

Rosi Rebitzer Hoffman (1898-1967)

My mother was born in the town of Weiden in northeast Bavaria, Germany, in 1921. She had 11 first cousins, all of whom were born in Germany, and all of whom, except one, survived the war. Seven of her first cousins were on her father's side. All were much older than her, and six had emigrated to the USA before the war.

My mother for England left on April 1, 1939. German Jews had years of warning. Most, but not all, left Germany. Many of her older relatives were unable to leave and did not survive the war.

My mother was an only child. Downstairs from her lived a grandfather, an aunt and uncle with their son and daughter. Their daughter Rosa (Rosi) Rebitzer was born in 1898 and thus was 22 years old when my mother was born. According to my mother Rosi was like a second mother to her. This story is about Rosi.

Rosi married a Protestant doctor named Friedrich (Friedl) Hoffmann at the end of 1924. This did not initially please her parents, but they eventually relented as he had "a good character". Rosi survived the war, but only with help and luck.

At first she was "safe" as a wife of an Aryan. She trained as a nurse and worked in the "Jewish Hospital" in Berlin. Meanwhile her parents and friends, together with her aunt Johanna, my grandmother, were taken from Weiden to Nuremberg to be "collected" in a retirement home while waiting for deportation to the east. The deportation of many nurses Rosi knew, as well as that of her aunt Johanna, seems to have led to a mental collapse and she entered a sanatorium. As she could not return again to full-time work she went to take care of her mother who had a heart condition. Her mother died peacefully, and as Rosi wrote "it may sound bitter but was for the best". A few weeks later her father and his brother were sent to Theresienstadt (where they both died). All this was in 1942.

Rosi and her husband decided that she should return to Berlin where it was easier to "disappear" in the big city. She worked in various places and was "interviewed" at times by the Gestapo. Her husband's movements were also monitored and limited. She eventually worked as a private nurse.

But in June 1943 she was arrested by the Gestapo. Fortunately, her husband was then in Berlin, and he was able to get her out. But the situation was extremely dangerous. From then until the end of the war Rosi was in hiding. First she went to the home of a doctor friend of her husband in Bamberg. But an anonymous threatening letter came, and she had to leave. For a while, according to what she wrote, she moved around like a "gypsy". Eventually she returned to Berlin, but the air strikes made it too dangerous. So she returned home with her husband. As she was wanted by the Gestapo both in Berlin and in Weiden she went into deep hiding, moving from place to place. We have a list of people who hid her and are also aware that there were others. For a half year her husband kept her hidden, but then his health forced him into a sanatorium, and she again had to move. We know that for a year, with interruptions, she was at the home of a railway gatekeeper named Nikolaus Rott. He had been a foreman in the railway but was demoted and harassed for his known anti-Nazi views. Rosi told my mother about hiding from the Gestapo under a bridge, and once bent over behind a beam. When they left she could not move or straighten out for the longest time. She talked about years of fear and loneliness.

The following is from the book by Michael Brenner titled "Am Beispiel Weiden" about Jewish life in Weiden before, during and after the Nazi period. He cites an article in a Portland, Oregon paper as the source: "During the war years, the exact point in time remains unclear because nobody was allowed to find out about it, Dr. Hoffmann brings his wife back to Weiden, where she could hide better with acquaintances. Here she had to change her hiding place 23 times within two years. Sometimes she dared to go out on the street with a false passport, but mostly her whereabouts remained secret. Friends who risked their lives

kept them hidden; once in a mill, another time in a gatekeeper's cottage with Nicholas Rott, who showed great courage. Coal cannisters were also added to her hiding places. At any moment she had to be prepared for discovery and impending death. Such as e.g, when one day SA men kicked in the door of the room in which she was staying. She just had time to disappear into a pile of dirty laundry and thus remain undetected.

Her husband never missed an opportunity to hide her. Once when soldiers were nearby, she waded into a creek and dived under. Her husband observed the situation from a bridge above. When the soldiers asked him what he was doing here, he replied that he was fishing. The soldiers were content with that and moved on. Ms. Hoffmann did not have any ration cards and since she was often not allowed to have contact with anyone for days on end, she sometimes had to feed herself on roots and berries."

On April 24, 1945, fears for her survival were over. The Americans liberated the city. She returned home where, she wrote with obvious sarcasm , "the residents greeted me with enthusiasm". She added "JETZT haben sie nur liebe fur uns, zu spat fur unsere armen Eltern" (NOW they only have love for us, too late for our poor parents.)

Incidentally, her husband was also made to suffer by the Nazis because of their "mixed marriage". Once when he came to a doctors' meeting, his colleagues got up and left the room. As a result, he stopped appearing at their gatherings. After the end of the war, all doctors in Weiden had to obtain a work permit from him. He forgave them their bad behavior and granted it to them.

A lot of what I have reported here is based on a letter Rosi wrote to her brother Hermann who had left Weiden for Cuba, eventually reaching Portland, Oregon. The letter is dated August 15, 1945. This letter can be found in the "Spaeth Family Collection" at the Leo Baeck Institute and is available online (the collection is misnamed as there is no Spaeth material in this collection). The letter ends with a few lines added by her husband Friedl that includes the sentence: "I hope you can return as soon as possible. Living here these last few years has not been pleasant."

Her marriage, it seems, did not survive. Her husband was in poor health and had been in and out of sanatoriums having become addicted to drugs (opium). Friedrich Hoffmann died in 1957 at age 60. At some point in her life Rosi converted to the religion of her husband. Thus she was not part of the Jewish community.

It was said in our family that Rosi Rebitzer Hoffmann was hit by a train and died on January 28, 1967. This happened in Weiden the town where she was born and raised. She was 68. My mother was never certain if it was an accident or a suicide. Neither Rosi nor her brother Hermann had any children.