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Letter surfaced: Weiden Jewess hidden from Nazis
Weiden in the Upper Palatinate 03/12/2020 - 11:16 a.m

Rosa Hoffmann, née Rebitzer, was the only Weiden Jew to survive the Second World War in the city. She was hidden in different places for two years. Until now, it was not fully known who helped to save her life.
by Christine Asher¹

Historian Dr. Sebastian Schott (Stadtarchiv Weiden) has been dealing with the fate of Rosa Hoffmann for some time. Now chance has helped him to write a remarkable letter - and new insights: On August 15, 1945, Rosa Hoffmann wrote to her uncle in Portland (America). She describes her experiences during the Nazi era. The letter is part of a collection archived at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York. Schott drew the attention of the Brit John Farnhill, who is working on a research project for the Jewish community in South Wales, to the collection.

Rosa, married to the Protestant ENT doctor Dr. Friedrich Hoffmann, had to watch helplessly in 1942 as her parents were taken away. Shoe manufacturer Gustav Rebitzer and his wife Ernestine were taken to Nuremberg, where Jews are "collected" in a retirement home for deportation to the East. The mother succumbs to her heart disease there. "Maybe it sounds bitter, but it was for the best," writes Rosa. In September 1942, her father Gustav had to board the train to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. "We saw him one last time. It was admirable how calm and resigned father was." Gustav Rebitzer died in March 1943. Her uncle, her aunt Johanna Boscowitz, and many friends and colleagues "were driven to concentration camps in Poland," writes Rosa.

Weiden is considered "Jew-free". Of the around 170 members of the Jewish community in 1933, not a single one is still there: all have emigrated or been deported. For Rosa, despite the "mixed marriage", things are becoming more and more dangerous. She logs off from the anonymity of Berlin and works as a private nurse in Wilmersdorf. In June 1943 she was arrested by the Gestapo in Berlin. "Fortunately Friedrich was in Berlin and was able to free me, but it was extremely dangerous."

The doctor brings his wife back to Bavaria and hides her. As Rosa writes, she first finds accommodation in Bamberg with a university friend. When an anonymous letter arrives, the odyssey through changing hiding places begins. Her husband finds a place of refuge in Weiden with a worker on Hammerweg, whose name is not mentioned in the letter. At times Rosa lives in Teublitz, "with Fanny's and Betty's parents".

For more than a year, the Jewess hid in the gatekeeper's cottage of the

locksmith Nikolaus Rott, himself a persecuted social democrat, on Regensburger Strasse. In between, she lives with friends (the Schuller family) at Unterer Markt 14, today Wöhr1. The Schullers come from Waidhaus, their daughter Katharina later marries Rott's son. During the last days of the war, Friedrich billeted his wife in the Haidmühle near Altenstadt/WN in view of the increasing air raids. The Müllners Anna and Josef Lindner accomodate them in a hidden back room until the Americans finally roll in in April 1945.

"I was there for a week, when my imprisonment came to a happy end and the Weiden residents greeted me with enthusiasm." Rosa Hoffmann, 47 years old when the war ended, makes no secret of her disappointment. "Now they only have love for us, too late for our poor parents."

The survivor tells of the inauguration of the synagogue in August 1945. "It's for the Polish Jews who have lived here since they were liberated from the Flossenbürg concentration camp." Only Lothar Friedmann came from the former Jewish community. He survived the concentration camp.

Rosa and Friedrich Hoffmann hope in vain that their families' emigrants will come back. But Brother Herrmann stays in Portland, Cousin Sabine in Montreal. Friedrich also wrote a few lines under the letter: "I hope you can come back as soon as possible. Living here these last few years has not been a pleasure. I've grown old. Friedl."

In the end the marriage fails:

The marriage breaks up. Friedrich Hoffmann died in Weiden in 1957 at the age of 60. The single and childless Rosa Hoffmann survived him by ten years. The day of her death is January 28, 1967. She was 68 years old.

Background:

Underestimated the danger

The collection from the New York archive consists of letters from the Rebitzer and Boscowitz families from Weiden to Uncle Anselm in America (Portland). The families jointly ran the "Salix" (Weide) shoe factory on Maxstrasse, today the City-Center location. And they were related: Albert Boscowitz's sister Ernestine was married to his business partner Gustav Rebitzer. Both couples had one daughter each.

None of the four parents survived the Holocaust. Only their children: Rosa Rebitzer (later Hoffmann) and her brother Hermann, who had emigrated to Portland, and Sabine Boscowitz, who was also sent away in time. She emigrated to England, then to Canada.

The letters show how happy family life is falling apart. In the 20s, the Rebitzers rave about their niece Sabine: "She is a really lovely child and very clever." The 20-year-old cousin Rosa writes

to the Uncle Anselm: She thanks him for the dollars to support her dowry. In 1924, Anselm was informed about her engagement to the Protestant ear, nose and throat doctor Dr. Friedrich Hoffmann. The parents are not enthusiastic, as Rosa's father Gustav honestly admits: "In the beginning we didn't agree, but in the end the most important thing in life is the character of a young man and not his religion." The mother later finds well-meaning words: "Our dear Rosi and Friedrich are quite happy together. Friedrich has a very nice practice, Rosi is his assistant and is very skilful."

In the early 1930s the climate changed rapidly. In 1931, Albert Boscowitz reported increasing anti-Semitism. "The worse things are for people, the more radical the elections turn out to be, and the swastika (the sign of anti-Jewish people) is now fashionable." The manufacturer hopes for better days: "Things are better for Jews everywhere in the world than here. Hopefully other times will come again."

The other times - they do not come. Sabine's father Albert Boscowitz died in Munich in 1938 (cause unknown), her mother Johanna is thought to have disappeared in the Polish transit ghetto of Izbica near Lublin. Rosa's mother Ernestine Rebitzer died in 1942 after being deported to Nuremberg. The collection contains a last letter from Gustav Rebitzer from the transit camp in Nuremberg to his son-in-law Friedrich: "Dear Friedl, yesterday we slept the first night without mattresses. Which wouldn't have been so bad if some of the gentlemen in the room hadn't chatted so much." He still has hope: "I'm sending you two telegrams from Hermann, which you can add to our emigration papers." Gustav Rebitzer dies in March 1943 in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.