder*

**Claude A. Rollin, Esq.**  
*President*

**Nadia G. Follman**  
*Vice-President*

**Uri Taenzer, Esq.**  
*Secretary-Treasurer*

#### Trustees

**Dr. Robert Amler**

**Nicole M. Angiel**

**Andy Barth**

**Ronald Bernell**

**Francesca Brunner-Kennedy**

**Karla Galindo-Barth**

**Timothy L. Hanford**

**Hon. Susan Shimer**

**David Taenzer**

**Monica Wollner**

#### In Touch Editors:

**Jennifer Shimer Piper**

**Jessica Piper**

Please send your

In Touch articles to:

[newsletter@afjmh.org](mailto:newsletter@afjmh.org)

#### Visit us on the web:

Jewish Museum Hohenems:  
[www.jm-hohenems.at](http://www.jm-hohenems.at)

American Friends of the  
Jewish Museum Hohenems:  
[www.afjmh.org](http://www.afjmh.org)



## Letter from the President

CLAUDE A. ROLLIN, ESQ.

Dear Friends and Supporters of AFJMH:

As President of our organization, I am delighted to extend my warmest greetings on behalf of the Board of Trustees.

As I write this letter, the cherry blossoms are in full bloom here in Washington, D.C., which reminds me that spring is once again upon us. Spring is a glorious time of year as our days get longer, flowers begin to bloom, and warmer weather allows us to spend more time enjoying the great outdoors. It's a time of new beginnings.

Since our last newsletter, I am pleased to report that the Rosenthal clan has once again grown, with the birth in late March of my first grandchild, **River Grey Bailey**, to my wonderful daughter and her equally wonderful husband. Of course, we have been very busy celebrating the addition of this newest descendant of the Rosenthal dynasty. At the same time, we pause to honor so many of our ancestors who lived in Hohenems, including those who lived in the Villa Heimann-Rosenthal, the current location of the Jewish Museum Hohenems.

Museum Director **Hanno Loewy** reports that, after the challenges of the last few years, visitors to the Museum are back in large numbers (yeah!). The staff is preparing new publications and programs as well as getting ready to change their featured exhibition in May. The new exhibition entitled, "**A place of our own. Four young Palestinian women in Tel Aviv**" will be on display at the Museum from May 7, 2023 until March 10, 2024. You can get more information about the new exhibition in the News from the Museum section of this newsletter.

Since Hohenems is directly on the border between Austria and Switzerland, there are so many stories of Jews, political opponents of the Nazis, defectors and others who escaped or attempted to escape from Nazi-occupied countries such as Austria to Switzerland and beyond. In this issue of the newsletter, there are several fascinating stories about individuals who fled from the German Reich with helpers on one or both sides of the border. Some were successful, although they often had to forfeit their money and other valuables in order to cross the border. Others ended up in detention or worse. The stories are well worth reading.

Finally, I want to highlight a recent retirement among the staff at the museum. **Gerlinde Fritz**, who provided administrative services and communicated with many of us over the years, retired after 16 years at the museum. She was a pleasure to work with and will be greatly missed. Her duties will be assumed by **Martina Steiner**, who is now responsible for the museum's administration office among other things. Upon Gerlinde's retirement, museum Director Hanno Loewy presented her with flowers on behalf of the American Friends. Gerlinde was thrilled to receive them. My sincere thanks to Hanno, Honorable **Sue Rosenthal Shimer** and **Uri Taenzer** for making that happen!

As always, I am incredibly grateful for your continued support of the Jewish Museum Hohenems and our mission to help increase awareness of the former Jewish community in Hohenems. With our ongoing support, I am confident that the museum will continue to be an inspiration for many generations in the future. I look forward to the day that I can visit the museum with my new grandson, River.

**All the best to you and your family,**

Sincerely,  
**Claude Rollin**  
President

## A Letter from the Director to Friends

DR. HANNO LOEWY

Dear Friends of the Jewish Museum Hohenems,

Spring has come and the visitors are back in large numbers. We are thrilled to prepare new publications and programs, and a new changing exhibition in May. Devoted to human rights and democracy, we know how fragile these values and basic laws are in our times, wherever we look.

Our project “*Crossing the Border*” brought us many new friends—and moving encounters with a past that seems disturbingly present when you look at the border so close to us from both sides. From Austria where thousands of Jews and others searched for freedom from persecution between 1938 and 1945. And from Switzerland, where public discourse was focused on xenophobia, warnings against foreign influx, and migrants that would “take our jobs” or would “profit from our public budget”.

In the course of the last months new escape stories came to our knowledge, meaningful relationships with second generation of refugees developed, and productive cooperation with Swiss educators and institutions but also the Cantonal government of St. Gall got new inspirations. In April the book “*Crossing the Border*” with all the stories researched in our project and an impressive visual representation of the border landscape in the photographs of **Dietmar Walsler** will be published.

Our project's website <https://crossing-the-border.infolindex.en.php> is now present in English as well.

In May, the State of Israel is celebrating its 75th birthday, in midst of a turmoil about its democracy—and an emerging debate about the question of how democratic a state can be, which by definition is privileging a part of its “native” population against another. Democracy for all is not yet on the agenda. But we are sure it will be sooner or later. Or the idea of democracy will die anyhow.

Our next exhibition “*A Place of Our Own. Four Young Palestinian Women in Tel Aviv*” will focus on the life and quest of more than 20% of Israel’s population. See more about this project in this edition of “In Touch”.

Hope to see you all again in Hohenems and let us stay in touch.

Hanno Loewy  
Director



## News from the Museum: Exhibitions and Projects

### New Exhibition: “A Place of Our Own. Four Young Palestinian Women in Tel Aviv.” By Iris Hassid

From **May 7, 2023 until March 10, 2024** the Jewish Museum Hohenems will host an exhibition by the Jewish Museum Amsterdam. Since its founding the Jewish Museum Hohenems has repeatedly addressed the relationship between minorities and majorities—for the most part this has involved a Jewish minority and its relationship to the majorities that comprise the (European) societies surrounding them. The exhibition “*A Place of Our Own*” by Israeli photographer **Iris Hassid** facilitates a shift in perspective—it focuses on the lives of four young Palestinian women. They are Israeli citizens, living and studying in Tel Aviv, and setting out on their professional lives, in Israel and elsewhere. Israeli photographer Iris Hassid (b. 1968) began photographing them in 2014 and talking to them about their ambitions, friendships, families, and political-social involvement. The photographs on display, films, and quotes from many conversations show the lives of these young women, since leaving their Arab towns and villages to go to university in Tel Aviv. Hassid has captured their development, illustrating what is a minority within an ostensibly Jewish context. The exhibition provides insights



Samar, Aya, Saja and Manar, green car, Ramat Aviv

into the reality of life in Israel—at least for some of the country’s inhabitants—highlighting not only obstacles and challenges but also the possibilities of a modern, heterogeneous Israeli society.

Almost to the date of the 75th anniversary of the State of Israel, the Jewish Museum Hohenems will celebrate the opening of this exhibition with two big events, which take place at a weekend full of festivities in the context of the “emsiana” cultural festival in Hohenems—with this year’s theme “about courage.” Three of

the four Palestinian women as well as the photographer Iris Hassid will attend the opening ceremony, during which **Samar Quity**, today a well-known Palestinian actress, director and one of the depicted women, will speak about her life as a Palestinian woman in Israel. She will touch topics like her identity as “the other” within Israeli society, the question of “home”, as well as her ambitions and day-to-day challenges. Secondly, Palestinian singer **Rasha Nahas**, a Palestinian singer living in Berlin, and her band will play a concert in the Salomon-Sulzer-Hall in the evening—and be the closing act for a weekend, and day full of courage and courageous statements.

**News from the Museum: Exhibitions and Projects (Cont'd)**

**Crossing the Border**

Between March 1938 and May 1945, thousands of people fleeing the German Reich tried to reach Switzerland via Vorarlberg: Jews, political opponents of the Nazis, deserters, prisoners of war, forced and foreign laborers from occupied European countries. Escape helpers on both sides of the border were able to help some individuals to escape. But for most of them there were only illegal ways to freedom. Their stories are about courage and despair, humanity and resentment, xenophobia and solidarity. Fled from the Third Reich, from persecution and extermination, the refugees reached, if they were lucky, a reality that is disturbingly similar to our Europe of today.



**Über die Grenze.**  
52 Fluchtgeschichten zwischen Bodensee und Gebirge 1938 bis 1945

Hanno Loewy/Raphael Einetter,  
with photographs of Dietmar Walser

256 pages, 24,80 €, Bucher Verlag,  
Hohenems 2023, ISBN: 978-3-99018-682-4



**Association for the Promotion of the Jewish Museum Hohenems / new Board of Directors elected**



On **March 29**, the annual member meeting of the Association for the Promotion of the Jewish Museum Hohenems was held, and a new board of directors was elected. After four years, **Severin Holzknacht** handed over the presidency to **Brigitte Plemel**.

- President: .....**Brigitte Plemel**
- Vice President: ...**Severin Holzknacht**
- Treasurer: .....**Daniel Mosman**
- Secretary:.....**Elisabeth Bitschnau**
- Advisors: .....**Yves Bollag**  
**Jutta Berger**  
**Evelyne Bermann**  
**Dinah Ehrenfreund**  
**Hildegard Schlatter**



**Board of Directors of the Association since March 2023, from left to right:** Elisabeth Bitschnau, Jutta Berger, Daniel Mosman, Hildegard Schlatter, Severin Holzknacht, Evelyne Bermann and Brigitte Plemel; *not present:* Dinah Ehrenfreund and Yves Bollag

**Summer Program**

This year again we will offer a diverse program of outdoor activities, public events and bike tours along the border into Switzerland and Liechtenstein in Hohenems, Lustenau, Altach, Mäder and Feldkirch, as well as in Bregenz, Dornbirn, Bludenz and St. Gallenkirch. And the group teatro caprile will offer theatre performances on refugee trails in Gargellen.

**Administration:**

**Gerlinde Fritz retires after 16 years—Martina Steiner joins the team**



**Gerlinde Fritz**, whom many of you know from Reunions, visits and communication on all channels retired after 16 years working with us in the Museum. Gerlinde was always the good spirit connecting everybody in our institution with each other—and all of us with the world. Among all her gifts and qualities, her magnificent capability to steer the team in good directions whenever it was really needed, will be missed.

She now enjoys a new age of life, having many plans with her family—and will hopefully be a regular in our café.

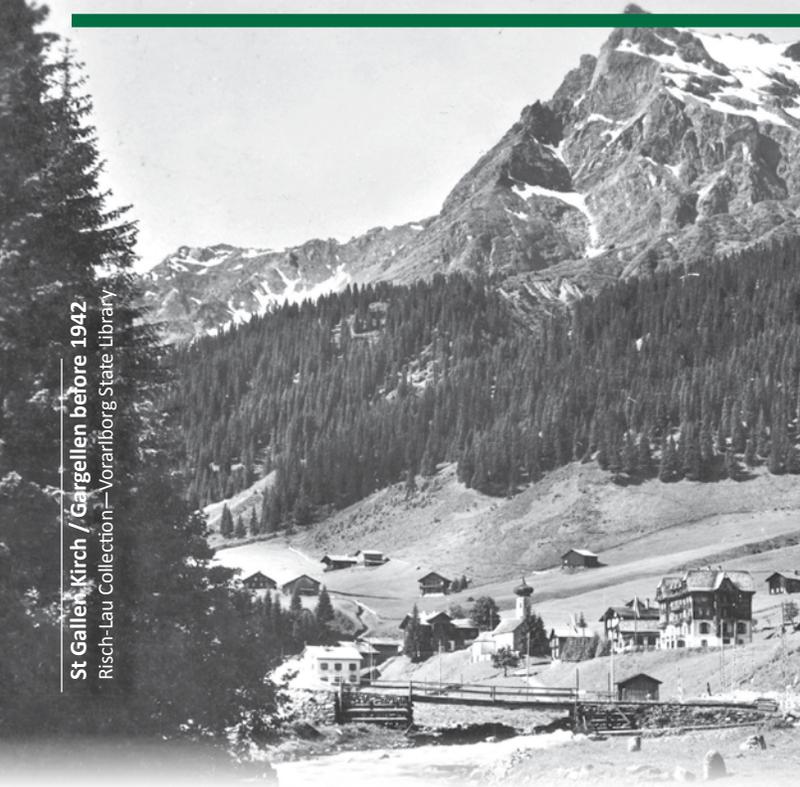
Since February 2023 our team has a new member. **Martina Steiner** is now responsible for the administration office, accounting and everything organizational. While studying archaeology, Martina has already worked in a museum and afterwards gained experience in office management in different positions.

*"I am happy to be part of the Jewish Museum Hohenems and I am looking forward to getting to know the American Friends!"*

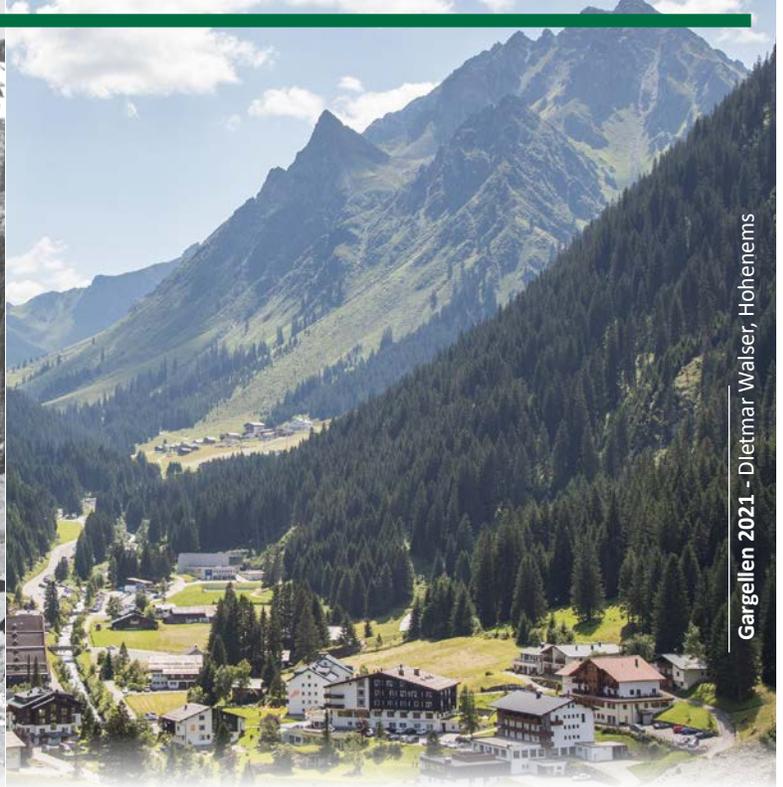


## NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE: MARTHA AND ELISABETH NEHAB FROM BERLIN ON THE WAY TO THE SAROTLA PASS

St Gallen Kirch / Gargellen before 1942  
Risch-Lau Collection—Vorarlberg State Library



Gargellen 2021 - Dietmar Walser, Hoheneims



### Gargellen, September 24, 1942

Some people in Gargellen and St. Gallenkirch still remember two Jewish women who tried to escape to Switzerland over the Sarotla Pass. Who the two women were remained unknown for a long time. And the accounts of contemporary witnesses contradicted each other. Sometimes they spoke of young women, or of girls, sometimes of old women with snow-white hair. One witness to the imprisonment of the two women tells of how she, having just come down from the alp herself with whey, milk and cheese, was about to put her load onto a tractor that was transporting wood down into the valley.

*“And then there was a customs officer marching back and forth all the time, by the bridge with a rifle. (...) And he was always laughing to himself. And I thought to myself: what’s wrong with him? And then he looked at these wooden rolls, over there. And then we saw that two old, white-haired women had been tied together there so that they wouldn’t run away. And then the woodworkers shouted: ‘You mustn’t talk to them! They are Jewish women!’ But we did tell each other a little bit, as we passed by. ‘We have the mother and the brother in these gas chambers...’ And it will probably happen to them as well....*

*They wanted to cross the border. In Gargellen, they rented a guest room. They stayed there for a few days and scouted out everything. And there they went, Sarotla, up to the alp with a comb and a bucket, as an excuse, to collect berries. (...)*

*And then he said, the tax collector said to us: ‘I would be a rich man!’ he said. If he had let them through. They would have had jewelry and money with them. And they would have begged and pleaded and cried: ‘Let us cross the border!’ They were just before the border.”<sup>1</sup>*

Some eyewitnesses report that the women hired a smuggler who betrayed them. Others report that the two women had too little money or valuables with them to be able to pay an escape agent. In any case, on September 24, 1942, they were locked up in the basement of the old schoolhouse in St. Gallenkirch in order to be deported the next morning. But the two women managed to beat their deportation.

*“I was 13 years old at that time. (...) Through my friendship with the son of the gendarme I learned about the incident in the community detention center. The friend told me at that time that two Jewish women had hanged themselves in the Kiecha. Since we were both very curious, we decided to go to the place of the incident to see it with our own eyes. (...) The sight that presented itself to us kept me busy and haunted my thoughts for a long time. I saw the two young women who had hanged themselves from the window cross with a thin cord. They were kneeling on the floor facing each other, their heads were tilted to the ground, and the girls were still holding each other’s hands. This position was very shocking and unexpected for me at the same time, because I had not expected it. The girls were siblings and also very young, being 16 and 19 years old.”<sup>2</sup>*



(Color) Old Schoolhouse Location 2021 - Dietmar Walser  
(B&W) Old Schoolhouse 1980 - Collection Karl Netzer, Montafon Archive

## MARTHA AND ELISABETH NEHAB FROM BERLIN ON THE WAY TO THE SAROTLA PASS (Cont'd)

In fact, the two women were sisters, almost the same age, but no longer girls. Martha Nehab is 50 years old, her sister Elisabeth one year older, when they travel from Berlin to the Montafon valley to escape to Switzerland. Only 80 years after their death the identity of the two desperate fugitives in Gargellen could be revealed.

In 1938, they had tried in vain to obtain a visa and work permit for Great Britain as sports teachers. And finally they stayed with their widowed mother in Berlin.

But in early August 1942, their mother Blanca Nehab took her own life in Berlin to escape deportation. Martha and Elisabeth Nehab had nothing left to lose.

On September 25, 1942 their bodies are brought to the anatomy in Innsbruck.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edith Hessenberger, „Gescheiterte Grenzüberschreitungen. Geschichten die man nicht vergisst.“, in: Andreas Rudigier, Edith Hessenberger, Michael Kasper, Grenzüberschreitungen. Von Schmugglern, Schleppern, Flüchtlingen. Schruns: Montafoner Museen Heimatschutzverein Montafon, 2008, p. 188-189.

<sup>2</sup> Irina Wieser, Endstation „Kiecha“. Das tragische Schicksal zweier jüdischer Frauen im Montafon. Seminararbeit. Bregenz 2003, Appendix, p. 6, quoted after Hessenberger, „Gescheiterte Grenzüberschreitungen“, p. 191

<sup>3</sup> Corpse book 1929-1950 of the anatomy, Innsbruck University, entry 440 and 441

## “THANK GOD I WAS ABLE TO LIE WITH A QUICK WIT.” THE ESCAPE HELPER, EDMUND FLEISCH

Altach, Fall 1938



Escape Helper Edmund Fleisch on his motorcycle (date unknown)

*“I was an old smuggler. During the time when we young people were unemployed in Austria, we smuggled sugar and coffee across the border. And I was well known, well known in the area. Do you understand?”<sup>1</sup>*

In 1991, **Edmund Fleisch** tells the Swiss historian **Stefan Keller** about his work as an escape helper at the border near Altach. In the first months after the so-called “Anschluss”, the refugees from Vienna were still sent across the border by the Gestapo itself, after they were required to hand over all their belongings. Their expulsion and robbery still are the priority. The Vorarlberg innkeepers are instructed to report arriving Jews to the nearest customs office. And the district customs commissioner orders that no stay of more than three days be tolerated. But in late summer, not only the Swiss border police are reinforced, but the Nazi authorities also mercilessly intervene against escape attempts. Escape helpers like Edmund Fleisch are now indispensable for crossing the border illegally. Fleisch is given the nickname “Brother in Need”.

*“And then they sent the people to me, right! And I took these people across the border by night and fog—Well ... back then... never again... we were followed by the SS, my house was spied on... under all circumstances... And then I was summoned once to the Secret State Police in Bregenz, Römerstrasse, and I was there for three hours, and all three hours I was able to tell a quick-witted lie, thank God, otherwise they would have... And from then on, of course, I had to be very careful—You see, nobody dared to do it anymore because of the Gestapo.”*

Edmund Fleisch is an unskilled worker in the embroidery industry, he is 28 years old and an experienced smuggler. He is not the only escape helper in the village. **Rudolf Egle** or **Ludwig Gächter** also help the persecuted across the border. Fleisch's point of contact is the “Sonne” inn. The refugees arrive there. He is notified beforehand from St. Gall, mostly by **Recha Sternbuch**, who with her husband **Isaac** built up an active network to rescue Jewish refugees in 1938—and by **Willi Hutter**, a greengrocer in Diepoldsau.

*“Mostly from Mrs. Sternbuch. And from this Hutter. The people are with this Hutter also somehow... I mean, they were in perfect accord. I couldn't know whether a few would come again tomorrow, and then I (...) was informed and took them away. And the others that I picked up in Landeck, in Ulm, that of course didn't go over here. People didn't dare to come here by train because the SS were checking in Plainclothes. It was difficult for people to even get to Vorarlberg, to the border area.”*

Fleisch also picks up refugees from Ulm or from Landeck with the help of a Hohenems cab driver named **Beck**. They, too, are taken across the border via the lock at the Altach public swimming pool. Only once does he meet Recha Sternbuch in person, at a meeting in Hohenems.

Not only Fleisch is interrogated by the police. **Willi Hutter** in Diepoldsau also has problems with the Swiss authorities. On May 12, 1939, his house is searched. Landjäger Butz makes a record:

*“Our attention was particularly directed to written material that might relate to emigrant smuggling. In this regard, some incriminating material was found and confiscated from the stove in the living room. In the notebook marked ‘General’, there are various Jewish names and records of sums of money. (...) Particularly incriminating are also the letters and the postcard addressed to Hutter by a certain ‘Herbert’ from St. Gall (...) In the letter dated 23.11.1938 from Herbert it is mentioned that on Friday ‘6 sacks of potatoes’ would arrive in Bludenz according to the timetable at 12.10, which would therefore have been November 25. On the following day, 26.11.1938, 6 newly arrived refugees who had illegally crossed the border at Diepoldsau also promptly arrived at the police command for registration.”<sup>2</sup>*

In 1939, Edmund Fleisch finds work in Friedrichshafen, as an iron lathe operator in an engine plant. Then he is drafted and serves five years as a soldier, in Greece, Russia and Italy. After the war, he works as a bulldozer driver. He died at the age of 82 in 1992.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Edmund Fleisch by Stefan Keller, October 28, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Keller, Grüningers Fall. Zurich 1993, p. 180f.

## RESCUE ATTEMPTS ON ALL FRONTS: RECHA AND ISAAC STERNBUCH



Isaac and Recha Sternbuch at a conference Montreux, 1946

### St. Gall – Montreux, 1938 to 1944

*“She had tremendous charisma. And a conversation with her was never an average conversation—I would say she had a mission, a God mission. I don’t know... I’m not that devout and religious, but... You can’t classify a person like her among normal people. She wasn’t normal either... with her family... nothing interested her... she didn’t sleep, she didn’t eat... she wanted to save. And she did save.”<sup>1</sup>*

**Gutta Sternbuch** remembers her sister-in-law **Recha Sternbuch** in conversation with **Stefan Keller**.

*“She also had the strange feeling after the war that she had done nothing. And especially that her parents had been murdered. There was a time when Switzerland said that if someone had a brother, a sister or parents, they could bring them in. And she had her parents in Belgium. But because she had acted against the Swiss laws, they didn’t let her parents come in. But they punished her with that. And somehow she couldn’t cope with that. That she is practically guilty, in a certain sense, for the death of her parents. They were deported to Auschwitz.”<sup>2</sup>*

Recha Sternbuch came from a pious family. In 1905, she was born as the daughter of Rabbi **Mordechai Rottenberg** in Wadowice in Galicia.

In 1928, she married **Isaac Sternbuch** in Basel and from 1929 they lived in St. Gall. The family runs a factory and a store for linen and raincoats. In 1938, the Sternbuchs opened a kosher refugee shelter for Orthodox refugees in Waldaustraße. Together with her husband



Waldaustraße in St. Gall, 2022 - Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

and his brother **Elias Sternbuch**, she organizes a complex network of refugee helpers, in which not least the worker **Edmund Fleisch** from Altach and the greengrocer **Willi Hutter** in Diepoldsau are involved, but also the Swiss consul in Bregenz, **Ernest Prodolliet**, and later the papal nuncio in Bern, **Philippe Bernardini**.

Already in 1938, at Recha Sternbuch's urging, Prodolliet issued Swiss return visas to three hundred refugees, enabling them to travel through Switzerland to the Italian Adriatic and embark for Palestine. However, the Sternbuchs worked particularly closely with **Paul Grüninger**. Again and again they send refugees to whom who have just arrived. Their dates of entry are backdated so that they can stay. In November, Recha Sternbuch herself brings the children of a relative from Munich to Switzerland. And on the last day of 1938, Sternbuch drives to the customs in Diepoldsau to bring a family from Vienna across the border. Paul Grüninger is also in Diepoldsau that evening. It is not long before Grüninger is dismissed and put on trial.



Customs Office Höchst, 2021  
Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

*“I was amazed that such a man could become a police commander.”*

Elias Sternbuch remembers Grüninger:

*“The man sacrificed himself. He knew that his position was finished if he broke the law like that. (...) He showed that he had a dignity. (...) He*

## RESCUE ATTEMPTS ON ALL FRONTS: RECHA AND ISAAC STERNBUCH

**Border bridge between the customs offices  
of St. Margrethen and Höchst-2021**  
Dietmar Walsler, Hohenems



*may have acted against the law, but he saved the dignity, the dignity of Switzerland! (...) It would not have been a feat to say: Well, I don't want to have anything to do with this. Grüninger put his personal interests behind that and put his family and everything behind. (...) He knew exactly that if he let 1000 people in and legalized it, that it would eventually burst. But he did it anyway. – He was a weak nature in himself. But here he was big.”<sup>3</sup>*

In May 1939, Recha Sternbuch also gets arrested. She is accused of smuggling, illegally accommodating refugees in her house, forming a network to aid escape, and obtaining illegal visas in St. Gallen, and she remains in custody for a short time. Above all, the police want to hear names, those of her helpers, none of whom will reveal them. Only after a new arrest in 1941 and further investigations against her, she was acquitted at the end of June 1942 for lack of evidence.

But their tireless fight for the lives of the persecuted has by no means ceased. As early as 1941, the Sternbuchs founded an aid association in Montreux for Jewish refugees in Shanghai.

In September 1942, they are involved in informing Jewish personalities in the USA about the mass deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto and ask the US government for help. At that time, initial reports of systematic mass extermination, such as the famous Riegner telegram from the World Jewish Congress bureau chief in Geneva, are still ignored and treated as wild rumors inspired by Jewish fears.

In May 1944, through the War Refugee Board representative in Bern, **Roswell McClelland**, they send a desperate plea to Washington to bomb the rail lines on which Hungarian Jews were being sent to their deaths at Auschwitz:

*“We have received messages from Slovakia,” Isaac Sternbuch writes, “according to which they ask that air raids be made soon on the two towns of Kaschau (Kosice) as a transit point for military transports, and Presov as*

*a hub for the deportations coming through Kaschau, and also on the entire railroad between the two places, which passes over a short bridge about 30 meters long. This is the only direct route from Hungary to Poland, while all other small and short routes leading to the east can only be used in Hungary, but not for traffic to Poland, as there are already battlefields there. Do what is necessary so that the bombardment is repeated at short intervals to prevent reconstruction.”<sup>4</sup>*

In 1944, the Sternbuchs are finally involved in the ransom of 1,200 Jews from the “Theresienstadt Ghetto.” As a middleman, they deliberately send an anti-Semitic Nazi sympathizer from Bern to Berlin, former Federal Councillor **Jean-Marie Musy**, who is apparently looking for ways to rehabilitate himself in the face of the foreseeable German defeat and whom they trust most to succeed in the mission.

### **Recommended reading:**

Stefan Keller, *Grüningers Fall. Geschichten von Flucht und Hilfe.* Zurich 1993 (1998)

Jörg Krummenacher, *Flüchtiges Glück. Die Flüchtlinge im Grenzkanton St. Gallen zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus.* Zurich 2005

<sup>1</sup> Interview by Stefan Keller with Elias and Gutta Sternbuch, 22.12.1991

<sup>2</sup> dito

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Die Jahre der Vernichtung. Das Dritte Reich und die Juden.* Vol. 2, Munich 2006, p. 655

## A STUCK SLIDING DOOR BETRAYS THEM: FOURTEEN JEWISH REFUGEES FROM SLOVAKIA ARE DRAGGED OFF A COAL TRAIN

Feldkirch Train Station (before 1912)  
Hermann Steck, Vorarlberg State Library

### Feldkirch, January 7, 1943

A goods train carrying brown coal is cleared by customs for the border crossing into Switzerland. Main customs assistant Reithmeyer notes in the chronicle of the Feldkirch main customs office:

*“When trying to open the wagon SZ 17068, the officials become suspicious. The sliding door was stuck. It can only be opened by lifting it with a crowbar underneath.”<sup>1</sup>*

The car is overloaded, which arouses suspicion. The officers start to unload the car. Then a man jumps out of a ventilation flap. He is arrested by the customs secretary.

*“In the meantime, the other officers dig through the front wall of the wagon and discover a hole that almost reaches the bottom of the wagon. In it they find four refugees. By removing more coal they create an exit, then they force those found to leave the car. However, they resist, but are soon demanded to crawl out at gunpoint. The refugees are all black in the face from coal dust and dirty, but seem to be in good physical condition.”*

Reithmeyer writes more in his report:

*“In the meantime, the refugees, all of whom turn out to be Jews, have surrendered to their fate after initially being very depressed. They look rather adventurous enough. They have covered their faces with scarves to protect them from the frost and cold, so that only their eyes and – dirty – noses are showing. They wear many clothes on their bodies; 5-6 trousers and 3-4 jumpers. When asked if there are other men hidden in the wagons, they deny it and assure: only the five of us. Of course, the officers do not rely on this statement and search the other cars as well. They discover another five men in one of them and three men and a 17-year-old girl in one of the others. All Jews. ... The girl asks with her hands up in fear: ‘What is happening to us?’ When asked why he had fled, one of the Jews explained: ‘Because I wanted to save live’. When questioned more in detail, the Jews explain that they boarded the wagons in Slovakia on 30 December, 1942 in order to avoid being deported to a labor camp.”*

By this time, 58,000 Jews from Slovakia had already been deported to Auschwitz and Majdanek. Most of them were murdered. But not all the refugees on the coal train at the Feldkirch railway station were from Slovakia.

In Bukowsko, Poland, only a few miles north of the border, word also spread in autumn 1942 that there was an escape organization in Medzilaborce, a small Slovakian town in the Beskids. Small groups are hidden in the goods trains loaded with brown coal that are dispatched from there to Switzerland. Several of them actually reach Switzerland by December 31.

Among the people from Bukowsko and other Polish towns in the area who try to save themselves this way are the **Balbirer siblings**. In September 1942, the family is deported to the nearby labor camp Zaslaw near Sanok. From there, the parents **David and Rosa** are deported to an extermination camp. Meanwhile, **Feige**, the eldest daughter, hid with a group in the woods near Bukowsko.

The three other siblings also manage to return to their hometown from the camp for a few days, shortly before the Yom Kippur holiday: **Basia, Gittel and Mendel** – they are 15, 17 and 20 years of age. They do not fast or pray on Yom Kippur, Basia later recalls. *“We said there is no God. Everything is a lie.”<sup>2</sup>*

Feige visits them one more time during those days, looking for something to



**Balbirer siblings.**

Standing: Feiga & Mendel.  
Sitting: Gittel and Basha  
(1937)

## FOURTEEN JEWISH REFUGEES FROM SLOVAKIA ARE DRAGGED OFF A COAL TRAIN (Cont'd)



Feldkirch Train Station 2021  
Dietmar Walsler, Hohenems

eat. Then she is caught by the SS and shot to death.

With the help of **Hersch Greiber**, an acquaintance from Bukowsko who had already gained experience in smuggling, the three siblings manage to escape from the Zaslaw camp once again. Just in time before the remaining ones are deported to the Belzec extermination camp. They reach Medzilaborce at the end of November or beginning of December. They are not the only Polish Jews here who now pose as Slovakian Jews to increase their chances of survival in case they are caught.

Not everyone can leave together. The places are rare and in great demand. Gittel leaves as early as December 30, her siblings are assigned a place in the bunker under the coal two weeks later. At this point, no one in Medzilaborce knows that Gittel's train was discovered in Feldkirch on January 7, 1943.

**Gittel Balbirer**, the seventeen-year-old "girl" in Reithmeyer's report, is detained for a few days in Feldkirch prison. In the entry log of the prisoner's register she appears under the false name she had adopted for her escape: **Sara Schönfeld**.<sup>3</sup> On January 15, before her siblings are also arrested in Feldkirch, Gittel Balbirer is taken on to Vienna. From there she is finally deported to Auschwitz on March 3, together with about 30 other Slovakian and Polish Jews on transport number 47a. There, her trace is lost.

Her siblings Mendel and Basia are first transferred to the prison in Bregenz. From there to the Reichenau concentration camp near Innsbruck. They also arrive in Auschwitz in May 1943.

Basia and Mendel survive and experience the liberation in 1945. After three years as displaced persons in Austria, they emigrate to Montevideo in Uruguay, in 1948. On the ship *Partizanka*. They never saw their sister Gittel again, neither in Auschwitz nor afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chronicle of the Feldkirch Main Customs Office, 7.1.1943, Feldkirch City Archives

<sup>2</sup> Basia (Basha) Balbirer, interview in Petah Tikva, 8.6.2010, Yad Vashem Archive. Further information on the family's history also comes from this interview.

<sup>3</sup> Feldkirch Prison, record book 1942-1943, VLA

<sup>4</sup> Until the end of their lives (Mendel died in 2015 and Basia in 2021) they both tried to clarify the fate of their sister. But it was only an email from Mendel's daughter in the USA to the Jewish Community for Tyrol and Vorarlberg in 2022 that set in motion the research which made it possible to reconstruct Gittel's route from Feldkirch to Auschwitz. It is uncertain if and when she died there or whether she was deported further from Auschwitz.

## PAPER WAR OVER PERMANENT ASYLUM: EMILIE HAAS AND THE SWISS AUTHORITIES



Emilie Haas, 1943  
Swiss Federal Archives

### Höchst - St. Gallen, March 28, 1943

*“Haas Emilie, housewife, born 2.9.1878, in Germany, stateless, widow, (daughter) of Levi and Sarah née Lehmann, place of residence undetermined. Cash: 127 Marks. Reason for deposit: Emigrant, unauthorized border crossing.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the night of 28-29 March, two women, **Emilie Haas** and **Elisabeth Frank** are locked up in cells 5 and 16 of the St. Gall city police. Police officer Fässler writes his report.

*“On March 29, 1943, 01.00 a.m., a Baumgartner Emil, resident at Zürcherstrasse 438, brought the two aforementioned emigrants to the Hauptwache. He explained that they had been at the main railway station and could not get any further. He had wanted to take them to a hotel at their request, but as they were both wet and dirty, they were asked about their origin. When it turned out that they were emigrants who*

*had come across the border in black, Baumgartner took them to the main police station.*

*When questioned, the two emigrants explained that they had been in Vorarlberg for a long time. As they feared being deported, they had waded across the Rhine on March 28, 1943, at about 8 p.m., and thus entered Switzerland illegally.”*

**Emilie Haas has with her:**

*“Valuables: 1 wristwatch (defective).*

*Miscellaneous: 1 wallet, 1 handbag, writing paper, 1 pair of scissors, 1 pair of glasses with case, 2 notepads, 2 pencils, 1 fountain pen, 2 pairs of gloves, 1 comb, 1 rubber, 1 small bag with sewing thread, 2 pins, 2 bracelets, 1 pack of cards. 1 bag with laundry and clothes, 2 bags with laundry, clothes and toiletries.”*

This is all she has to start a new life in Switzerland.

Emilie Haas had already fled Krefeld in June 1942 after receiving orders to report for deportation on 14 June. The transport to which she was ordered departs on 15 June with 1003 people from the Rhineland to Majdanek, where some men are selected for work, and from there to the Sobibor extermination camp with more than 900 condemned to death.<sup>2</sup>

Emilie Haas went into hiding. A non-Jewish acquaintance, the dentist **Heinrich Kipphardt**, who as a Social Democrat had himself been in a concentration camp twice, places her with a farmer in Sauerland under a false name, as a harvest helper. In October, she changes hiding places, pretends to be a bomb victim and does housework for another family. But the risk becomes higher and higher.

Kipphardt makes contact with her cousin Elisabeth Frank, who has been in hiding for months as a helper with farmers in Schruns

in Vorarlberg. She, too, is using a false name. With a forged postal identity card, Emilie Haas finally travels to Bregenz in March 1943. She meets Frank and Kipphardt has also traveled from Krefeld to help the women. A family in Bregenz accommodates the two. Then a family in Höchst. A tugboat takes them to the border and helps them get through the waist-deep water of the old Rhine and through the barbed wire enclosure on the Swiss side. Then the two are on their own.

At the St. Gall police station they are interrogated several times. The officers notice contradictions in their statements. The women do not want to betray their helpers in Vorarlberg. Instead, they beg for their lives.

*“I hope that I will be granted asylum here until I can leave for another country. Returning to Germany would mean my death.”*

The two women are allowed to stay. From that moment on, the many documents that the Swiss State Archives have preserved on their story are about their never-ending struggle for permanent asylum and an existence in Switzerland.

Initially interned in the Oberhelfenschwil refugee camp, the 65-year-old was classified as “not fit for a labor camp” in the spring—and transferred to private quarters in Sulgen in Thurgau. She will spend the rest of her life there.

Emilie Haas had already got to know the world a little. She had lived with her husband in Shanghai for many years until he died in 1931. There were no children. As a penniless widow, she returned to Krefeld to live on a small pension and a little rental income. Until she fled. In Switzerland, too, she remains a poor woman, whose care is now being fought over by various authorities, refugee aid and the Israelite poor relief organization. Her relatives in the USA, England, Italy and Uruguay are also asked to pay by the Swiss authorities. A trip to Rome to visit her nephews and a visit by her sister are held against her. The Thurgau poor relief authorities suspected social fraud.

In 1950, after a long paper war, Emilie Haas was granted permanent asylum, even though the authorities in Thurgau were still toying with the idea of deporting her to Germany in 1952. By then she had received emergency aid from there. She does not receive any reparations.



Old Rhine by Höchst, 2022  
Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

## “Kutscha-Michel”

*Emigration story about my husband’s (Richard Dorzback) parents (Julius and Hermine Dörzbacher), who escaped from Göppingen to England.*

BY ANN DORZBACK

Around 11:00 PM on August 31, 1939, loud knocking on the front door startled **Hermine and Julius Dörzbacher**. The last time that Julius, my future father-in-law, heard a knock on the door late at night was on November 9, 1938, known as Kristallnacht, when synagogues and Jewish businesses were destroyed. That same night, he and other Jewish men were rounded up and imprisoned in Dachau Concentration Camp. He bitterly remembered the cruel treatment he received during his internment.

Hermine stayed back while Julius cautiously approached the door. As Julius got closer, he could identify a familiar voice urgently calling his name: *“Julius, wake up. Open the door. It’s me **Kutscha-Michel**.”*

“Kutscha-Michel” was not his real name but he earned it because he used to drive a horse-drawn carriage. “Kutsche” is German for carriage. Michel is just a name, like in “Jack of All Trades”; even though Jack is not the person’s real name. When my father-in-law told me this story in the USA, he told me the real name of Kutscha-Michel but, unfortunately, I can’t remember it now.

As Julius opened the door, “Kutscha-Michel,” his best friend from their school days, walked into the house. Nervous and out of breath, he said: *“Julius, I have something very important to tell you! You must leave the country tomorrow!”*

Julius and Hermine, surprised at this remark, asked why did they have to leave the country tomorrow? Kutscha-Michel explained that he just drove three Nazi officials from a regional meeting at their headquarters back to their hotel. The men were intoxicated and unaware that the window separating the taxi driver from the passenger compartment was left open. They discussed the information from the meeting and said: *“Tomorrow we invade Poland.”*

Kutscha-Michel realized that this meant the German borders would close and that Julius and Hermine, who had been trying to leave Germany, would be trapped. Their son Richard, my future husband, who after studying in England now lived in the USA was desperately trying to get his parents out of Germany.

Julius and Hermine agreed, thanked Kutscha-Michel, and told him that they would leave Germany in the morning. Kutscha-Michel insisted on

picking them up and driving them to the train station. This is one of the first “candles in the darkness” in this story, as it was against the law for Kutscha-Michel to give a ride to a Jewish customer.

Julius and Hermine already had an approved visa to England. Their suitcases were already packed and they had paid their “Unbedenklichkeitsbescheinigung” (Clearance Certificate) and their “Reichsfluchtsteuer” (Reich Flight Tax, created to essentially rob emigrating Jews of their financial assets). The Dörzbachers were simply waiting on permission from the local police to leave. Other than their suitcases, they left everything behind.

The next morning, Kutscha-Michel drove them to the train station and they were shocked to see that all the passenger cars were packed. Presumably, the news of the German invasion of Poland had spread and now every Jew in Germany was desperate to leave.

Julius shoved Hermine and their suitcases onto the passenger car as the door closed behind her. The train was so crowded that Julius, with the help of other passengers pulling on him, crawled through the compartment window into the train,

The train took Julius and Hermine to Holland. Upon arrival in The Hague, they needed to travel from the train station to the pier to board a ferry to England. They hailed a taxi but when they pulled Reichsmarks out of their pocket to pay the fare, the taxi driver refused: *“I do not take German money!”*

Hermine began to cry. The stress was unbelievable and now, this close to freedom, they might miss the ferry. And now a second “candle in the dark.” A Dutchman passing by overheard the conversation and paid the cab driver in Guilders! Julius and Hermine thanked the passerby, got into the taxi, and arrived at the dock in time for the ferry.

The next morning, Julius and Hermine arrived in Dover, England and then took the train to Manchester. **Alan and Winnie Dearden**, who befriended their son Richard while he studied at the university, met them at the train station and welcomed them with open arms.

Richard had studied in Manchester because, as a Jew, he was prohibited from attending university in Germany. However, after completing his engineering degree, he could no longer remain in England on his student visa and had to leave the country. This is why he emigrated to the United States in 1937.) So, how could he get his parents out of Germany to a safe haven?

The Deardens, librarians at a Public Library near Manchester, were yet another “candle in the darkness” that I, my husband, our families and friends experienced while escaping the horrible and intolerable treatment of Jews in Germany. They kindly offered their home to Julius and Hermine, who lived with them from 1939 through 1942.

Without Kutscha-Michel and an unknown Dutchman helping an elderly Jewish couple, Julius and Hermine would not have escaped from Germany. I wish I could remember Kutscha-Michel’s real name as I would like to express my gratitude to his family. To this day, I am thankful for the future they gave us.

### EMILIE HAAS AND THE SWISS AUTHORITIES (Cont'd)

The Aid Organization of the Protestant Churches of Switzerland finally took care of her and paid for her medical and hospital expenses. In the meantime, Emilie Haas is about to turn 80. On April 17, 1957 she dies during a visit to the doctor in St. Gall.

Her rescuer, Heinrich Kipphardt, also survived the end of the war in hiding as a deserter in the Siegerland region. Together with his son Heinar Kipphardt, the later politically engaged playwright and pioneer of documentary theatre.

<sup>1</sup> Police report 29.3.1943, St. Gall, Bundesarchiv Bern.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.statistik-des-holocaust.de/list\\_ger\\_rhl\\_420615a.html](https://www.statistik-des-holocaust.de/list_ger_rhl_420615a.html) (13.1.2022)



## ARE THERE STORIES YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN YOUR NEWSLETTER?

Please email us ([jennsp500@gmail.com](mailto:jennsp500@gmail.com)) and offer suggestions or even better yet, let us know that you want to write a story. We would appreciate your work!



**Your tax-deductible donations are welcome; please make donations payable to AFJMH, and mail to: AFJMH • P.O.Box 237 • Moorestown, NJ 08057-0237**