

The fate of the Loewenstein children during the Nazi era

by Peter Loewenstein

Dear members of the association „Judaica in Meimbressen“, dear friends and relatives, those of you from Meimbressen and those who have come from elsewhere in Germany and abroad

My name is Peter Loewenstein and I have been asked to outline the history of the Loewenstein family in Meimbressen and describe what happened to Rosalie and Salomon Loewenstein's five children whose Stolpersteine we have laid today. Several relatives of those five children are here today, and I will introduce them throughout my talk.

Rosalie Adler was born in Meimbressen in March 1873 and before then her mother Betti Gruenenklee was also born in Meimbressen, in 1841. Rosalie married Salomon Loewenstein in February 1897 and they lived at Hauptstrasse 59 and brought up their children there. They had six children. The eldest, Blanka, died of leukaemia when she was just fourteen and is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Meimbressen. Neither Blanka's parents, Rosalie and Salomon, nor her brothers and sisters are buried in Meimbressen, for reasons that will become clear.

From 1900 until 1908, Rosalie and Salomon had a child every two years, first Viola – everyone called her „Ola“ – in 1900, then Siegfried, Harry, Betty and finally my father Bernhard in 1908. Salomon was a strict but kind father who worked as a cattle dealer. Rosalie was a loving and much-loved mother. Their children were brought up in an orthodox Jewish home although, interestingly, most of the children that survived after 1945, even though they were proudly Jewish, were not observant Jews.

All five children had a wonderful childhood in Meimbressen with their parents. They went to primary school in Meimbressen and then to high school in Kassel and had many friends, both Jewish and Christian.

By the time the Nazis came to power in January 1933, all five children were no longer children. They were aged between 25 and 33 and had all left the parental home. Three of them lived very nearby and all of them visited their parents regularly. All of them except for Siegfried had married, and three of them had children of their own. My father and mother had married just four months before Hitler became Chancellor and were living in Ahnatal-Weimar near Meimbressen.

In March 1933, Viola's family and my parents visited Rosalie and Salomon in Meimbressen. The SA, the paramilitary combat organisation of the NSDAP, had declared 25 and 26 March to be the day of the 'great reckoning' with political dissidents and members of the Jewish communities. A total of about 240 people were

‘rounded up’ by SA men in the communities of the Hofgeismar district and taken to the SA headquarters in Fürstenweg in Hofgeismar, where they were brutally mistreated. Among them were Salomon, Bernhard and Viola's husband Hugo Alexander. They too were severely beaten and tortured before being released.

This event had a huge impact on the whole family – all those detained and beaten were shocked, scared and traumatised. Bernhard, my father, had been beaten so badly that he could not walk unaided for several months. The family received news that some of them were about to be detained again and sent to Dachau. Siegfried and Bernhard, together with my mother, Irmgard, fled via Aachen to the Netherlands within days, abandoning their home, businesses, car and most of their possessions. They were soon joined in the Netherlands by their parents, Rosalie and Salomon, and their sister, Viola, together with her husband Hugo and their two children. Harry, together with his wife and young son; and Betty with her husband and two daughters all stayed in Germany until 1938 when they were forced to flee to the Netherlands. Those who had fled to the Netherlands in 1933 and 1934 lived in Rotterdam and later in Utrecht and elsewhere, and were given some support from the Jewish Hilfskommittee, but lived on the breadline.

When we laid Stolpersteine for Rosalie and Salomon in 2019, we described their forced journey from Meimbressen to the Netherlands and eventually to the gas chambers at Auschwitz in 1944. I would now like to give you an outline of the fates of Salomon and Rosalie's five children, whose Stolpersteine we have laid today, together with their families. Some of their stories have positive endings and others the worst possible outcomes. I will start with the oldest and finish with the youngest.

Viola Loewenstein

Viola „Ola“ married in Meimbressen Hugo Alexander in August 1919, when they were both 19 years old. They went to live in Landau in South-West Germany, where Hugo was born and where he worked as a Kaufmann. Their daughter Herta was born in Landau just under a year later followed by their son Helmut in 1923. You will remember that Hugo was one of those who was arrested and beaten by the SA in March 1933.

The whole family fled to the Netherlands in May 1933 and lived in Rotterdam and then in Utrecht. They lived with many other members of the Loewenstein family during the first few years. The last voice recording that we have of Viola is from a record made by her and her parents in Rotterdam and sent to her brother/my father Bernhard in South Africa for his 30th birthday in March 1938. Here it is: *„My dear brother: After you have endured the two old folks, you'll now have to endure me as well. What do you say now? You wouldn't have expected to hear us in black Africa. Yes, our voices reach far. Actually, I wanted to sing you "Mere thirty years old you are", but I'm just a little bit indisposed due to the Dutch climate. So, from all of my heart I wish*

you all the best and much success in all things. From Hugo and Herta and Helmut I shall wish you the heartiest congratulations as well. Many hearty regards to Irmgard too from all of us. Now, at that, we wish a very merry birthday celebration. To you, dear Bernhard, a birthday kiss from your sister Ola.“

Westerbork camp was established by the Government of the Netherlands in the North-East of the country in the summer of 1939 to serve as a refugee camp for Germans and Austrians who had fled to the Netherlands to escape Nazi persecution. However, after the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940, that original purpose no longer existed. By 1942, Camp Westerbork was repurposed as a transit camp for the deportation of Jews. Jews were forcibly arrested and taken from their homes to Westerbork. Transport trains arrived at Westerbork every Tuesday from July 1942 to September 1944; an estimated 97,776 Jews, Sinti and Roma were deported during the period to Auschwitz, Sobibor, Theresienstadt and Bergen-Belsen.

In February 1942 Hugo, Viola, Hertha and Helmut were arrested and transported to Westerbork. They stayed there for almost two years. On 18th January, 1944 they were deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto. Ola and her daughter Hertha remained there but eight months later, on 28th September, Hugo and Helmut were sent to Auschwitz. Hugo was murdered at Auschwitz within a few days.

Helmut, a draughtsman and painter, was taken to Dachau two weeks later and stayed there until he was liberated by American troops in April 1945. He died in Bavaria soon after, on 4th May 1945 – the cause of his death is not known.

Helmut's mother, Viola, was moved to Bergen Belsen in late November 1944, where she died between then and April 1945. Viola's daughter Herta said that a witness at Bergen Belsen told her that Viola was buried alive.

Hertha, Viola and Hugo's daughter, remained imprisoned in Theresienstadt until it was liberated by the Soviet Army on 8th May 1945. She then made her way to the USA to join her Aunt Betty in Chicago. She was joined by Aribert Jacobi, whom Herta had met in Westerbork and who had also survived the concentration camps. They married in December 1947 and in 1952 Hertha gave birth to their son, Neal. Hertha's family eventually moved to California in the 1970s and she continued to live there until her death in 2002 at the age of 81, thirty years after the death of her great love, Ari. Neal married Alison in 1987 and they have two daughters, both in their 30s. Neal is Ola's grandson. May I introduce you to Neal and Alison, who are with us today.

Siegfried Loewenstein

Siegfried was the second child of Rosalie and Salomon, born in 1902. After leaving school at the age of 15, he worked as a butcher's apprentice in Kassel and then in Hanover. Eventually he came to live with his parents in Meimbressen in the 1920s, helping Salomon with his cattle trading business.

Siegfried fled to the Netherlands in mid-1933, at the same time as his brother Bernhard, and then moved on to Romania in 1934 where he met Frieda Weiss. They married that year and moved to Palestine, where they arrived in September 1934. Frieda gave birth to their son Perez in early 1935. In Palestine Siegfried worked as a labourer, then as a garage assistant and eventually opened a laundry in Tel Aviv. In late-1958 Siegfried and Frieda decided to leave Israel and move back to Germany and lived in Kassel, first in Friederich-Ebert Street and then in Kronenacker Street, until Siegfried's death in 1968 at the age of 65. Frieda died over 20 years later in Frankfurt.

Their son Perez married Malka Haran in Israel in 1958, and they gave birth to a son Juval the following year. They moved to Kassel a couple of years later to be with Siegfried and Frieda. Perez worked at the engineering firm Henschel. In 1968 Perez, Malka and their son Juval moved to Ndola in Zambia to work with my parents, who were living there. They moved back to Germany together with my parents in 1972 and lived in Mönchengladbach until their deaths in 2015 and 2017. Juval married Ulrike Roeders in 1998 and they have three grown-up children. They still live in Mönchengladbach. I have the pleasure of introducing you to Juval, Ulrike and their children Janik and Malin, who are with us today.

Harry Loewenstein

Harry was Rosalie and Salomon's next child, born in 1904. Harry is the only child who had no direct surviving descendants after 1944. Harry married Erna Frohwein in around 1930 and they lived in Josefstrasse in Aachen, which is where Erna had been born. Harry worked as a sales representative, and they gave birth there to a son Gert in November 1934. They were also probably the reason why my mother and father met. When my father visited his brother, Harry, my mother was also living in Aachen. Harry's wife Erna was the daughter of my mother's stepmother's sister! They almost certainly met at a family gathering, and the rest, as they say, is history!

Harry, Erna and Gert continued to live in Aachen until after Kristallnacht in November 1938, when Harry was arrested and sent to Buchenwald. He was released and the family fled to the Netherlands. On 6th March 1940 all three were arrested and taken to Westerbork by the Dutch authorities, where they remained until January 1944, when they were transported to Theresienstadt. From there they were taken to Auschwitz on 16th May 1944, where Erna and Gert were murdered on 7th July 1944. The exact date and place of Harry's death is not known but documents state that he will have died between 3rd July 1944 and 28th February 1945, probably in Auschwitz. Harry was just 40, Erna 37 and Gert just 9 years old.

Betti Loewenstein

Betty was Rosalie and Salomon's youngest daughter, born in 1906 in Meimbressen. She married Bernhard Moses from Frielendorf (Schwalm) in August

1928. Betty and Bernhard lived in Hohenstorstrasse 6, Kassel. In January 1930 their first daughter Lore was born in Kassel and in 1934 Ilse (later in the USA renamed „Elsie“) followed. In the four years that followed, the Moses family remained in Kassel, Bernhard working as a merchant. Betty and her children visited their relatives in the Netherlands from time to time.

In November 1938 Bernhard was arrested and imprisoned at Buchenwald concentration camp. Later he was released, and the family left Germany as quickly as possible and went to Rotterdam, where they stayed with Betty's sister Ola Alexander, who lived at 57b Aleidis St. Betty applied for USA visas for her family. Their travel documents to the USA were finally issued in Rotterdam on January 12, 1940 and they left from Antwerpen on March 1, 1940, traveling on the SS Westernland. Betty, Bernhard and their two daughters arrived in New York, on March 12, 1940, travelling on to Chicago, where their cousin, Edgar Miller, lived.

Betty told me the story that she had arranged to go with her sister Viola to apply for US visas for both their families. On that day, Viola felt ill, and so Betty could only lodge the applications for her family. When Viola went to the US embassy a couple of days later the quota for visas was full, and so Viola and her family were not able to obtain visas, with the awful consequences that I described earlier.

Once settled in the USA, Bernhard changed his first name to „Gabriel“ and the family name to „Bernard“. The whole family was known by that surname after that. Betty and Gabriel gave birth to a son, Steve, in 1945. Gabriel worked as a toolmaker. Betty worked at Marshall Fields & Co. in Chicago for twenty five years until she retired in 1970. Gabriel died in Chicago in 1973 and soon after Betty moved to California to be near her daughter Elsie who had moved there a few years earlier. Betty lived in Encino, California until close to her death in February, 1998, aged 91, leaving her three children, seven grandchildren, and eight great grandchildren. Betty's children Lore, Elsie and Steve all had children themselves and Steve is still going strong at the age of 80. I am delighted to introduce you today to Lore's daughter Caren and to Elsie's daughter Vicki.

Bernhard Loewenstein

Bernhard, my father, was the youngest of Rosalie and Salomon's children, born in 1908. As I mentioned earlier, he married my mother, Irmgard Wildau, in September 1932 and he was studying for his Doctorate in Philology when the Nazis came to power in 1933. I described the brutal detentions in Hofgeismar which led to my parents fleeing to the Netherlands in early 1933. They stayed in Rotterdam with other members of his family until 1935 when, first my dad and then a few months later my mum emigrated to South Africa, to Johannesburg. They decided that they would not have children while the Nazis were in power, so I was not born until 1947, after the end of the war.

It is worth saying, at this point, that having to flee from Germany and losing the security of their homes, friends, jobs, studies and country; and hearing about what was happening to Jews – including their friends and families – in Germany, the Netherlands, the concentration camps and elsewhere, had a traumatic impact on the physical and mental health of members of the Loewenstein family. Because he was my father, I know that Bernhard, who before 1933 was a very fit athlete, suffered after 1933 from what we now call PTSD, had nervous breakdowns on several occasions, had serious stomach and heart problems and suffered with acute anxiety and stress for as long as I knew him. I'm sure that similar illnesses affected other members of his brother's and sisters' families too.

My father had several jobs, interrupted by periods of ill-health. He was a salesman at first, then became a newspaper journalist and eventually the newspaper's editor, then a jeweller and a watch repairer. My mother worked as a seamstress and then as a cook in the South African army during the second world war. In late-1957 my parents decided to move from Apartheid South Africa to more liberal Rhodesia, where they opened a small factory. Within a few years Rhodesia had also become a racist Apartheid state, and they moved to Zambia in the mid-1960s. In 1972, at the age of 64, my father decided that he wanted to return to Germany, the country of his youth. My mother did not want to return to Germany, but like so many women, had very little choice in the decision. Many of us warned my father that they would find it difficult to settle and make friends with those Germans of their age who had either volunteered or were forced to be part of the Nazi project. Sadly their time in Germany – Krefeld and then Monchengladbach – was a difficult and unhappy one. They had just a few friends, including Guido Ruhland's wonderful parents – and I would like to introduce you to the lovely and talented Guido whose musical talent you heard earlier. They also had Perez, Malka and Juval living nearby. And I had moved to the UK in the mid-1970s and Stella and I were married in 1981 and had two wonderful children, Nick and Helen, and we visited my mum and dad regularly.

My father died of a heart attack in May 1989; six months later my mother moved to Nottingham to be nearer to us and her grandchildren. She settled in very well and was very happy, but very sadly she died just six months later, also of a heart attack. It gives me the greatest pleasure to introduce you to my best friend and wife Stella and two other wonderful people, our son Nick and daughter-in-law, Angel.

So now you know a bit more about the people behind the Stolpersteine that we laid today, and about their families – my family. What can we learn from what happened to a family whose members were either brutalised and murdered or forced to flee to all parts of the world? There are many lessons, of course. At a time, though, where populist racist and religious extremism is gaining strength everywhere it seems

– in the UK, in Germany, in the USA, in Israel and Gaza, Russia and India among many places – and where tens of thousands of innocent civilians are being bombed or starved to death in some of those places, the lesson for me is the same as when we laid Stolpersteine in 2019 in Meimbressen.

We must actively oppose the racist and fascist policies and actions of political parties, governments, prominent individuals and their supporters everywhere – in Europe, including Germany, Russia and the UK; in the USA; in India; and in Israel and Palestine. While we should never forget what happened during the Nazi era, we also need to resolve to fight today, now, against racist and religious oppression, including Antisemitism and Islamophobia, wherever it exists – in our families, friendship circles, communities and countries.

As Edmund Burke and others have said, *„The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people should do nothing.“* It is in that spirit of a struggle for peace, social justice, equality and freedom that we are today laying the Stolpersteine for Viola, Siegfried, Harry, Betty and Bernhard Loewenstein.