In Touch

The Newsletter of the American Friends of the
Jewish Museum Hohenems, Inc.

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Letter from the President

CLAUDE A. ROLLIN, ESQ.

Dear Friends and Supporters of AFJMH:

As President of the American Friends, I am called upon to pen the introductory letter for each of our newsletters. It is often difficult to know what to say but this time it is particularly difficult given the horrific events of October 7th in Israel and all that has followed.

The incredibly tragic events in Israel and Gaza have led to increased antisemitism, many other forms of religious hatred and numerous violent acts against innocent Jews, Muslims, and Arabs around the world. As you will see in this newsletter, **Hanno Loewy**, the Director of the Jewish Museum Hohenems, and his very talented team, are doing their part to address this crisis.

Please see the *"Joint Declaration on the War in Israel and Gaza"* on page 3, which was signed by Hanno Loewy on behalf of the Museum and **Prof. Dr. Zekirija Sejdini** of the Institute for Islamic Theology and Religious Education at Innsbruck University, along with **Arnon Hampe**, a joint project director. The Joint Declaration raises many important points about the underlying causes of the conflict. It provides a balanced perspective and calls on "all people who feel emotionally affected by the conflict and the current outbreak of violence to continue (and now more than ever!) to seek dialogue with each other and not to allow themselves to be divided and incited against each other."

Also inside this newsletter is a Report from the Museum on its exhibitions and programs, including the ongoing exhibition entitled, *"A Place of Our Own. Four Young Palestinian Women in Tel Aviv,"* which is scheduled to run through March 10, 2024. The Report includes information on another joint project with the Institute for Islamic Theology and Religious Education, which is a program entitled, *"Being Different Without Anxiety."* The Museum staff is working on a number of other interesting projects which you can read about in the Report from the Museum, but Hanno emphasizes that their main concern at the moment is the fight against antisemitism and racism in schools and in our society at large.

In addition, the Education Department of the Museum reports on its *"Culture Subscription,"* which is a new format for the Museum's educational work. The Museum staff has developed several programs to teach school children about current events, the Villa Heimann-Rosenthal (where the Museum is housed), the former Jewish Quarter in Hohenems (which I believe is now home to many Muslims) and the Jewish cemetery in Hohenems.

You might also want to check out the article by **Ralph Einetter** of the Museum staff about **Erik Weltsch** who was involved in the early days of the Museum and whose research significantly influenced the development of the Museum's collection. He passed away 20 years ago and is one of the few people buried in the Jewish cemetery since the turn of the century.

Please also read the article by **Ann Morris** in 2001. We shared this in a very early edition of the *InTouch* newsletter. It never made it online and it is so relevant now.

Finally, I would recommend to you the five stories in this Newsletter that detail the harrowing efforts of numerous individuals to escape from Austria in desperate attempts to avoid being captured by the Nazis and other hostile authorities. Unfortunately, most of them fail and end in capture, forced labor, imprisonment, or death.

As this year ends, I am sure that there are many demands on your time and resources. However, I encourage you to take the time to read some of the articles in this newsletter, which will remind you why the mission of the AFJMH is so critical. I would also ask you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the AFJMH (over and above our annual dues) so that we may continue to provide financial support to the Museum. It seems to me that it is more important than ever to support the activities of Museum Director Hanno Loewy and his team as they try to address the very real rise of antisemitism and other religious hatred around the world.

Let us pray for an end to the hostilities (sooner rather than later) and a resolution of the crisis that finally ensures that both the Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace.

Best wishes for 2024.

Sincerely,
Claude Rollin
President

A Letter from the Director to Friends

DR. HANNO LOEWY

Dear Friends of the Jewish Museum Hohenems,

The devastating news from October 7 haunts us still. The genocidal massacre of Hamas, the first pogrom of the century, serves as a radically disturbing reminder: there is no safe haven in this world.

While our ongoing exhibition "A Place of Our Own" presents the reality of living together in Israel, its complexity, contradictions and its deficiencies, another reality strikes back: antisemitism and hatred. Not only in Israel. On campuses and in the streets all over the world. Answered as well by Anti Muslim resentment and accompanied by right wing extremism attacking both, Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians.

We try to maneuver in the midst of this turmoil of tragic events and feel the need to foster mutual understanding and clear positioning against hate speech more than ever.

Our program **#OhneAngstVerschiedenSein** ***(Being different without anxiety)*** – a joint project with the Institute for Islamic Theology at Innsbruck University, Okay. Zusammenleben in Dornbirn, and ***erinnern.at*** in Vienna – is now organizing workshops on Israel and Palestine for school classes, teachers and Youth centers almost every day. Luckily we started this project in 2022, and project director **Arnon Hampe**, who prepared these educational programs, is able to react now with his small team to the urgent needs in schools and other areas of education. Reservations for the workshops now reach far into 2024.

Together with the Institute for Islamic theology we also published a declaration of joint efforts to counter the wave of antisemitism and racism we experience today.

While we are reacting now like a fire brigade we are also working on a long term endeavor together with the Canton of St. Gall and the Swiss Government. Our project ***crossing-the-border.info*** encouraged the authorities in St. Gall to apply for being designated the location of the Swiss National memorial for the Victims of the Nazis, discussed by the Swiss government. The decision to apply, first made this past April, includes two elements: a monument in Bern and a learning center in the Canton of St. Gall, located on the border on the Old Rhine next to Hohenems. The idea is to implement this learning center as a part of the historical ensemble on both sides of the river, engaging the Jewish Museum as a leading partner in its development and programing.

We are proud to be part of this first transnational memorial, focusing on the history of refugees and their helpers, but also of the Nazi crimes they fled and the Swiss society and its authorities that struggled with decisions about Asylum and push backs, from 1933 to 1945.

In September we were able to hire our new colleague **Barbara Thimm** for this project.

Stories of escape and refuge are also a continuous part of our events and programs in the museum. And on November 3 and 4 we also devoted two concerts to one of the well known personalities who tried to seek freedom in Switzerland, the poet and political activist **Jura Soyfer**, who tried to pass the border on skies in March 1938 and was arrested by the border police, only to be deported to Dachau and Buchenwald, where he died in 1939.

Soyfer's antifascist theatre plays and revues are still encouraging people up to this day to stand up against hatred and social injustice. And his poems inspired the Austrian jazz musician **Sabina Hank** to write songs she now performed together with **Reinhold Bilgeri** and **Tini Kainrath** in Hohenems accompanied by writer **Michael Köhlmeier**, who told the story of Jura Soyfer and his visions. The Löwen auditorium on the Schlossplatz was packed two times, and together with our sponsor, the Collini company in Hohenems, we hope that the fascinating program will also make its way to Vienna and other locations.

But our main concern at the moment is our fight against antisemitism and racism in schools and in our society at large. We hope for your support and to stay firm, while balancing on the narrow ridge that this polarization forces us to maneuver.

With Love from Hohenems,

Hanno Loewy and the team of the museum

Arnon Hampe, born in Rehovoth, grew up near Cologne in Germany and studied political science. He worked for several Institutions on Jewish history and Holocaust education, against antisemitisms and racism. For the education department of the Jewish Museum Berlin he was touring with mobile educational projects to schools all over Germany, Since 2022 he is project director of **#OhneAngstVerschiedenSein** at the Jewish Museum Hohenems.

Barbara Thimm, born in Freising near Munich, studied cultural education and worked for the education departments of the concentration camp memorial institutions in Dachau and Buchenwald. She developed training programs for museum educators in memorials before she worked for the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the Memorial for the victims of the Khmer Rouge in Phnom Penh from 2017-2023. She is member of the board of ICMEMOHRI, the international organization of memorial institutions at ICOM.

ONLY TOGETHER WE CAN STAND UP AGAINST THE THREAT OF DIVISION IN OUR SOCIETY

A joint declaration on the war in Israel and Gaza

We are still paralyzed by horror and shock at the pogrom-like, anti-Semitic and misogynistic terror against innocent Israeli civilians on October 7 and the spiral of violence it has already unleashed. The lack of any prospect of an early non-violent solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is causing feelings of powerlessness, despair and anger among many people on both sides of the fence and their relatives and friends. In the midst of this madness, we would like to set a common sign for non-violence, humanity and healing.

The conflict is already being fought out on the streets of the world, but above all in the echo chambers of social media. The fighting is accompanied by a media "war of images". This war of images is part of the calculation of the terrorist Hamas. People are to be emotionalized and incited to hate others. The conflict is to be perceived as a clash between Muslims and non-Muslims. The inevitable rise of anti-Muslim racism—which is always the case when terrorist attacks are allegedly carried out in the name of Islam—is deliberately accepted, indeed it is a strategic goal of Hamas and its ideological relatives.

They must not be allowed to succeed! We call on all people who feel emotionally affected by the conflict and the current outbreak of violence to continue (and now more than ever!) to seek dialogue with each other and not to allow themselves to be divided and incited against each other.

The future of the Israeli government, especially that of Prime Minister Netanyahu, is being openly discussed in Israel. Many see him and his right-wing government as (co-)responsible for this development and this escalation of violence. The next elections will decide their fate. Israeli society is at a crossroads. This includes the question of whether the response to terror respects international law or takes the path of collective punishment.

The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, on the other hand, have long been unable to decide their own fate and are dependent on solidarity and supplies from outside. The population of the Gaza Strip therefore deserves every solidarity and expressing it must not automatically be equated with anti-Semitism. However, showing solidarity with the Palestinians' justified desire for self-determination and a life in safety and dignity must not mean legitimizing Hamas' terror in any way. It must now be clear to everyone that the totalitarian Hamas cannot be part of this movement for equal rights for all people in the region. Israelis and Palestinians will continue to live side by side in the region and there can only be a future for both sides if the fantasy of eliminating the other no longer determines their actions.

Anti-Semitism is a real threat to Jewish life—and the new wave of anti-Jewish conspiracy fantasies that is already emerging is causing us great concern. But neither can anti-Semitism be countered with anti-Muslim racism, nor should racism in our society be misused as a justification to pander to the rampant terror propaganda.

We know that dialog in our diverse society faces new and difficult challenges. But we can only stand together against the threat of division in our society. Here and there.

Prof. Dr. Zekirija Sejdini
Institute for Islamic Theology and Religious Education, Innsbruck University

Dr. Hanno Loewy
Jewish Museum Hohenems

Arnon Hampe, Dipl.-Pol.
#OhneAngstVerschiedenSein

GEGEN DIE DROHENDE SPALTUNG UNSERER GESELLSCHAFT KÖNNEN WIR NUR GEMEINSAM EINSTEHEN

Eine gemeinsame Erklärung zum Krieg in Israel und Gaza

Noch immer lähmt uns Entsetzen und der Schock angesichts des pogromartigen, antisemitischen und frauenverachtenden Terrors gegen unschuldige israelische Zivilist*innen am 7. Oktober und die dadurch bereits entfesselte Spirale der Gewalt. Die fehlende Aussicht auf eine baldige gewaltlose Lösung des Konflikts zwischen Israelis und Palästinensern verursacht bei vielen Menschen auf beiden Seiten des Zauns und ihren Angehörigen und Freunden Gefühle von Ohnmacht, Verzweiflung und Wut. Inmitten dieses Irrsinns möchten wir ein gemeinsames Zeichen für Gewaltlosigkeit, Humanität und Heilung setzen.

Der Konflikt wird bereits auch auf den Straßen der Welt, vor allem aber in den Echokammern der sozialen Medien ausgetragen. Die Kampfhandlungen werden begleitet von einem medialen “Krieg der Bilder“. Dieser Krieg der Bilder ist Teil des Kalküls der terroristischen Hamas. Menschen sollen emotionalisiert und zum Hass auf Andere angestachelt werden. Der Konflikt soll als Auseinandersetzung zwischen Muslim*innen und Nicht-Muslim*innen wahrgenommen werden. Das unweigerliche Ansteigen von antimuslimischem Rassismus – so ist es immer, wenn vorgeblich im Namen des Islam Terroranschläge verübt werden – wird bewusst in Kauf genommen, ja es ist geradezu ein strategisches Ziel der Hamas und ihrer ideologischen Verwandten.

Damit dürfen sie keinen Erfolg haben! Wir fordern alle Menschen, die sich emotional vom Konflikt und dem aktuellen Ausbruch der Gewalt betroffen fühlen auf, weiterhin (und jetzt erst recht!) das Gespräch miteinander zu suchen und sich nicht spalten und gegeneinander aufhetzen zu lassen.

Die Zukunft der israelischen Regierung, allen voran die von Premier Netanyahu, wird in Israel offen diskutiert. Viele sehen ihn und seine rechte Regierung in der (Mit-) Verantwortung für diese Entwicklung und diese Eskalation der Gewalt. Die nächsten Wahlen werden über ihr Schicksal entscheiden. Die israelische Gesellschaft befindet sich an einem Scheideweg. Dazu gehört auch die Frage, ob die Antwort auf den Terror internationales Recht respektiert oder den Weg kollektiver Bestrafung geht.

Die Palästinenser*innen im Gazastreifen dagegen haben schon seit Langem keine Möglichkeit, selbst über ihr Schicksal zu entscheiden und sind auf Solidarität und Versorgung von außen angewiesen. Die Bevölkerung des Gazastreifens hat deshalb jede Solidarität verdient und diese äußern zu können, darf nicht automatisch mit Antisemitismus gleichgesetzt werden. Solidarisch zu sein mit dem berechtigten Wunsch der Palästinenser*innen nach Selbstbestimmung und einem Leben in Sicherheit und Würdee darf aber nicht bedeuten, den Terror der Hamas in irgendeiner Weise zu legitimieren. Es muss jetzt für alle klar sein, dass die totalitäre Hamas nicht Teil dieser Bewegung für gleiche Rechte aller Menschen in der Region sein kann. Israelis und Palästinenser*innen werden auch weiterhin Seite an Seite in der Region leben und es kann nur dann eine Zukunft für beide Seiten geben, wenn nicht länger die Fantasie der Eliminierung des anderen das Handeln bestimmt.

Antisemitismus ist eine reale Bedrohung jüdischen Lebens – und die sich bereits abzeichnende neue Welle judenfeindlicher Verschwörungsfantasien bereitet uns große Sorgen. Aber weder kann Antisemitismus mit antimuslimischem Rassismus begegnet werden, noch darf der Rassismus in unserer Gesellschaft als Rechtfertigung missbraucht werden, der grassierenden Terrorpropaganda aufzusitzen.

Wir wissen, dass auf den Dialog in unserer diversen Gesellschaft neue, schwierige Herausforderungen zukommen. Aber gegen die drohende Spaltung unserer Gesellschaft können wir nur gemeinsam einstehen. Hier wie dort.

Prof. Dr. Zekirija Sejdini
Institut für Islamische Theologie und Religionspädagogik, Universität Innsbruck

Dr. Hanno Loewy
Jüdisches Museum Hohenems

Arnon Hampe, Dipl.-Pol.
#OhneAngstVerschiedenSein

THE "CULTURE SUBSCRIPTION"

A NEW FORMAT IN OUR EDUCATIONAL WORK

"*Can we come back to the museum?*" This question was asked by students of a 2nd grade commercial school from Lustenau this spring. We had already met three times, researched Jewish biographies, explored the Jewish quarter and had been to the theatre together. At a subsequent meeting at their school, we took time for a variety of questions and experienced a fruitful exchange. So during the fourth visit to the museum, initiated by the students, the class was already on familiar territory. This time they had brought their own objects. Objects that played a central role in their own biography or in the broader history of their families. With this in hand, or in digital form on their mobile devices, they set out in the permanent exhibition on a search: where is there a connection between my object, my history and the objects behind the glass? Touching nodes were created and became the conclusion of our first pilot project for the "culture subscription."

Over the past few months, the Education Department has developed the "Culture Subscription" from a total of three pilot classes and is now presenting it as a standard format that can be booked freely. There are two subscriptions for two age categories:

Spurensuche subscription (8-12 years)

1. Get to know each other at your school
2. Exploring Villa Heimann-Rosenthal
3. Backpacking through the Jewish Quarter
4. Visit to the Jewish cemetery

History subscription (13-19 years)

5. Get to know each other at your school
6. Workshop at the Jewish Museum, Focus: Diversity and Migration
7. Visit to the Jewish Quarter and the Jewish Cemetery
8. Walking tour to the Swiss border on the topic of flight

In consultation with the teachers, these packages can be individually tailored to the topic wishes and interests of the class.

Every subscription consists of four meetings of a class with an educator within the span of one semester. The first meeting takes place in the school, the other workshops in and around the museum. The basic idea behind this is that through several workshops spread over a longer period of time make it possible to go into a deeper thematic engagement with the contents of the museum, and this in an increasingly trusting relationship between educator and student. The content developed is anchored in the long term, and the learning and knowledge effect is significantly intensified.

The programme was developed and funded in close cooperation with Double-Check, the platform that links culture and education in Vorarlberg. A subscription is thereby completely free of charge for Vorarlberg school classes. We are looking forward to welcoming many committed school classes!

SEARCHING FOR FELIX MENDELSSOHN

BY ANN MORRIS

This was published in one of the first issues of InTouch and is being shared again this year. Original pdf from 2001 is available upon request.

Being an Okie who lives in California is not the problem it used to be. People's faces light up when they learn my husband and I are from Oklahoma because they're immediately put at an advantage. You can see them relax into the knowledge that, even if we get rid of our accents, drink caffe latte instead of Folgers instant, never have a yard car, we'll always be Okies, no matter what.

My Jewish ancestors, on my mother's side, would have told us we have it easy. If they moved to a different area, changed their names, converted to the dominant religion, they were still "the other" in narrowed minds that shut them out.

Perhaps to ameliorate this disadvantage, my great-grandfather, **William Mendelssohn**, always claimed to be a cousin of **Felix Mendelssohn**, the famous composer. Because of this illustrious relative, my early years were determinedly musical. My older brother and I sat for hours at the piano, practicing scales, arpeggios, classical music. The metronome was a constant part of our lives. From high on the mantel, a bust of the eminent composer peered down on our efforts. The connection made me feel special until a friend in the eighth grade informed me in hush tones that Mendelssohn was Jewish. In WASP Oklahoma of the fifties, Jews were excluded from the "best" circles. With my father's Scottish surname, I'd gone undetected, even to myself.

"Are we Jewish?" I asked my mother, who was raised Presbyterian.

"No," she said firmly. "Felix Mendelssohn converted to Christianity and so did his whole family." And there the subject was dropped.

But Felix's conversion hadn't meant much to the Nazis who demolished his statue along with the synagogues on that infamous German Kristallnacht, the "Night of Broken Glass."

I don't advertise that I am one-eighth Jewish. I've read enough history, talked to enough people, seen enough on television to believe that Germany of the 1930's and 40's was not the aberration many think it was. Though we try desperately to close our eyes to it, hatred of "the other" is around us and in us. Few people on the planet have not experienced it, though most try for a lifetime to keep it locked out.

The Mendelssohn connection was one I admitted only under favorable circumstances. But my Mendelssohn's surname relatives were never given the choice, so they played to the hilt the most useful part of our heritage. As keeper of the family mementos, I had numerous yellow newspaper clippings from Southern California about family members being "cousins of the composer." It became the family parenthesis, as in "Gayle Mendelssohn, second cousin to the noted composer, was crowned queen of the Tulare County Fair."

Death had already claimed this ex-queen and most of my parents' generation. If I intended ever to uncover the truth about my family history, time was clearly running out.

I wrote a letter to a Los Angeles relative. From **Mistie Mendelssohn** I learned that **Clinton Brown**, a second cousin of mine, had recently visited Germany and Austria to research genealogy. His name and Utah address were written as the "submitter" on a "Pedigree Chart" that Mistie enclosed with her letter. Here, in black and white, printed out very professionally, was the family tree I had been seeking. It showed that my great grandfather William Mendelssohn was the son of Felix's uncle, Alexander Mendelssohn. There it was, the proof of my connection to the famous composer.

The photo I carry in my mind of my family, one of dark tones and ill-fated alliances, seemed suddenly to brighten and come into focus. My thoughts pranced with the image. Though I had spent much of my life distancing myself from my relatives, now I stood shoulder to shoulder with **Billy Mendelssohn**'s descendants and cheered.

I could see my 102-year-old great-grandfather as a Los Angeles area newspaper clippings portrayed him. A 1937 headline story announced: "This year San Pedro's annual Memorial Day parade leader will ride alone. There'll be no gray-haired, bearded, smiling, waving little veteran of the Civil War proudly and rightfully occupying the seat of honor in the automobile at the head of the procession while thousands of persons, eyes dimmed, return the warm, friendly greeting of the oldest and most widely known and loved veteran in the harbor district. For Uncle Billy Mendelssohn is dead." And there was the familiar statement: *"Uncle Billy was a first cousin of the late Felix Mendelssohn, the noted composer."*

Something should have warned me that family stories are seldom concluded so neatly, but I chose to ignore my more down-to-earth instincts. Still riding high on the "Pedigree Chart", I wrote Clinton Brown: "My husband and I are planning a Danube cruise for this coming summer. Are there places we could visit in Germany or Austria that are connected with my ancestors?"

Clint had grown up in L.A., he wrote back, with our mutual great-grandfather. He had loved the old man, that was certain. He had been one of the flock of Mendelssohn progeny who gathered regularly at the patriarch's home, sitting at the dining room table, listening to the stories, gazing up at the family mementos displayed on the wall.

Along with more family anecdotes than I could digest at one sitting, Clint sent this information: the only member of Felix's family with a son named William (Wilhelm in German) in the 1830-35 period was **Alexander Mendelssohn**, the composer's uncle. Alexander was a Berlin banker and a man of considerable wealth. "It has always seemed to me," Clint wrote, "that his eldest son would have been brought up in rather well-privileged circumstances, unlike the childhood described by our great grandfather, which seemed to be rural. The fact that our Wilhelm had a deep love for plants and for the land and became a Nebraska farmer who raised his family to appreciate the sorts of things he valued are more in keeping with a humble origin than that of a banker's son.

"For this and other reasons," the letter went on, "including the pursuit of truth, I took my wife, Pauline, to Hohenems, Austria, which great grandpa had said was his birthplace. At the town offices, an English-speaking clerk was appointed to conduct us to the site of the house where Wilhelm was born. She also showed us the Jewish Cemetery and the Jewish Museum Hohenems where all the facilities were placed at our disposal."

According to Clint, the data he was provided indicated that the Wilhelm Mendelsohn of Hohenems, born in 1834, was the firstborn son of Berthold Mendelsohn (one "s") and his first wife. What became of the young man was never recorded in the town's ledgers, though if this was our great grandfather, at the age of sixteen, he had simply left. "It is still likely," Clint wrote, "that a connection exists between the Austrian branch of the family and Felix's branch which migrated through Poland to Dessau and finally to Berlin since they all came, no doubt, from the original Palestinian Jews imported by the Romans to slave in the minds of Sardinia, from whence they migrated under the most difficult circumstances to all parts of Europe."

This might have been the end of the story for now, but it turned out to be only the first chapter. My husband and I had just paid for a Danube cruise that was to terminate in Germany near the Austrian border. With a nearly completed itinerary in front of me, I picked up the phone and called Clint. This retired Utah dentist used his most convincing chair-side manner to encourage my genealogical endeavor. Further research might turn up more evidence of our kinship to the composer.

Then I asked Clint an innocent question. "Did you locate any Mendelsohn tombstones in the Jewish graveyard?" What he told me in this pre-tour conversation was something that haunted me the entire trip.

"No", he said, "they wouldn't go with us into the cemetery. They gave us a key, but Pauline and I had to go there by ourselves. It was a steep climb up the side of a hill, and surrounded by a big stonework wall. When we got inside, we saw that the slopes were overgrown with vegetation and many of the graves had been desecrated. More disturbing, there were dead rats, hundreds of them, that had been thrown over the fence."

My husband and I left for our Austrian German Adventure on July 19th, 1998. On the way to the San Francisco airport, I remembered our last trip to Italy, next door to Austria. Our Roman cab driver, swerving like a maniac onto sidewalks, through alleyways, screaming out the window, called every person who got in his way a Jew. Later, on a tour bus to Pompeii and Naples, when Italian vendors became angry, the Cry of *"Jew, Jew, Jew"* filled the air. Now here I was, in 1998, starting off on a journey to the one-time Nazi empire, feeling like the narrator Marlow in Heart of Darkness, uneasy already, this first day out, about the unknown. Before making the ultimate plunge into Eastern Europe, we did what we always do: stopped off in New York and London to indulge in our passion for theater, but this time we stayed longer than usual. Then, on the airplane to Prague, I remembered some unpleasant realities that threw a dark shadow over the rest of the trip. What is now the Czech Republic had been under Nazi rule during the time of the Holocaust. The Czechs had not interfered as the Jews were shipped off to death camps. As for the other countries on the final stretch of our itinerary - Slovakia, Hungary, Germany, Austria, Switzerland - not one had risen up to protest the carnage. Now, approaching Prague's Ruzyne airport, watching the buildings and trees rush up to meet me, I wondered if any of Billy's European relatives had managed, somehow, to escape.

We went through Czech customs, took a taxi to the Diplomat Hotel and linked up with our American and English tour group. This was my maiden voyage as an ethnic minority. I was perceiving my surroundings for the first time through a newly born sensibility. Instead of sun washed buildings, ancient arches, and colorful gardens, I now saw the more sinister side of things: baroque gargoyles, skeletons hanging in churches, the nightmarish landscape of Franz Kafka met us everywhere we went. We had entered deep into former enemy territory, on a mission whose final rendezvous would take place at a Jewish cemetery, in an Austrian town with a zero population of Jews. I had read that Prague was the only occupied city whose synagogues had been spared by the Nazis. It was designated by the Fuhrer as the future home of "an exotic museum of an extinct race."

As I had anticipated, we didn't hear a word about Hitler on our tour of Prague. The Russian Communists were the targets of our umbrella-brandishing guides' vehement hits. Riding in the tour bus to Germany, eating lunch at a beer seller in Passau, the silence about the Nazi era became deafening. Current political matters were the concern of our German guide. Was no one in our group interested in the Nazi era? Arnie, a retired postal employee from L.A., had an encyclopedic knowledge of history, but more recent events were his topics of discussion, not the dark days of Adolf Hitler. I, like my parents before me, was leaving all uncomfortable subjects unsaid.

When we boarded The Rousse that first day, wearing Bermudas and t-shirts, we discovered the situation was not what we expected. Here, in mid-afternoon, at white-linen-covered tables, sat people in near formal dress. As it turns out, in my search for Felix Mendelssohn, I booked a Bulgarian ship that catered primarily to Germans. At various ports, small groups of Germans got off and on. The constant guttural German language was mixed with the softer tones of the Bulgarians. With a peppering of people from other nations, territorial hostilities, begun the moment we boarded, simmered down to an unspoken agreement of detente.

That first night, when we came up for dinner, we found that the American table, the largest on board, was segregated from the rest of the passengers, closed off in a room across the hall. Adaptable travelers that we will all were, we use this isolation to our advantage. We could talk louder, tell more jokes, pull more pranks than our stuffier fellow-cruisers; we could be typical American tourists, crudeness and all.

But for me beneath this hilarity was a never-mentioned presence. it was the specter of anti-Semitism that would not go away. As a child in Oklahoma, I had seen films in the movie houses of that black mustached Austrian-German whose face had hovered over all of our lives. His zombie-like goose stepping Nazis became the horror film of my formative years. A half century later, sitting on the deck of The Rousse, watching the Bulgarian crew on the level below, I noted that a typical greeting between males was a Nazi-like stiff armed salute. "It's a cultural thing," my husband told me, trying to soothe my nerves. But I remembered the black and white films of Jewish bodies, and felt my skin grow cold.

Not having been raised Jewish, uninitiated into their particular pain, I was not inured to the emotion. As a WASP, I had spent my life using the executive elevator. Jobs, social contacts, lifestyle, whatever floor I wanted was an easily accessed spot. Ethnic minorities, on the other hand, had to use more difficult means of entry. The challenges developed their fearlessness, a trait I seldom had need to possess. Well, my time had come. My free ride all these years had run out. I was a Jew now in former Nazi territory and could no longer avoid my history. While our guides on this pleasure cruise focused on the beauties of the region, I would face up to its ugliness. I would look at my notes squarely. I would not be afraid.

Hitler had been born in Braunau, Austria, near the German border, although our tour guides of course never mentioned this fact. During that first night, we passed the Fuhrer's favorite city of Linz, which lies on both sides of the Danube, but this area was noted in the ship's Programme only for its locks. The Mauthausen concentration camp was my next place of interest and it's location was mentioned not at all. At the end of the tour we would be within 30 minutes of Dachau, outside Munich (Hitler's early stomping ground), but it would be ignored as if it had vanished in a curtain of smoke.

Our first scheduled Port was Vienna, where Hitler's anti-Jewish virus was first spread. But there was no mention of the budding Fuhrer by our local Viennese tour guide, though anti-Semitism was not absent from her talk. Proudly, it seemed, she announced that there were

virtually no more Jews in Vienna, that the city had rid itself of nearly every last one. Did she fail to notice the Star of David hanging around the neck of a passenger on her bus? Betty, one of our American tablemates, had worn the Hebrew pendant since our first night on board. This white-haired Arizona grandma had fought the Hitler virus serving as an Army nurse during World War II.

Perhaps our Viennese guide had noticed the Star of David, someone suggested. Perhaps that's why she had refused to turn the air conditioning on. Our tour bus became a traveling sweat box, trapping us in the stifling August sun. "Now, now" our Austrian guide lectured in her German accent to the English-speaking tourists, "Doctors tell us it's bad for your health to go from the hot sun in the air conditioning." To our credit, the Americans and English wouldn't take this, not for a moment. "This is like an oven!" someone shouted. We all protested in loud voices until our tour guide relented and turned the cooler partially on.

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Before leaving the states, I had decided not to arrive at Hohenems unannounced. I determined that if we were coming this far, we'd better make sure that the Jewish Museum wouldn't be closed. In June, I had written to the museum, enclosing the names Clint had sent me. "Any additional names you could provide for my family tree would be much appreciated. I'm especially interested in discovering if Felix Mendelssohn, the famous composer, is a relative." My plan was to get in and out of Hohenems before the rat-throwing locals got wind of our visit.

The response I received the day before we left contained some surprising information. The museum would be open on August 12th, but on August 13 to 16, "exactly one day after your planned visit, we have organized a meeting of descendants of Hohenems Jewish families. We expect over 170 people. If you should be interested to participate, you should inform us immediately as room reservations will be difficult."

Hohenems was the last stop on our four week journey. The return flight from Zurich to the states, a non-refundable charter, was set in stone. Staying over for the conference would have cost us additional plane fares, a luxury that was not within our budget. Besides not a single person from the Mendelsohm line was on the participants' list.

We arrived in Hohenems, by local train, on a sunny August 12th morning. The Alps, the apple orchards, the red roofed churches were picture-postcard sharp. It was hard to believe that this sleepy mountain town had been the site of hundreds of years of anti-Semitic sentiment, that this railway station processed the trains that during World War II transported local Jews to their deaths.

I had received brochures on the town from the Austrian tourist board and the Jewish Museum Hohenems. For hours I had poured over the German language information and maps. My husband and I were probably the only Americans within a hundred mile radius. Yet a determination newly achieved seemed to be guiding my footsteps as I, great granddaughter of Billy Mendelsohn, stepped off the train.

To my surprise, as we walked up the hill toward the museum, nowhere did I get the impression that this was a town crawling with potential rat-throwers. No unemployed skinhead youths stood on street corners, no graffiti was scrawled across centuries old walls. The few people we saw were ordinary looking bicyclists, pedestrians, street crews working on the roads. Hohenems seemed a town like many back home in California.

My husband was amazed that I knew exactly where I was going. He didn't know that in my mind I had lived this moment over and over for the past few months. Although our destination was nearly a mile away, I knew how to get there. Before long we turned a corner, onto a cobblestone street, and we had arrived.

The Jewish museum is housed in the Villa Heimann-Rosenthal, a stately grey building in what was once the Jewish Quarter. The original residents of the area are gone now, including the mansion's former owner Klara Heimann-Rosenthal, who in the spring of 1940 was deported to Vienna and in 1942 suffered the fate of all the remaining Hohenems Jews: murder in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

It wasn't quite ten o'clock when we got to the museum, but the front door was open. Sun streamed across the warm wooden floor as we entered the high ceilinged foyer. I could see the museum staff busy in adjoining rooms, preparing for the upcoming conference. Dr. Johannes Inama strode in on long Austrian legs and held out his hand.

He was younger than I imagined from his letter and not Jewish; none of the staff was Jewish. Those who established the museum and maintain it are the children of the generation that made scapegoats of the Jews in the Nazi period. In broken English Dr. Inama told us he had received my second letter. "We are sorry you can't stay longer," he said, and took us into the library. "We are expecting to have very good meetings with the descendants."

He pulled up chairs around a small table and showed us a stack of books and papers. He had gathered genealogical material on the Mendelsohns, and though it was all in German, the names were recognizable. I eagerly flipped through the pages. There was a thick blue volume, Die Geschichte der Jude in Hohenems, a history of the Jews in Hohenems, written by a Rabbi, published in 1905. On pages 684 to 789 were the genealogies of sixty Hohenems' families, and on pages 747 to 749 were the Mendelsohns, beginning with Salamon who begat Josle who begat Wolf who begat Emanuel who begat Josef who begat Berthold who begat Wilhelm, who became my great grandfather Billy. These lists were far more complete than the pages Clint had sent - additional names, dates of births, marriages and deaths. My search for a Felix Mendelssohn branch might come to fruition yet.

Dr. Inama excused himself from the room but returned a few minutes later with another tall young man, a local resident studying in Vienna, working at the museum for the summer. Werner Hafele would take us to the Jewish Cemetery, Dr. Inama said.

Werner Hafele drove us through Billy's hometown in his small red Opel. We went through streets probably changed very little since Billy ran down them as a boy in the 1840s. He had lived here, gone to school here, seen his mother and three babies siblings die here before he was eleven years old.

We passed the Jewish school Billy attended as a child, and the eighteenth century synagogue (in the fifties converted to a fire house) with its clock-tower which was added after he left. At the age of sixteen, he had run away from home, never to return, even for his father's death.

Did relatives help him on his way to the states? Did he stow away or pay his way on the steamer? After Billy landed in America, he worked at any job he could to support himself, became a skilled meat cutter, then volunteered for service as a Union soldier. He took a rifle ball in the leg 9 June 1862 at Port Republic, Virginia. As he lay wounded among the dead and dying for twenty-four hours, it became apparent that if any of the survivors were to be cared for, they were going to have to care for themselves. He heated his pocket knife over a small flame started by a match from a government-issue match case and dug the rifle ball out of his leg, bandaging it with strips of a dead comrade's shirt which he boiled in his mess kit and dried over his fire. He then cut a crutch from a fallen branch and proceeded to organize those who could be helped into a company of hobbling wounded and as many as could do so walked for days toward what they hoped would be the Union lines. He was one of the handful who made it and he was honorably discharged on 20 Dec 1862.

The Jewish cemetery was on the side of the hill on the outskirts of town, surrounded by a stone wall, just as Clint had described it. But preparation for the descendant's meetings must have inspired a cleanup. The grass was clipped, the vines torn down, and on the green peaceful slopes, not one single rat.

Werner Hafele was very solicitous in showing us each Mendelsohm's gravestone. Because of an underground sulfur spring, some markers had sunk into the soil or disappeared for more insidious reasons. Many had crumbled or broken. The writings, in Hebrew and, later, German, were worn away for the most part and nearly impossible to read. But one, I have since translated. it was the inscription on Billy's mother's headstone, which he had surely seen as a child:

Clara Mendelsohn
born: Sager 1806
died: 20 Oct 1843

God give her eternal peace.

Before she died, had she talked to him, her first born, about America? Perhaps she told him that it was a country where any boy, even a Mendelsohn, might get an even start. Is that why, at age sixteen, he left home to escape the military draft in his native Austria, only to later volunteer to fight in the Union Army in the United States?

The damp earth, the tall pines, the surrounding mountains formed a picture of a place that must have been difficult to leave. What emotions quickened his step as he turned his back on this town in 1850? If he had known how things would end for those who stayed and experienced the full force of anti-Semitism, he might have run even faster. My mind filled with thoughts as I gazed at the graves of my ancestors on that warm Austrian day.

Slowly, in small increments, the truth had dawned on me. Clara was the name Billy gave his first daughter. Bartholdo was his first son. These were, no doubt in my mind, my ancestors' tombstones. We were blood relatives. Clara and Bertholdl were my great great grandparents. Their son was my great grandpa. My roots grew deeply in that Jewish graveyard on a hillside in Austria. And had Billy not emigrated to America, I would not have been standing there in the sun on that bright August day.

Back at the museum, we were left to explore on our own. The original Neo Renaissance furnishings have been retained in the drawing room, the same furniture Klara Heimann-Rosenthal knew as a girl. Climbing the elegant staircase, browsing through the exhibits on the top two floors, I was suddenly struck by the building's emptiness. The only Yiddish heard here was in the language laboratory; the only music played here was on CD's. What was most desperately missing from the museum, from these streets, from this town was the warmth, the vitality, the stimulating spirit of the flesh and blood Rosenthals and Kafkas and Levis. They would come tomorrow, yes, and for four days this town would be alive. But on Tuesday it would curl up on itself like a dead sea scroll until the next Jewish visitors arrived.

In the Jewish Museum Hohenems is a document dated 1829 that was issued to Billy's father, "Bertoldo" Mendelsohn, a merchant, age thirty-four. It is labeled "passport" and is displayed as "evidence of the extensive commercial and personal contacts of Hohenems Jews." It was indeed a typical Jewish passport of the era - an expulsion order, issued by a police commissioner and what is now Italy. My ancestor was taken by armed guard back to Hohenems, one of the few places where Jews, at that time, were allowed to live.

Dr Inama took us for a private tour of the once Jewish Quarter, opening doors for us, treating us as honored guests. On the sidewalks where the last Hohenems Jews were stripped of their possessions (information courtesy of the museum), today a Mendelsohn descendant was receiving a red carpet reception. Our guide looked up from the notes he was carrying, then headed across the street and around the corner. There, standing solid in brick and mortar, having survived the expulsions, the pogroms, the Holocaust, were the houses where Billy, his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents in the 1700s and 1800s had made their homes. Jakob-Hannibal-Strasse 4 and 6 and Schweizer-Strasse 8 are the twentieth century addresses, though in their day, the latter street was called "Judengasse" (Jewish Street). As I stood on the vacant street gazing up at the houses, there seemed to be an almost audible echo of voices, a shadow across a window pane. Or was it a memory, somehow inborn, coming out of the past?

The author, Wilhelm Frey, who grew up the Jewish community of Hohenems and probably knew my great-grandfather when they were young, says in a story about Hohenems written in 1857:

The small town of H. in southern Germany has only two real streets. One is called "Christengass" and the other "Judengass"

After World War II, those streets became Market Street and Swiss Street, but, ironically, today some of the town's streets are being named in honor of former Hohenems Jews.

In the large blue volume about Hohenems Jews written by the Rabbi there were numerous brief references to my forebears, in German. The book also contained list after list of Billy's immediate relatives - aunts, uncles, cousins, most of whom were born and died in Hohenems. Nowhere on those pages, Dr. Inama confirmed gently, would I find the name of Felix Mendelssohn.

One shirt-tail relative of Billy's, however, a contemporary of The Eminent Composer, was accorded a complete chapter, and a whole room in the Jewish Museum was dedicated to his music. Billy's second cousin, Salomon Sulzer, who from age sixteen had been Cantor of the Hohenems Synagogue, was called in 1826 to the newly built Viennese Synagogue where he would be Chief Cantor for almost sixty years. Shortly after Sulzer's arrival in Vienna, he met Franz Schubert and encouraged him to set to music the ninety-second psalm in Hebrew. To Sulzer this meeting opened the musical salons of the Biedermeier-Vienna, which celebrated him as an inspired interpreter of secular songs. His voice was also heard when the victims of the barricade-fighting were buried in 1848. In the presence of clerics of all religions, Sulzer sang the Jewish funeral prayer, the Kaddish, for the fallen of the March revolution.

In Hohenems, the young Billy must have been proud of this relative who was receiving recognition in the wider world. There is an inscription on Sulzer's house in Hohenems that bears testimony: "It was here in 1804 that was born Salomon Sulzer whose fame as Cantor of the Jewish community of Vienna and a composer of synagogue music has remained undimmed throughout the Jewish world." His works have never gone out of print since his death in 1890. He remains the pre-eminent composer of Jewish liturgical music to this day.

Ironically, instead of being related to Felix Mendelssohn, the "Christian" composer, I was related to Salomon Sulzer, the Jewish composer. How did Billy's imaginative rendition of our family tree begin? Was it how he got a job on the steamer at the age of sixteen? Was it how he kept himself going on the battleground in Virginia during the War between the States? After awhile, as his childhood history grew dim, as the Nebraska snows threatened to blot out its last trace, sitting in his sod house in the heart of America with his wife and eleven children around the buffalo-dung fire, telling stories to keep himself alive, he possibly began to believe it.

In the end, it wasn't Billy's lie that mattered in the bigger picture. it was the life that meant the most. According to newspaper accounts as well as family legend, hardships throughout his life never withered Billy's spirit. He retained his capacity to hope and love unreservedly, to give to his neighbors, to reach out, despite setbacks, for his goals. In 1908, at the age of seventy-four, he fulfilled a long-time dream; he sold his Nebraska farm and resettled in California. Billy made a success of his life because he was not deterred by his own difficult history. He worked hard, raised his children to be good American citizens, stayed with his wife until she breathed her last breath. And he was loved by the people around him.

In 1937 he became one of the last five survivors of the Civil War, north and south, before he died at nearly 103 as a result of an accident, not of old age. He was traveling by bus from his home in Lomita, California, to be the featured speaker at an afternoon meeting of a women's club. As he stepped off the bus, the driver moved ahead, dumping him onto the concrete curb and breaking his hip. Great Grandpa died of the pneumonia he contracted from being immobilized in the hospital rather than as a result of aging. He told Clint the day before he died that he was bitterly disappointed that he missed that speaking engagement because the ladies were always loving and considerate toward him and they fed him well.

As my husband and I boarded the train for Zurich the next day, descendants of Hohenems Jews began arriving: children and grandchildren and great grandchildren of forebears who had left before the Holocaust. In 1999 a book was produced commemorating the experiences of the 168 participants who had come from fifteen countries, from Europe, Israel, the USA, and even Australia. One woman, who fled Austria in 1938 as a small child and returned to live there after the war, reported that she was brought up in a culture of apprehension: to never be conspicuous; never be ostentatious; always to be better behaved, more generous than others, so as not to give adverse publicity to Jews. When at the end of the program on the last evening an American woman's beautiful voice spontaneously rang out in Hohenems castle singing a Jewish folk song, the Austrian woman's first reaction was shock. "I almost expected booing. Then as the general singing got louder, I realized that the young generation of Jews outside Austria are not afraid or ashamed and I felt that that song sung in Hohenems Castle - not in the ghetto, Juden-viertel - heard by many who have preferred not to hear it, showed the 'Levenswille' of the Jews and would have pleased those who were murdered."

Looking back on my own experiences of that summer, I feel compelled to admit that our German tour guide, on the bus between Prague and Passau, tried to open us up. "Are there any questions" he asked his charges, many who were Jewish, many with relatives from Third Reich countries who had not escaped; it is likely that some of our relatives' bodies had been thrown in the Danube. Our tour guide came down the aisle, looking with soulful brown eyes at each of us. "Anything you want to ask," he emphasized. I sat there silent, afraid that, once open, the door to the past might not be able to be shut.

Now, since returning to California, I've managed to pull the door open on my own. Fear of my roots has loosened its hold on me. There are stories within me, not all of them pretty, I now want to tell. Before she died my mother told me this story. Billy's youngest daughter, my grandmother, fell in love with a German immigrant. My great grandpa, having a bias against persons Teutonic, was reluctant to give his consent. For four days, each evening, Rudolph Geist came up the steps of Billy's Plainview, Nebraska farmhouse. Each time the young German suitor's request was denied. On the fifth day, when my grandfather Rudy walked up the steps, he saw Billy standing in the wide open door in starched shirt and cuff links. Inside the house, from his new Victrola came the life-affirming sounds of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March."

ERIK WELTSCH, WHO SUPPORTED THE JEWISH MUSEUM RIGHT FROM ITS FOUNDATION, PASSED AWAY 20 YEARS AGO

BY RAPHAEL EINETTER, MA

Erik Weltsch at the award ceremony for the Vorarlberg State Medal of Merit, 1987. Photo: Helmut Klapper. Vorarlberg State Library.

More than 500 people have been buried at the Jewish cemetery in Hohenems since it was first mentioned in the writ of privilege from 1617. While the vast majority of them died during the 19th century, only four burials have taken place post-millennium. One of them was on September 11, 2003, when **Erik Weltsch** was laid to rest. The funeral speech was written by the buried man himself and was delivered on his behalf by **Dr Michael Barnay**, a lawyer from Bregenz. In his speech, Erik Weltsch "addressed" the assembled mourners one last time and stated that it should be usual for those who leave to say goodbye to those who remain behind, and not the other way around. He also reflected on his life, a life that—especially due to the last two decades of important research work for the Jewish Museum Hohenems and the Vorarlberg State Library—should be commemorated. So, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of his death this September, Erik Weltsch's achievements were noted on a regional and national level as he was remembered in the Austrian Academy of Sciences' series "Biography of the Month" as well as in the 41st Hohenems Almanach.

Erik Emil Weltsch at the age of 9. (1923)

Erik Emil Weltsch, who was born on February 28, 1914 as the second son of **Melanie née Österreicher** (1875-1943) and **Hugo Richard Weltsch** (1871-1943), was raised at the Grabenhof in Vienna's first district. After graduating from high school in 1932, he continued his education with specialization courses at a business academy. He also began studying law at this time, but despite successfully passing his first state examination, he did not complete it, since he received the opportunity of a traineeship at a metallurgical factory in Olomouc (Czechoslovakia) in the spring of 1934. In winter, as in previous years, he returned to the snow-covered Alps, which his memoirs reveal. This can be also seen in some of his photo albums, which are held in the collection of the Jewish Museum Hohenems today. Among others, photos of skiing tours in Tyrol, Vorarlberg—for example in the area of its highest peak Piz Buin as well as expeditions between Omeshorn and Mohnenfluh near Lech— and Switzerland have been preserved.

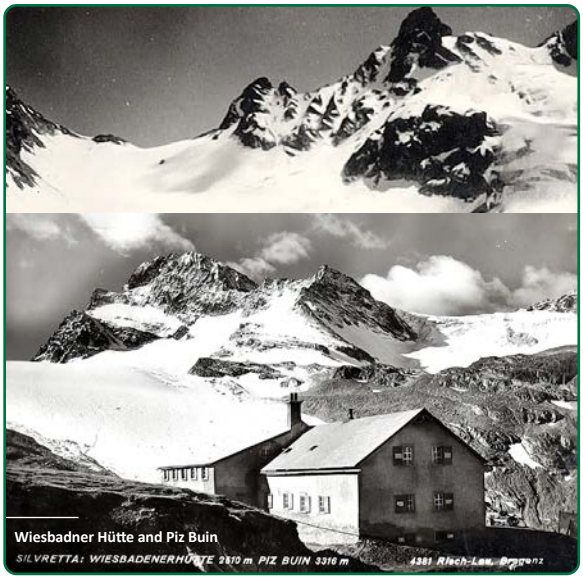
Apart from that, his knowledge from the business academy, which he was able to put into practice for a few months in Czechoslovakia, would soon be useful for his professional endeavors on another continent. Shortly after his 21st birthday, Erik Weltsch had to drastically increase his distance to snow-covered mountains, as he had received an invitation to Egypt, where he was able to start working for a company specializing in cotton exports in March 1935.

"Escape"

Erik Weltsch quickly settled into his new job, although he also reported working up to 13 hours a day. However, his efforts were soon to pay off, as he was granted procuration after just one year. He traveled to Europe repeatedly during this time, and in early 1938, initially also on business. The cotton congress, at which he was allowed to represent his employer, was followed by a private vacation in Arosa, Switzerland, where he met up with friends who had brought him his skis from Vienna. At this time, the first escape attempts were already occurring just 30 kilometers away—such as those of **Jura Soyfer** (1912-1939) and **Hugo Ebner** (1913-1997), who failed to reach Switzerland on skis on March 13. Their tragic story can be found on the website of the museums "Crossing the border" project: ***https://crossing-the-border.info/indexprev3_en.php?id=51***

German passport of Erik Weltsch with "J" stamp. (1939)

In contrast, the day of the so-called "Anschluss" of Austria to Nazi Germany "only" marked the premature end of Erik Weltsch's stay in Europe, as instead of continuing his journey to his home country, he had to arrange a plane ride back to Egypt. Something that was still possible to do without any problems with his valid papers, but nonetheless had to be done quite quickly. And so, for the first time in his life, he boarded a plane, which took him from Amsterdam to Alexandria with stopovers in Marseille, Naples, Piraeus and Rhodes. On March 23, the Egyptian entry stamp found its way into his Austrian passport, before he had to exchange it. Even living abroad, he received a passport from the German Reich a few months later, which in his case also contained the additional red "J" stamp.



Wiesbadner Hütte and Piz Buin

Hochlicht together with Mohnenfluh and Omeshorn, 1932

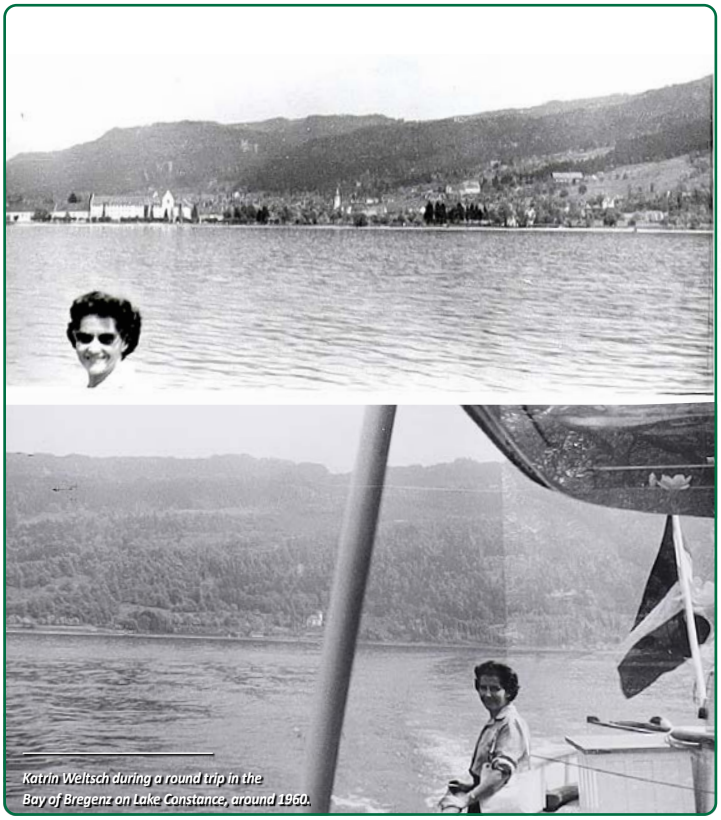
ERIK WELTSCH, FOUNDING PATRON OF JEWISH MUSEUM, REMEMBERED 20 YEARS ON. *(Cont'd)*

The wedding of Lilly Barber & Erik Weltsch, Alexandria, June 1940.

While we can't really talk about an escape from Europe in Erik Weltsch's case, it was a more difficult undertaking for his parents and his brother to leave Vienna. Thanks to their Egyptian tourist visas, which were still valid, it was still relatively easy for his family members to leave the country safely, even if—of course—they had to leave more or less everything behind in order to survive. In 1940, Melanie, Hugo and Heinz Weltsch moved on to Palestine, while Erik Weltsch married his first wife Lilly Barber (1908-1992). The pianist and cellist was also born in Vienna and had already moved to Alexandria a few years earlier.

Back in Austria

Lilly Weltsch worked for the Red Cross during the Second World War and cared for war invalids in a British naval hospital. Meanwhile, Erik Weltsch switched between several companies in the 1940s, but remained in his field of business. The marriage was not one to last long, as the divorce was confirmed by the Austrian Ministry of Justice in December 1949—after a complicated procedure involving various official formalities described in detail in his memoirs. Erik Weltsch, who also had two Egyptian laissez-passer (passports) in addition to the German one, received his Austrian passport back in 1948. After a few years as a single businessman who traveled frequently for his job, he met his second wife in Alexandria. He married Katrin (Cathérine) Papadopoulo—a Greek Orthodox who was born in 1919 in the Egyptian city of al-Mansura—in 1953. Together they decided to "return" to Europe in 1958. They chose Bregenz as their new home, which was no coincidence, as Vorarlberg also had a large cotton industry. Furthermore, Lake Constance was supposed to be a suitable substitute for Katrin Weltsch's beloved sea.



Katrin Weltsch during a round trip in the Bay of Bregenz on Lake Constance, around 1960.

After living in a hotel for six months, Erik and Katrin Weltsch, who had no children, found an apartment large enough to accommodate an office, as Erik Weltsch used his professional experience to set up a trading agency for cotton (later also for chemical fibers and textile machinery). He continued his work until he was about to turn 70.

"Fourth third"

In the last two decades of his life, which Erik Weltsch described in his graveside speech as a "gift on top" and therefore referred to as his "fourth third", he was able to gain a reputation for his voluntary work, particularly at the Vorarlberg State Library, where he was involved in the systematization of the Juridica and the recording of older Vorarlberg prints. He also bibliographed not only the incunabula of the State Library, but also the larger collection of the Cistercian monastery library in Mehrerau. Erik Weltsch was awarded the Vorarlberg State Medal of Merit in 1987 for his commitment. He also published the results of his studies on regional studies, book printing and Jewish history on an ongoing basis, so it is not surprising that Erik Weltsch also showed great interest and dedication when it came to the establishment of a Jewish Museum in Hohenems.

Erik Weltsch—who, by his own account, was for a long time the only Vorarlberg member of newly founded Jewish Community for Tyrol and Vorarlberg in Innsbruck, which was the legal successor to the Jewish Community of Hohenems that was forcibly dissolved in 1940—was already involved in the foundation of the "Jewish Museum Hohenems" association in 1986. After the museum had opened in 1991, his research work and research trips significantly influenced the development of the museum's collection. In Antwerp, for example, he met with "displaced persons", meaning those survivors of Nazi terror who lived in Hohenems for a longer or shorter period of time after 1945.

Erik Weltsch also researched the property registers and investigated the at times complicated ownership history of houses in the former Jewish quarter. Weltsch was honored for his ongoing commitment with the title of professor in 2001. The Association of the Patrons of the Jewish Museum Hohenems also took this as an opportunity to award him an honorary membership.

Alongside the eulogy he had written himself, Prof. Erik Weltsch had also already taken care of his own gravesite before he died in Bregenz on September 7, 2003. The relevant correspondence with Kurt Bollag, the long-standing president of the Association for the Preservation of the Jewish Cemetery in Hohenems, who had preceded him by only a few weeks, dates back to 1999. One year after the funeral, a memorial service to mark the setting of the stone was held by the St. Gallen rabbi Hermann Schmelzer. His wife Katrin Weltsch, however, was unable to attend, as she had already followed her husband on November 23, 2003.

Erik Weltsch's gravestone at the Jewish cemetery, 2021. Photo: Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

GREEK FORCED LABORERS

"TODAY ULYSSES WAS WITH ME." GREEK FORCED LABORERS FLEE OVER THE PASSES INTO THE PRÄTTIGAU

Forced Labor Construction Site, Latschau 1941
Montafon Archive
Estate Prof. Dr. Richard Beitl 1900-1982

Partenen – Gortipohl – Schruns – Latschau, 1942-1943

Thousands of prisoners of war are working as forced laborers in Vorarlberg as in the entire German Reich, starting in 1939. "Civilian workers" are brought into the country too, not all of them come voluntarily. In total, more than 20,000 people, Ukrainians and French, Russians and Poles, Italians, Belgians, Bulgarians and Greeks, work in Vorarlberg under diverse conditions. They work in the agricultural sector, in industry and, last but not least, on the large construction sites of the power plants that are being built in the Montafon valley. Large investments were made to secure the growing power consumption of the armaments industry in the German Reich.

Some of them let themselves be recruited as "civilian workers". Their status allows them modest earnings and a certain freedom of movement, which however often turns out to be an illusion. Others are used as prisoners of war for forced labor in violation of international law. Concentration camp prisoners are also forced to work. The treatment of so-called "Ostarbeiter" from Russia or the Ukraine, who are classified as "racially inferior" and kept in strict camp confinement, is particularly bad. Brutal punishments, isolation from one another, miserable working conditions and accidents on the dangerous construction sites in the high

Gaschurn Parthenen Montafon vor 1941 — Vorarlberg State Library

Silvretta reservoir Bielerhöhe, 2021—Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

GREEK FORCED LABORERS SEEK FREEDOM, CROSSING PRÄTTIGAU PASSES. *(Cont'd)*

mountains are the norm at many sites. For the most part, those who are housed alone or in small groups scattered around the province in direct contact with their employers like farmers fare somewhat better. A few people try to help the prisoners of war, like the nurse **Pauline Wittwer** from Gaschurn, who gives clothes and food to French prisoners of war. She is denounced, finally arrested and sentenced. After seven different prisons, she is deported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and is only released after a year, seriously ill.[1]

Time and again, forced laborers also attempted to escape. Most of them fail and end in severe imprisonment or death. However, 48 Greeks, organized in various groups, actually succeeded in escaping in 1942 and 1943.[2]

In August 1942, a first group of Greek forced laborers manages to escape over the Grubenpass to St. Antönien in the Swiss Prättigau valley. A Swiss physician is called to examine them – and apparently also to help the police to question the "exotic" guests. His account can be found in the dossier of the Swiss aliens police.

"Today Odysseus was with me, Odysseus, who lay ten years before Troy, who on his return home was lost in the storm and has now wandered for ten years.... Today the policeman comes along with three men, all without headgear, with somewhat tattered shoes, in long striped pants, one dressed only with a shirt, the second also with a worn vest; the third has a smock, undoubtedly somewhat older, certainly of Central European cut. The three, says the policeman, are Greeks and crossed our border today. I should examine them and possibly take their personal data. Difficult thing: they don't respond to German, French, Italian or English ...But after all, thirty-five years ago I learned Greek. So let's give it a try!" [3]

Stammering, with the help of memories of his Homer reading in school and quoting turns of phrase from the Odyssey, the physician actually manages to record the particulars of the first fugitive. **Odysseas Konstantinidis**, a former tobacco worker from Xanthi in Thrace. Like his comrades, he had been employed in Latschau by the Hinteregger company to build roads.

Other forced laborers from the Montafon region are to follow. A year later, a Greek group of eight foreign workers manages to escape. Their leader, Jakob Tsitrian, was last employed in Gaschurn as a construction worker for the Jäger company. They report to the Swiss authorities about false promises and bad treatment, lack of food and beatings. Above all, the Greeks deployed in Vorarlberg are afraid of being drafted into the Bulgarian army. Parts of Greece are occupied by Bulgaria and on September 25, 1943, Greeks fit for military service are to be forcibly recruited from this region, even if they are in the German Reich.

Even from Hohenems two Greeks, employed in the Klien brickyard, are making their escape for this reason in September 1943. They, too, take the long way over the mountains and go over the Plasseggen Pass into Prättigau.

In the night of September 12, another group of eight Greek foreign workers, who had worked in Latschau and also in Hohenems, follow them over the Tilisuna-Furka. And the very next day nine Greek prisoners of war under the leadership of Leonidas Pasajanidis reach Switzerland via the Schesaplana. Their military papers had been taken away from them and they had been falsely declared as civilian workers in order to use them for forced labor on a tunnel construction in the Montafon. They, too, feared that they would be sent to the Bulgarian army.

Anastasios Georgollas

Finally, on September 17, the largest group from the Seespitz camp, up in the Silvretta mountains, set out over the Klosterpass. They are led by **Anastasios Georgollas**, who had heard about the successful escape attempts of the last days. They are fourteen men, from various work camps at the Seespitz, in the Silvretta village or even in Gortipohl.

In the early morning hours of September 19, they reach Switzerland. Georgollas and his comrades are taken to the Adliswil internment camp near Zurich, where they are handed over to the Swiss army police. Georgollas also comes from the vicinity of Xanthi in Thrace. He too was employed as a tobacco worker before the war began in 1941 with the occupation of his homeland by Bulgarian troops – and he was sent to the German Reich as a forced laborer. On September 28, Georgollas is interrogated by the army police.

"I came to the former Austria (Vorarlberg) to a mining tunnel in Gaschurn. Greeks, Poles and Italians worked here, about 60 men. We slept and lived in barracks and the food as well as the treatment was bad. We had heard from comrades who had fled to Switzerland in the past that there was a possibility of escaping to Switzerland. (...) We organized ourselves and met in the village of Seespitz, walked together over unknown mountains and finally reached Switzerland illegally at an unknown place over a pass (...) in the early morning. Here we, 14 men all Greeks were stopped by the Swiss border guards, who took us on foot for about 2-3 hours to Klosters-Dorf. After lunch, together with other refugees who had joined us in Chur, we were taken by train to Zurich and from there by truck to the Adliswil camp. I have nothing but a legitimation card which I deposited here, no acquaintances nor money. I want to work in Switzerland together with my comrades until the end of the war."

And indeed, on December 8, Georgollas and some of his comrades enter the Pont-de-la-Morge labor camp in the canton of Valais. Like him, the rest of the Greeks spend the rest of the war in Switzerland.

Recommended Reading:

Michael Kasper, *"Durchgang ist hier strengstens verboten! Die Grenze zwischen Montafon und Prättigau in der NS-Zeit 1938-1945"* in: Edith Hessenberger (Ed.), Grenzüberschreitungen. Von Schleppern, Schmugglern, Flüchtlingen. Schruns 2008, pp. 79-108.

Links:

In the Montafon valley, 15 memorial plaques commemorate victims and resistance under National Socialism.
The locations can be found on:
www.stand-montafon.at/erinnerungsorte

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[1] *15 Places-15 Stories. Texts locate memories of National Socialism in the Montafon.* Ed. By Stand Montafon, Schruns 2021, p. 35

[2] For the following see the dissertation of Jens Gassmann, *Zwangsarbeit in Vorarlberg während der NS-Zeit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Situation auf den Illwerke-Baustellen*. Vienna 2005.

[3] Report in a local Prättigau newspaper in 1942, preserved undated in a Swiss police dossier documenting the escape of Odysseas Konstantinides, who together with two comrades crossed the border on August 29, 1942 at the Grubenpass.

CAUGHT IN THE BARBED WIRE:

PAULA HAMMERSCHLAG, MARIE WINTER, PAULA KORN, GERTRUD & CLARA KANTOROWICZ

FOUR OUT OF FIVE JEWISH WOMEN FROM BERLIN FAIL AT THE OLD RHINE HOHENEMS, MAY 10, 1942

Marie WInter around 1940
Donation from Gabriel Heim, Jewish Museum Berlin

Hohenems, May 10, 1942

"While giving her name in the guardroom, she had a glass of water given to her on the pretext that she was unwell. She mixed white pills into the water and drank this liquid before she could be prevented from doing so. After a short time, an unconscious state set in, so that she had to be admitted to hospital."

Paula Hammerschlag, the woman in the Hohenems guardhouse, had been arrested at the Hohenems border three days earlier on May 7, 1942. Together with four other older Jewish women from Berlin, she had tried to escape to Switzerland at the Diepoldsau public bath. Escape helper **Jakob Spirig** tells Austrian television about this in 2002.

"Of course it was very difficult because of the barbed wire and the barriers, but we young boys risked it. Then we were caught in Switzerland and the women too. ...An ill-considered adventure, I would never do that again. They said they were young ladies. So we thought it would be all right. But there was this barbed wire, or as we Swiss called it: 'Spanish horsemen' ...We ordered the women to the country house for 10 o'clock in the evening. Then we went over, even at risk. We dragged the people to the border. ...We got the women across, but the last woman got her skirt caught on the barbed wire, and she had to get loose. Somehow the customs guards heard this and shouted 'Halt, German customs guards! They ran down from the customs office with torches, and the guard further down fired and ran here too. Then we had to leave, of course. Then we had to leave the women and get to safety. But we were arrested by the Swiss police and brought before a military court. The women were also caught and turned back." [1]

Three of the women knew each other well from the Berlin circle around the poet **Stefan George**. In addition to Paula Hammerschlag, the sister of the religious philosopher and poet **Margarete Susmann**, they were the philosopher **Gertrud Kantorowicz** and her aunt Clara. They had prepared their escape together with a network of friends in Germany and Switzerland. The Diepoldsau escape helper Jakob Spirig and a colleague had been hired for the risky enterprise.

Marie Winter had also joined the three in Berlin. Her daughter, the actress Ilse Winter, emigrated to Switzerland soon after 1933 – and is now studying economics in Basel. Her professor is also a member of the George circle, which is now scattered throughout Europe. A contact she now tried to use for her mother. And then, shortly before the agreed escape date, a fifth Berlin woman threatened with deportation, **Paula Korn**, forced herself on the group.

Before their attempted border crossing, the women spent the night in the Hohenems inns Habsburg and Freschen under false names and waited for the right day. The owner of the Habsburg inn is familiar with the escape plan. One of her employees, **Isabella Aberer**, finally leads the group to the so-called "Landhaus" near the border, where the Swiss escape helpers are waiting. But the enterprise fails. The German border officials are alert. Only Paula Korn manages to escape to Switzerland.

Paula Hammerschlag dies from the overdose of Phanodorm she took, with which she poisoned herself in the Hohenems guardhouse at the "Gasthaus zur Post". Marie Winter and Gertrud and Clara Kantorowicz are brought back to Berlin to the police prison. First comes the complete official robbery, which is now formally organized. All assets are signed over to the German Reich. As early as June 1942, Marie Winter is deported to Minsk and murdered in Maly Trostinec. Clara Kantorowicz is put to death in the Theresienstadt concentration camp in February 1943. The last to die was Gertrud Kantorowicz, also in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, a few days before the liberation by the Red Army.

Recommended Reading:

The story of Marie Winter, whose escape at the border failed just as much as that of Paula Hammerschlag, Gertrud, and Clara Kantorowicz, is described in the following book: Gabriel Heim, *Ich will keine Blaubeertorte, ich will nur raus. Eine Mutterliebe in Briefen*. Cologne 2013

Petra Zudrell (ed.), Der abgerissene Dialog. Die intellektuelle Beziehung Gertrud Kantorowicz – Margarete Susman oder Die Schweizer Grenze bei Hohenems als Endpunkt eines Fluchtversuchs. Innsbruck 1999

[1] Interview with Jakob Spirig, in: *"Heimat, fremde Heimat"* (Markus Barnay, ORF 2002)

Group Descendants on the Old Rhine during the Reunion, 2017
Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

Border fence at Diepoldsau Swimming Poll on the Old Rhine.

Unmarked Grave of Paula Hammerschlag at Hohenems Cemetery
St. Anton, 2021 — Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

Edith Meyer

A LOVE THAT WAS NOT ALLOWED TO BE: EDITH MEYER AND HEINRICH HEINEN

Feldkirch – Hohenems August 30, 1942 - September 1, 1942

On August 30, 1942, six prisoners manage to break out of the prison behind the Feldkirch district court. **Josef Höfel**, a 19-year-old unskilled worker from Hohenems who has had several conflicts with the law, is imprisoned for high treason; he allegedly belonged to a communist resistance organization. **Erwin Kermer**, a sixteen-year-old apprentice carpenter, was accused of planning an "unauthorized border crossing" into Switzerland. **Othmar Rathgeb**, a 17-year-old Swiss, had unsuccessfully tried to enlist in the German Reich's navy. While trying to return to his homeland, he was arrested on the train to Feldkirch for passport violations. **Paul Schwetling** from East Prussia had tried to escape to Switzerland near Lustenau before being drafted into the air force, and **Friedrich Frolik**, a young Czech, had also tried to cross into Switzerland near Feldkirch.

The impetus for the joint escape, however, was given by another fellow prisoner: **Heinrich Heinen** from Cologne. Three days earlier, Heinen had been convicted in Feldkirch of "racial defilement," draft evasion and passport offenses. Together with his Jewish fiancée **Edith Meyer**, he tried to escape to Switzerland near Feldkirch in June. Their love is forbidden in Germany.

Nineteen-year-old Edith Meyer and her family were forcibly relocated to a "Judenhaus" in Langenfeld near Düsseldorf in 1939. In December 1941, she was deported to Riga. Heinrich Heinen, however, succeeded in liberating her from the ghetto in an adventurous way in April 1942. After an odyssey via Königsberg, Berlin, Cologne, Solingen, Königswinter, Constance, and Bludenz, the two were arrested in Feldkirch on the evening of June 22, 1942. When they were taken to the prison shortly after midnight, they saw each other for the last time.

On August 30, Heinen and his five cellmates manage to overpower two guards and take their weapons. But instead of escaping immediately, Heinen searches for his beloved for an hour and a half in the prison house, in vain. Finally, the escapees split into two groups. Most of them are caught soon, in Feldkirch and Lustenau. Höfel and Heinen escape arrest once again in Lustenau on a bycicle and hide for one night in the Hohenems district of Oberklien. The chronicle of the Hohenems gendarmerie post records under the date of September 1, under the heading "Use of weapons against felons":

Hohenems Oberklien, 2021 — Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

"The escapees tried to flee to Switzerland on stolen bicycles. Höfel had old smuggler friends in Hohenems Oberklien and sought shelter there for the time being with Heinen. On September 1, 1942, at about 2:20 p.m., the gendarmerie post learned that Höfel and another unknown man were supposed to be in Oberklien at house No. 7. The post commander, Master Linder, organized an arrest plan and at 2:55 p.m. intervened against the criminals with Chief Constable Welte of the municipality and, since no other gendarmes were present at the post, with Master of the Schutzpolizei of the municipality, Anton Margreiter and Border Guard Alfred Huchler from Hohenems. Höfel and Heinen immediately fired several pistol shots against Master Linder at a distance of 19 meters, but since Master Linder immediately found cover on the ground, they missed. Höfel was then fatally shot by a brain shot and Heinen, who finally tried to escape and, in the process also fired further shots at the border guard Huchler, was fatally shot by Huchler by two shots. – The bodies were taken to the morgue of the hospital and buried extra-parochially and inconspicuously in the local cemetery at 5 a.m. on September 3."[1]

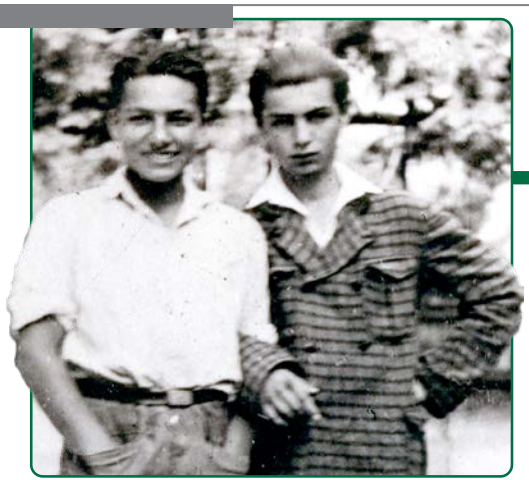
Heinen had been unable to find his fiancée in the Feldkirch prison because she had already been handed over to the Gestapo the day before. She was deported from Innsbruck to Auschwitz on October 9, 1942. Since then, there has been no trace of her.

Recommended Reading:
Alfons Dür, Unerhörter Mut. Eine Liebe in der Zeit des Rassenwahns. Innsbruck 2012

[1] *Quoted from Alfons Dür, Unerhörter Mut. Eine Liebe in der Zeit des Rassenwahns. Innsbruck 2012, p. 143-144.*

Prison Feldkirch, 2021 — Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

District Court Feldkirch, before 1943



A SARDINE CAN AND THE WRONG NEWSPAPER.

JURA SOYFER AND HUGO EBNER END UP IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMP INSTEAD OF CROSSING THE SCHLAPPINER JOCH MOUNTAIN PASS

Gargellen, March 13, 1938

"Jura was released with the February amnesty, and, as I originally believed, did not have a passport. Correct was, he had a passport, but the passport had expired."[1]

The lawyer **Hugo Ebner** tells of his joint escape attempt with the writer Jura Soyfer on March 13, 1938.

"When we met on the 11th or 12th to discuss the situation and we found it would be good to leave, the problem was that he didn't have a valid passport. We came to the conclusion we'll try over the mountains. We were reasonably good skiers. I had been skiing the year before in Montafon, in Gargellen, and I knew the area a bit. Besides, it seemed quite convenient to me, when we were asked what we were doing there, to be able to point out that I was already there last year, where politically nothing was going on yet."[2]

Ebner and Soyfer are Communists, and both are Jews. Soyfer, himself the son of a Jewish refugee family from Russia, had already been imprisoned in Austrofascist Austria in 1937 as an author of anti-fascist satires and cabaret scenes. In February 1938, under German pressure, an amnesty was granted to political prisoners in Austria, actually referring to illegal National Socialists. But paradoxically, some communists were also released, including **Jura Soyfer**. In the days following the "Anschluss" to Nazi Germany, escape is the order of the day. Unhindered, the two manage to get to Schruns by train with their ski equipment. On foot they walk up to Gargellen. But on the way further to the Schlappiner Joch mountain pass, their plan fails.

"Behind Gargellen we were checked by a gendarmerie patrol consisting of one gendarme, who was not very comfortable with the whole thing, a second one, whom I don't remember, and a third one, who was obviously a Nazi and who insisted on our arrest, ... As a pretext he used the following: There was in my knapsack a can of sardines wrapped, probably unnecessarily, in a piece of newspaper. This newspaper was a quite legal trade union newspaper from 1936, i.e. a patriotic one. But he used that as a pretext, considered it an illegal newspaper, and insisted that we be arrested and come along. He was obviously the youngest one who set the tone."[3]

The prisoners spend one night in St. Gallenkirch, then they are imprisoned in Bludenz and interrogated by the Gestapo. Still in spring, they are transferred to Innsbruck, where they meet, among others, the former governor of Vorarlberg and short-term federal chancellor Otto Ender in the prison yard, and finally to the Dachau concentration camp in June 1938. There Jura Soyfer writes the *"Dachau Song,"* which has become legendary. From Dachau they are deported to Buchenwald concentration camp in September. While working in the corpsmen's detachment, Soyfer is infected with typhus. He died in Buchenwald on the night of February 15-16, 1939, already in possession of emigration papers to the USA. Hugo Ebner, on the other hand, is tortured in Buchenwald. He will suffer the after-effects of the notorious "tree hanging" for the rest of his life. In May 1939 he is released and returns to Vienna.

Hugo Ebner's girlfriend **Rosl Kraus** also remembers March 1938. These days also haunt her for the rest of her life.

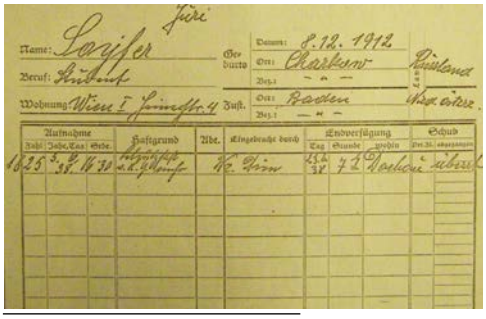
"And then the memory that I unfortunately cannot forget: The Chancellor's radio address, farewell to Austria as an independent state, and then the night on our usual mattress camp on the floor of my sublet room, the terrible fear for Hugo, (....) and his decision that he wants to go with Jura over the mountains to Switzerland and I should come along, all with skis and I cried all night and so did many thousands that night and then suddenly early in the morning when we were saying goodbye – I was supposed to follow them both, to meet them in Vorarlberg – he said something that made me so indignant, I don't remember exactly what, but something like, 'if a girl is with them, they are more protected, it's more like a ski trip' and my suddenly unfortunate rage: not for my protection I should come along, but as a shield, so to speak, take the risk of being caught on me and our short argument still in the apartment door and off he was.... That still bores and gnaws in me today, perhaps I could have spared them everything that then came their way, if I had not been so terribly selfish."

But Rosl Kraus had every reason to argue with Ebner. As a Jew, she was just as much at risk. After the arrest of her friends, she realized that she too would have to flee. Her brother, living in Paris, managed to find a French acquaintance who was willing to enter into a marriage of convenience with her in order to obtain French citizenship for her. As **Rosl Jurkiewicz**, she was able to emigrate to Paris in 1939, and that same spring, with the help of a cousin, on to London. There she met Hugo Ebner again. He had also managed to flee to London in the summer of 1939.

In Great Britain, however, a camp for "those willing to leave the country" was waiting for him, and after the beginning of the war, internment as an "enemy alien" in a labor camp in Canada.

Once again they had to wait two years before they were allowed to start a life together. After the war, they returned to Vienna and finally were able to marry. Rosl Ebner became a physician and Hugo Ebner a lawyer – not least known for his commitment to the pensions of Jewish survivors of persecution and displaced persons.

Ascent to the Schlappiner Joch, 2022 — Dietmar Walser, Hohenems



Jura Soyfer's prisoner card and transfer to Dachau concentration camp
Files of the Vienna Police Headquarters,
Documentation Center of the Austrian Resistance, Vienna


Bohumil Snižek in Uniform around 1944

FROM PRAGUE TO GIBRALTAR AND BACK – VIA VORARLBERG, SWITZERLAND, AND DUNKIRK.

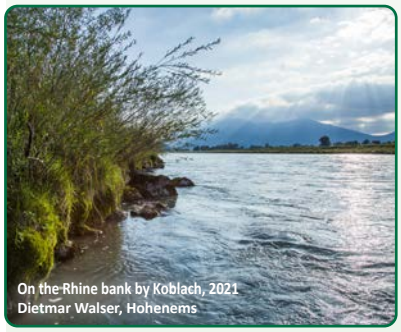
BOHUMIL PAVEL SNIŽEK ON HIS WAY THROUGH EUROPE

Koblach, August 28, 1941

"I creep quietly through the thicket. The riverbank is controlled, the trail betrays that the soldiers guarding the border often pass this way. I wait a while, venture as far as the river, but quickly turn back."

A young Czech wants to cross the Rhine.
It is August 26, 1941.

"Quickly but quietly I slip into the water and swim, the bundle of my clothes tied around my neck with a belt, floating on the water. I am already in the middle of the river. My hearing is strained; as soon as the sound of gunfire is heard, I must dive. I am already approaching the other bank, the tension is easing. I step out of the shallow bank and catch my breath. I try to look back, it seems to be getting light. The fog moves across the river. I wipe the water off me and get dressed. A strange feeling comes over me. I am beyond the reach of the power of the Great German Empire!" [1]


On the Rhine bank by Koblach, 2021
Dietmar Walser, Hohenems

Two weeks earlier he has left his parents' house in Chrast, a small town in the middle of the then *"Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia"* in order to reach Switzerland. He then bicycled 240 kilometers to the west, as far as Pilsen. From there he crossed the border into the German Reich on foot and continued by train. Via Eger, Marktredwitz and Munich, further via Lindau and Hohenems to Götzis.

At 1:00 a.m. he arrives there, searches and finds the river and reaches the other bank. He walks along a canal, dodging Swiss border posts. In the next village, Oberriet, the world has already woken up. Schoolchildren are already on their way. No one takes notice of him. He greets other people on the street as if it were normal.

"A warm balm for a scratched soul (...) I could smell the aroma of real coffee with fat milk, the smell of freshly baked bread from the bakery. I haven't eaten anything for the third day."

On foot, he continues on his way, along the country road to Gams and up to Wildhaus. His destination is Zurich. But in Toggenburg, in Alt St. Johann, he is arrested. In St. Gall, he is interrogated by the Political Department of the Cantonal Police Command. The young Czech identifies himself as Bohumil Pavel Snižek. He is twenty-seven years old and full of hope that everything will turn out well for him. Because he has a lot of plans. And he already has a lot behind him. He finished his military service at the end of 1938 - shortly afterwards the Wehrmacht marched in and crushed Czechoslovakia.

"Suddenly, however, a great discontent was noticeable among the Czech people."

This is how the Swiss policeman records Snižek's interrogation.

"However, we were strongly observed, so that I had to assume one fine day to be put in custody by a pretext. Free speech was no longer possible, since the Germans had many informers among our compatriots as well. So it happened that in January 1940 (...) I was arrested together with about 30 people from the town and transferred to the prison in Prague. Here they let me go again after 8 days." [2]

But by now, the decision matured in him to flee from the Nazi occupation.

Snižek states that he wants to visit an acquaintance in Zurich whom he knows from his student days in England – and from their common membership in the pacifist organization "International Civil Service". Since 1920, the "Service Civil International" sought ways to promote international understanding and provided disaster relief, under its Swiss president Pierre Cérésole.

Snižek remains in St. Gall prison and is interrogated several times. The Swiss army command makes inquiries. And decides to deport Snižek to the German Reich. Could it have something to do with the fact that Cérésole, a radical pacifist and conscientious objector, had already served several prison sentences in Switzerland?

But instead of being deported, Snižek was handed an address in Geneva by the prison warden on October 17 – and told to go there directly. It was the representative of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London: Jaromír Kopecký, the liaison with the resistance in Europe.

For half a year Snižek worked under his guidance in Geneva. Then he finally wants to go on to England to join the Czechoslovak army in exile.

But the way there still leads across many obstacles and borders. First, he and a comrade named **Jan Kocmanek** have to make their way to Marseille to report to the Czechoslovak relief organization of the lawyer **Oldřich Dubina**.

For a few days the two are hidden in a farmhouse before continuing to Toulouse and from there to Banyuls on the Spanish border. On May 2, a smuggler takes the two, along with eight other Czechs, over the foothills of the Pyrenees to Port Bou. From that moment on, Bohumil Snižek calls himself Paul Snow and assumes the identity of an English soldier.

In Barcelona, they are arrested and held in the Casela Modelo prison. At the beginning of July they are taken from there to the Spanish concentration camp Miranda de Ebro. Snižek is still threatened with extradition to the Germans. But the Spanish fascists try to get by as servants of two masters, and to preserve their neutrality in the war. So the Czechs are not extradited, but instead send to Gibraltar in September, to the British. Exactly where they want to go. At the end of October, Snižek, *alias* **Paul Snow**, is flown to England with his comrades. And there, too, interrogations await him. His odyssey seems all too adventurous to the British military. Is he possibly a German agent?

Finally, Snižek is able to dispel the doubts. And joins the Czechoslovak Independent Brigade in the British Army.

Two years later, at the end of August 1944, he is transferred to France as a lieutenant in the Czechoslovak Armored Brigade. There, the Czechoslovak Exile Army is deployed by the British against the German positions in Dunkirk. The attempt to take the port city on October 28, 1944 fails. It remains the only major battle the Allies allowed the Exile Army to fight. The Czechoslovak brigades had to continue the siege of Dunkirk until the German surrender on May 8, 1945.

When Bohumil Snižek is finally allowed to return home, Prague is both liberated and occupied by the Red Army. No glory awaits returnees from the West like him, but at best oblivion – or trials for "American espionage" and "cosmopolitanism." Bohumil Snižek died in 1959 as a result of his war wounds. He wrote his so far unpublished autobiography under the name Paul Snow.

Source:

Zdeněk Holenka, Bojová cetsa Bohumila Snižka. Z Protektorátu a zpět do ČSR (5. květen 1941 - 20. květen 1945), master thesis 2008 (Bohumil Snižeks Path of Fight. From the Protectorate and back into Czechoslovakia (May 5, 1941 – May 20, 1945).

[1] Paul Snow (Bohumil Snižek, Cesta Nadeje (Paths of Hope), unpublished autobiography, quoted after Zdeněk Holenka, Bojová cetsa Bohumila Snižka. Z Protektorátu a zpět do ČSR (5. květen 1941 - 20. květen 1945), master thesis 2008 (Bohumil Snižeks Path of Fight. From the Protectorate and back into Czechoslovakia (May 5, 1941 – May 20, 1945), p. 29.

[2] Police interrogation protocol of Bohumil Snižek, 28.8.1941; Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bern, E4320B#1990/266#2848

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