

# My Search for Heritage

A Genealogical Travelogue

Germany  
July, 2011  
Dennis Aron

## Introduction:

My parents survived Nazi Germany.

My father's immediate and close family came to Chicago intact in 1938 when he was 17. He served in the US Army during World War II in the Philippines and New Guinea.

My mother left her parents and sister in Germany in 1937 at age 16 and came to live in Chicago with her aunt, uncle and three cousins. Her parents and sister, unable to get exit passes, perished in a death camp.

My parents met after the war in Chicago and married in 1946. I was born in 1947, my brother Lester in 1952.

This is a journal of my 2011 trip to ancestral villages in Germany with a summary of the genealogy efforts which led to it.

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I have done genealogy, on and off, for the last thirty years, more intensely in my five years of retirement. My primary family trees are for the Aron, Speier, Wirth, Rosenbusch, Kander, Heilbron and Hirsch families.

My paternal grandmother's maiden name was Wirth. I built the Wirth family tree with help from several members of her generation and Gustav Schellack, an archivist in their home town of Gemünden. Regarding the Aron family, my father recalled little. The primary information I had on the Aron family came from a wonderful but limited family register from my great grandfather, Samuel Aron. Had I been more interested when my grandparents were alive, I would have much more information.

My mother never wanted to talk much about her Speier and Rosenbusch families, given the loss of her parents and sister. As a result, I almost never asked questions on that topic – in respect of her feelings... and mine. As far as I knew, my mother's surviving family was very small, numbering less than twenty. After she died, I connected with Mark Gordon, Howard Heilbrunn and other cousins who had put significant effort into building family trees. When all the information was eventually combined, hundreds of my mother's living relatives were identified.

I also had largely put my head in the sand when it came to learning about the Holocaust. I avoided the pain. When my mother died in 2002, I found a packet of letters she received from her mother in Germany in 1938-39, a period when the Nazi persecution escalated. I did not try

to read them – I could not handle it. Seven years later, a year after my father died, I took them out of their little box. I knew reading them would be painful, but they had waited long enough. Then ... frustration! I was unable to read the old German writing and her penmanship.

I had come to know Hans-Peter Klein through an introduction by Mark Gordon. Hans-Peter is a non-Jewish teacher in Germany whose avocation and passion are German Jewish genealogy and history. He had become an internet collaborator and friend. He is a most generous and giving mensch. When I asked him if he knew of someone who could transcribe the letters, he immediately offered to do it and I gratefully accepted.

In the early letters my grandmother gave motherly advice to her distant daughter, reported on local news and optimistically planned to leave Germany. In the last letters she was trapped in fear and desperation. It was very, very sad to read them and terrible to think about what my mother went through as she received them and they eventually stopped coming.

The letters opened the emotional door for me – I was finally ready to deal with that time in my family's history. I wanted to know more. I wanted to go to Germany to see my families' towns, their cemeteries, search the archives and personally come to grips with all my feelings as a child of Holocaust survivors. This was to be a summer of discovery.

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July, 2011 was most convenient for Hans-Peter -- I needed to meet him and thank him in person for all his help. Logistically, I broke my trip into three segments, one, the cluster of towns in the state of Hessen where my mother's family originated, and, for my father's family, two areas in the state of Rheinland-Pfalz.

On seeing this plan, Hans-Peter offered to accompany me in Hessen where he lives and invited me to stay at his home. I was delighted. Then the kicker: he said that he would like to join me for the rest of the trip as well, since he had close connections to the other regions. Hans-Peter's participation made this trip much more than it could have been without him. I am forever grateful.

I am an experienced vacation and business traveler. This trip was more of a business trip – I had several goals that I was interested in accomplishing and, while I was open to sightseeing, it was not my purpose. The planning and arranging were challenging.

Sheryl Sachman, a cousin, had visited her mother's home town in Germany the prior year. She suggested that I would get more from my visit if I had a local guide in each town. The first challenge: I had identified over 20 ancestral towns that I might visit, but had only two contacts in Germany: Hans-Peter and Sabine Borlinghaus, another researcher that Hans-Peter had introduced when I first mentioned having family from Rheinland-Pfalz.

Sabine is Assistant to the Mayor of a small town. Her passion is Jewish genealogy and history, especially in the region of Bad Kreuznach which is near where some of my family lived. She has taken photos of every Jewish grave in Bad Kreuznach and has spent much time at the archives and collected substantial information useful to other researchers. She was very helpful in sharing information with me over the last year and when I mentioned this trip, she arranged contacts and our hotel.

Through Hans-Peter's and Sabine's effort and my own networking, we connected with people who would help us in the towns of Frickhofen, Gemünden, Guxhagen, Mandel, Melsungen, Meudt and Neuwied. They all proved to be marvelous.

I was also interested in visiting archives and finding original records of births, marriages and deaths, possibly of relatives I hadn't yet identified. The second challenge: identifying the appropriate archives for the towns<sup>1</sup>, establishing contact, and communicating clearly what information I wanted. A combination of internet research and help from Sabine led to contacts at four archives in Koblenz, Neuwied and Simmern.

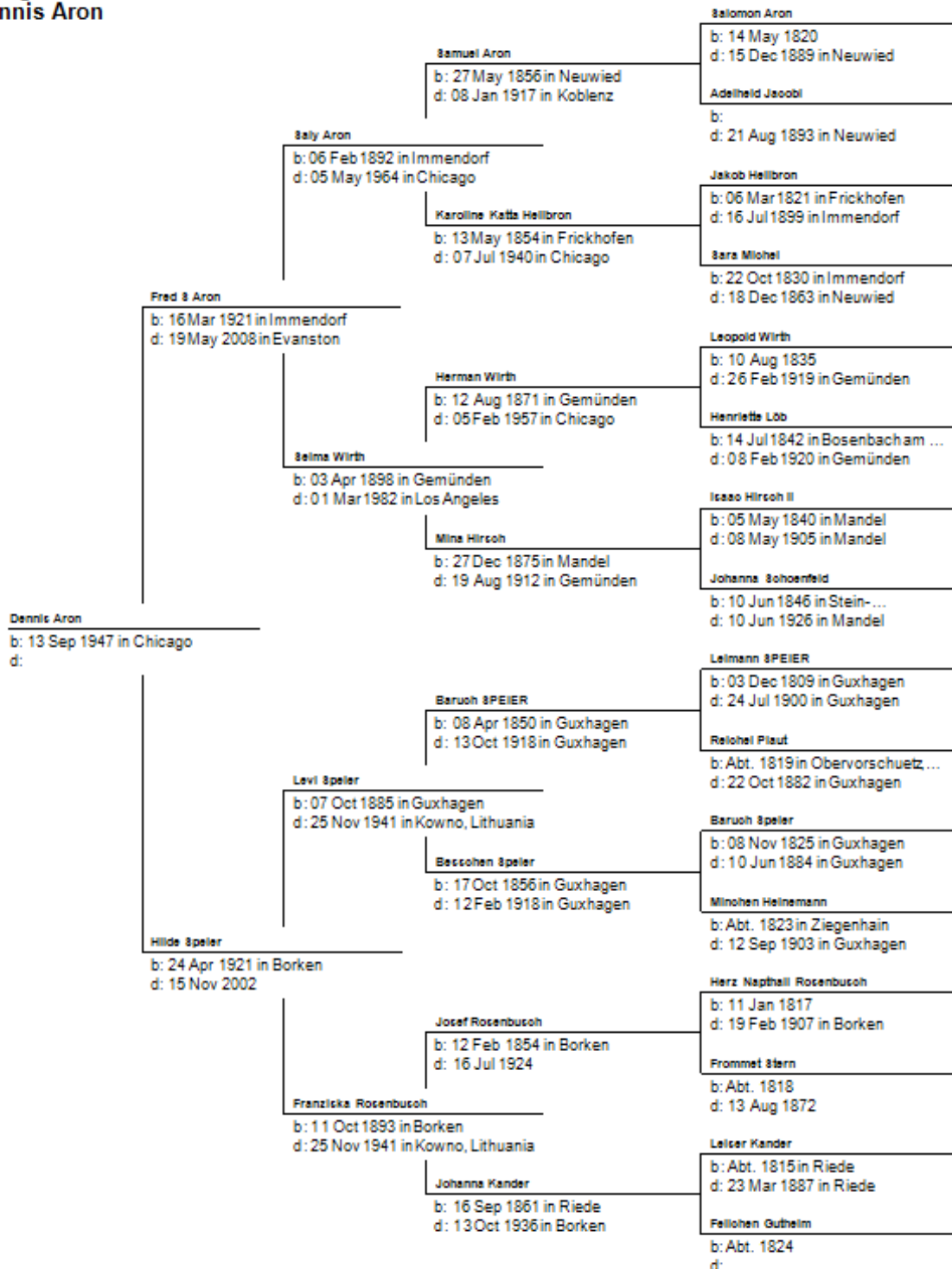
The third challenge was putting all these people and places into a manageable schedule. This was easier given my experience setting up business trips, but still a long process. But it did come together nicely.

The following family pedigree chart and maps are intended to provide some perspective for the trip.

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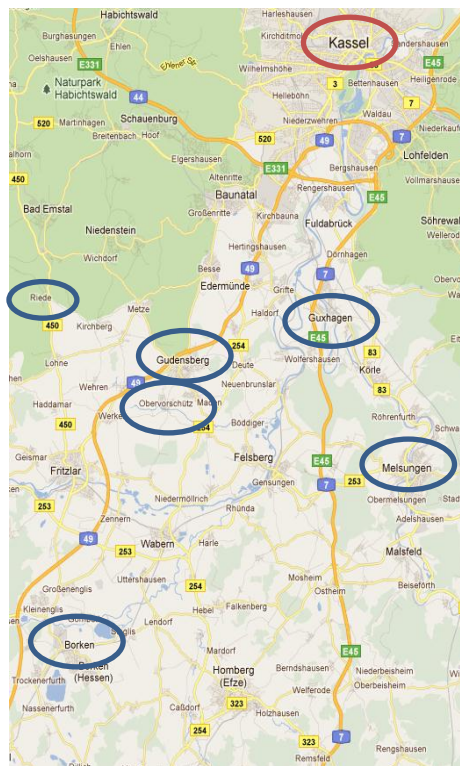
<sup>1</sup> This was not as easy as it sounds. Germany has a complex network of archives at the local, regional and national level, with some overlap of documents between them. At one of the archives we found an archive directory ordered by town – a great resource for any genealogist.

## Pedigree Chart for Dennis Aron

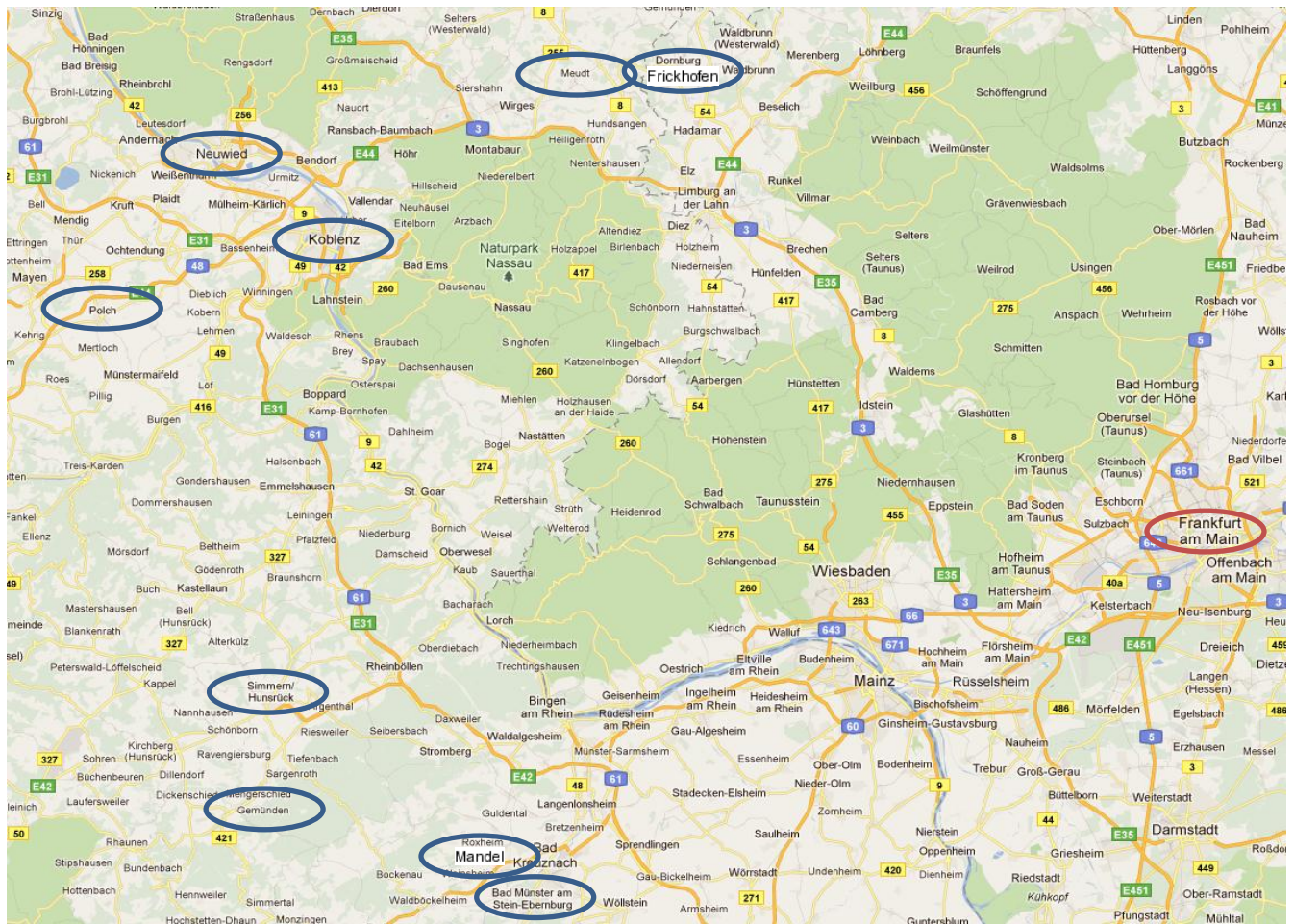




1 For perspective, it's about 200 km from Frankfurt to Kassel.



2 Maternal Towns – Borken is about 45 km from Kassel



**3 Paternal Towns - It's about 130 km from Frankfurt to Koblenz. We stayed in Neuwied in the north and Ebernberg in the south.**



**6-Jul** I landed in Frankfurt early in the morning. My first meeting was that morning with Monica Kingreen of the Fritz Bauer Institut, who as part of her duties does projects for the Jewish Museum. She is an historian and author with an emphasis on the Jewish community in the state of Hessen before and during the Holocaust. I had contributed family pictures to a web site ([www.before-the-holocaust.net](http://www.before-the-holocaust.net)) she developed showing the family life of the Jews before the Holocaust and I wanted to meet her.

She told me about my grandparents Levi and Franziska Speier and aunt, Ursel Speier, their 1939 move from their home in Borken, a hotbed of Nazism, to Frankfurt and finally of their deportation which took them to the Kaunas death camp in Lithuania. I had not been aware of any of this but their final fate. She took me to the Neuer Börneplatz Memorial (of which I was also unaware) on the wall of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Frankfurt, which was in use from 1272 to 1828. The memorial consists of 11,000 bronze blocks set into the wall, each inscribed with the name of a Frankfurt Jew who was deported and murdered during the reign of Nazi terror. She directed me to the blocks for my family (again, I had no idea of the memorial or that my family was remembered there) and respectfully waited at a distance.

This was a very emotional start to the trip. Seeing this memorial to my family amid the 11,000 was shocking and overwhelming. It is one thing to know that your family perished -- quite another to feel it *that* way in *that* place. I shed tears then and at other points of the trip, but that level of emotion, continued for the entire trip, would not have been bearable.

Monica took me then for a soothing lunch and small talk on the main square of Frankfurt. I needed to calm down. After we parted, I drove to Melsungen where I would connect with Hans-Peter after a couple of nights at a bed and breakfast he had arranged. Thankfully, the rest of the trip would be less emotional.



**4 Neuer Börneplatz Memorial.** The blocks cover the exterior of the entire wall surrounding the cemetery.



**5 Memorial Blocks for my grandparents Franziska (Fraenze) and Levi Speier, Levi's second cousin Moses Max Speier, and my aunt Ursel Speier.** The bottom line "Riga" on the three stones indicates the original destination of the transport on which they were sent. For some reason, it was redirected to Kaunas death camp in Lithuania where all the passengers were murdered three days after leaving Frankfurt..

**7-Jul** **Melsungen:** Home of Hans-Peter Klein. He was on holiday until 8-Jul. This was a rest day. I needed the time to recover from travel and absorb the prior day's experience while wandering Melsungen, a nice town with a very pretty square.

**8-Jul** I met up with Hans-Peter, aka "Pit", who was to be my fellow traveler for the remainder of the trip. As we traveled together, I learned that, in addition to his genealogy and history work, he is very active in the restoration and memorialization of Jewish sites in Hessen and assisting family



researchers like me. I stayed with Pit's family for three nights.

**Guxhagen**: home of Levi Speier, my maternal grandfather and the six prior generations of Speiers and home of Beile Katz Speier, my 3<sup>rd</sup> great grandmother and the prior three generations of Katzes.

We met with Gunnar Richter, Director of the Breitenau Memorial, at the edge of Guxhagen. Breitenau is a Holocaust memorial organization founded by the University of Kassel. It includes a permanent exhibition, a reference library, and an archive. It is housed in a former monastery, prison and early concentration camp (1933-1934) and later a so-called educational work camp (Arbeitserziehungslager, 1940-1945).

Mr. Richter showed us a presentation on the persecution of the Jews that he developed and would soon be presenting. It related some of the specific horrors for the Jews in Germany in the 1930s and the current status of former synagogues. He further opened my eyes to the evil of Kristallnacht. While there, I reviewed and took photos of archival records stored at the memorial.



**6 This Photograph is in the Stadtarchiv Kassel, Bestand E 4. (Kassel City Archive File E 4) It is included in Mr. Richter's presentation. It shows the scene outside the center and synagogue of the orthodox Jewish community of Kassel the morning after Kristallnacht November 9-10, 1938**

In Guxhagen, there is a nicely restored synagogue with memorial displays on the second floor where women prayed. While there is a current Jewish community in nearby Gudensberg, for reasons I didn't understand, they were unable to negotiate use of the synagogue for their congregation. However, they do use it a number of times during the year. Restoration of the

synagogue and establishment of the memorial was a project in which Pit was involved.



**7 The restored Guxhagen synagogue sanctuary.**

We took photos at the Guxhagen Jewish Cemetery and looked for homes of the family. I would take photos of graves in each of the cemeteries we would visit. My purpose was to gather information on birth and death dates and maiden names, to identify family members that may have been missed by prior research and to have the photo for the record. Over time, the stones erode and become less and less legible. The cemetery was locked, but Pit had gotten the key from the authorities. It was fairly overgrown and many of the stones were already deteriorated.

**9-Jul** **Borken**: Home of Franziska Rosenbusch Speier, my maternal grandmother and the prior five generations of the Rosenbusch family.

There are two Jewish cemeteries that served Borken, the old, in service from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, 7.5 kilometers away in the farm village of Haarhausen and the new, in service from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Borken. Many of the older cemeteries we saw were a distance from town. I understand that these locations were those that were affordable for the Jewish community. The idea of going 7.5 kilometers, especially in winter, with some probably on foot, must have been quite arduous for the mourners, their friends and their family.

We arrived in Borken on Shabbos, so the cemeteries were locked. With no flexibility to schedule for another day, I had no alternative, so with Pit standing watch, I scaled the fences at each of them and took pictures of graves. We ended up making two trips to Haarhausen, as the first was aborted because we were not sure how the farmer working near the gate would react to my gate climbing. Haarhausen had many graves, but, as we found at most cemeteries, the oldest stones were badly deteriorated. The stones in the new cemetery were in excellent shape, including those of my great grandparents, Joseph and Johanna Kander Rosenbusch. A few stones were overgrown with thorny shrubs which made taking photos a painful experience.



Other than that, the cemetery was very nicely maintained. This was odd: do the caretakers think that no one wants to see who is buried in those graves?



8 [translation of the German] Here rests my dear husband, our good caring father Josef Rosenbusch, born 12 Feb 1854, died 15 Jul 1924

9 [translation of the German] Here rests in peace our dear mother Johanna Rosenbusch, born Kander, born 16 Sep 1861, died 13 Oct 1936



10 The overgrowth made it hard to read some gravestones

In town, we tried in vain to find my mother's house. We knew the address, but the street numbering system changed after the war, so we couldn't find it. We had a picture of what I

believed to be their home and walked the neighborhood looking unsuccessfully for houses that matched. We found some senior citizens who remembered the Rosenbusches but not the Speiers.



11 My mother's family in front of what I believe was their house. This was the photo we used to try to find it.

Continuing our quest, we went to the village hall to find old village maps. They did not have them, but referred us to a local researcher who ended up having the information<sup>2</sup>.

My goal in finding the exact location is to commission placement of memorial Stolpersteine<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> After note: The Speier home was razed in 1971 and stood exactly where we spoke to the senior citizens. Below are photos, obtained post-trip by Pit from Heinrich Broz, an archivist in Borken, taken in 1971 at the home's address, proving that the original photo was taken at the Speier home:





While at the village hall, the manager of the archival records was very nice and provided copies of several family birth and marriage records including the birth certificate of my grandmother.

Seite 117

Nr. 117

Borken, am 11.ten Oktober 1893

Vor dem unterzeichneten Standesbeamten erschien heute, der  
 Persönlichkeit nach \_\_\_\_\_, Sara kannt,  
 der Grundelmann Hilff Rosenbusch  
 wohnhaft zu Borken bei der Kirche N. 84/85  
Israelitisch Religion, und zeigte an, daß von der  
Johanna Rosenbusch geboren  
Carter, früher Hilff  
Israelitisch Religion,  
 wohnhaft hier  
 zu Borken bei der Kirche N. 84/85  
 am 11 im Oktober des Jahres  
 tausend acht hundert neun zig und drei hundert und  
einzig Uff ein Kind weiblichlichen  
 Geschlechts geboren worden sei, welches Sara Vornamen  
Franziska  
 erhalten habe.

Vorgelesen, genehmigt und \_\_\_\_\_  
Israelitisch  
Tosya Rosenbusch  
 Der Standesbeamte.  
Hellwieser

*Handwritten notes on the left side of the page:*  
 Borken, den 27. September 1938.  
 Gemäß § 2 Nr. 2. der Verordnung  
 zur Ausführung des Gesetzes über  
 die Änderung von Familiennamen  
 wurden die Lebensdaten von  
 17. Oktober 1893 (i. Reichsgesetz-  
 blatt Nr. 1044) für die  
 Geburtsurkunde mit der  
 Unterschrift von 27. September  
 1938 mit der Unterschrift  
 von 1. Januar 1939 die  
 Geburtsurkunde von  
 M. Rosenbusch neu  
 ausgestellt.  
 Die Unterschrift  
 in Borken,  
 H. H.  
 Borken, am 2. März 1949.  
 Die Geburtsurkunde vom  
 27. September 1938 wird gelöscht.  
 Die Unterschrift  
 H. H.

12 Birth Record, obtained at Borken Village Hall, of Franziska Rosenbusch, my grandmother, born 11 Oct 1893 signed by her father. On the upper left are annotations from 1938 and 1949. Here is a rough translation:

**Borken, December 27, 1938th**

According to §2 of the second regulation for implementing the Law of 17<sup>th</sup> August 1938 (Reich Law Gazette, page 1044) on control of the family name and first name approved December 23 1938 effective 1 January 1939 the adjacent person assumed the additional name Sara<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Literally stumbling blocks. These are bronze memorial paving blocks placed in front of the former homes of victims and survivors as reminders so that passersby will always remember. See <http://www.stolpersteine.com/> for a description of this project of artist Gunter Demnig. Also see figure 15 for an example. In each town there are volunteers who keep the blocks clean and polished.

<sup>4</sup> In August, 1938, The Reich Minister of the Interior decreed that all Jewish men residing in Germany and bearing names not recognizable as "Jewish" must adopt the middle name "Israel." Jewish women were required to take the middle name "Sarah." Note the annotation that the name adoption was voided in 1949.

**The registrar representative  
Hahn**

**Borken, 2 March 1949.  
The preceding marginal note of 27th December 1938 is deleted.  
The registrar**

**Riede:** home of Johanna Kander Rosenbusch, my great grandmother, and the prior five generations of the Kander family.

Riede is a tiny village. The Riede Jews' dead were buried in the Obervorschütz Jewish cemetery, 12.5 kilometers from Riede.

There is a new memorial to the Riede victims of the Holocaust and Jewish Community. In describing the Jewish community's contribution to village life it mentions Aron Kanter (one of the various spellings of the name), my 3<sup>rd</sup> great grandfather, who was an alderman of the village. Pit was involved in the establishment of the memorial. Aron Kanter's large house still stands, adjacent to the memorial.



**13 Memorial Tablet**

**In honor of the persecuted Jewish citizens and to the admonition and memory of the victims of National Socialism. For many centuries the Jewish community was a vital part of our community and was extinguished in a short period of National Socialism.**

**Jewish fellow citizens lived in Riede from the 17th to the 20th Century. They were merchants and traders. There was an**

"Israelite" education system in the 19th Century Mr. Aaron Kanter was a "community member", which has the same importance as today's town council member.

At least eight native fellow Riede citizens were killed in concentration camps. These are:

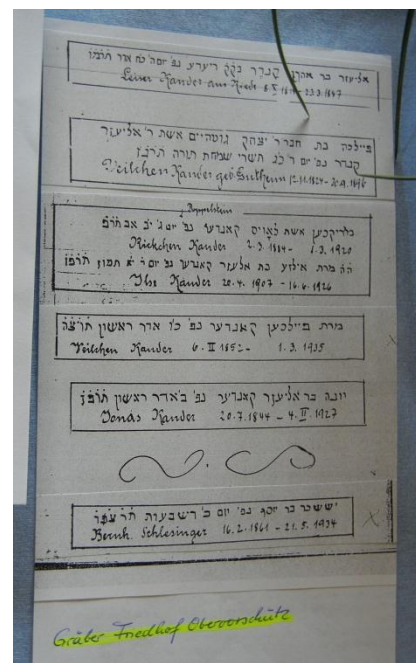
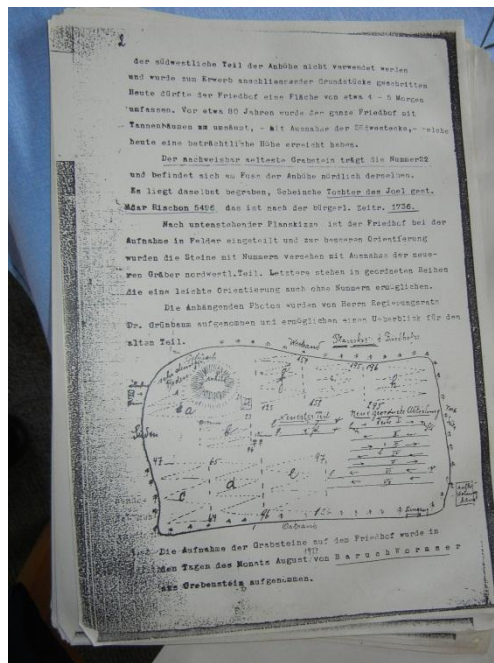
(Hanette) Scheunchen Ferse nee Kander, Bernhard Schlesinger, merchant, Nathan Heinemann, Hedwig Heinemann, Louis Kander, cattle dealer, Recha Kander nee Grünewald, Rosa Frankenberg nee Kander, Julius Heinemann, Merchant

[Of the eight, four were Kander family members.]

**10-Jul Melsungen:** Home of Ilse Stern Beissinger, my mother's first cousin, and the prior generations of the Stern family. Ilse was one of the few members of my mother's family that I knew. She and her husband Heinz left Germany and made Israel their home shortly after Hitler came to power. Yet, they still loved Germany and after the war they summered each year in Melsungen and stayed with Ilse's family's close friends and old neighbors, the Reinemund family.

Pit unexpectedly arranged a nice visit with the Reinemund family. We saw Dr. Gerhard Reinemund, son of Ilse's friend, and his wife and son. Sadly, I didn't get to meet his mother as she had passed away earlier that year. The Reinemunds were gracious hosts and quite fond of their old Jewish friends. They spoke warmly of their annual visits. Their college age son studies history and was outspoken on the horrors of the Nazis. Hopefully his interest and outrage is representative of his generation of Germans.

**Obervorschütz:** The Obervorschütz Jewish Cemetery was used by the Jews of several towns including Riede and Gudensberg. It is large and in reasonably good condition. Luckily Pit had a chart of the cemetery so we could find some of the graves of interest.



14 Documentation of the Obervorschütz Cemetery prepared by a local researcher

**11-Jul** We traveled this day from Melsungen in Hessen to Neuwied in Rheinland-Pfalz. We made one stop in Polch.

**Polch:** This was the home of Leo Hoenig's mother. Leo is one of my genealogy collaborators, related by marriage, who wrote an extensive genealogical history of many Jewish families in this part of Germany. He suggested visiting his cousins Heinz Kahn and Inge Kahn. Both in their late 80s, they were warm and gracious hosts. They are Holocaust camp survivors, Heinz of Auschwitz; Inge of Theresienstadt. Heinz was in the underground effort at Auschwitz. Their families returned to Germany after the war as their fathers were confident such a horror could never again happen there. They had not met before the war, but apparently Inge had known of Heinz and "had her eyes on him." They met in Germany after their return and married. Heinz is a retired veterinarian and currently coordinates the care and administration for 100 Jewish cemeteries in the Koblenz region. He told us of the growing Jewish community, mostly from Russia, with little training in Jewish traditions.<sup>5</sup>

**12-Jul** **Neuwied:** Home of Samuel Aron, my great grandfather and the prior 4 generations<sup>6</sup>.

Our guide in the city was Rolf Wüst, the head of *Deutsch-Israelischer Freundeskreis Neuwied* (Neuwied German-Israeli circle of friends). He has led the effort in gathering information on the Neuwied victims of the Holocaust and installing Stolpersteine (see footnote <sup>3</sup> on page 13) in the former Neuwied Jewish neighborhoods. Rolf is a retired English teacher. He was a warm, enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide.



**15 A Stolpersteine placed in the pavement in front of the home of my great grandfather's second cousin in**

<sup>5</sup>Afterword: Janet Isenburg, another descendant of this region, who was also introduced by Leo Hoenig sent me the following note after reading that we visited the Kahns: "I don't know if you noticed a huge, very old armoire in the Kahn's foyer? It belonged to Heinz's family. When he came back after the war, he searched all over for it and finally found it in a neighbor's barn. The neighbor insisted it was his and that it had been in his family for generations. Heinz said "It's mine and I can prove it." He then opened a secret drawer and produced Kahn family photos. That's how they got the piece back."

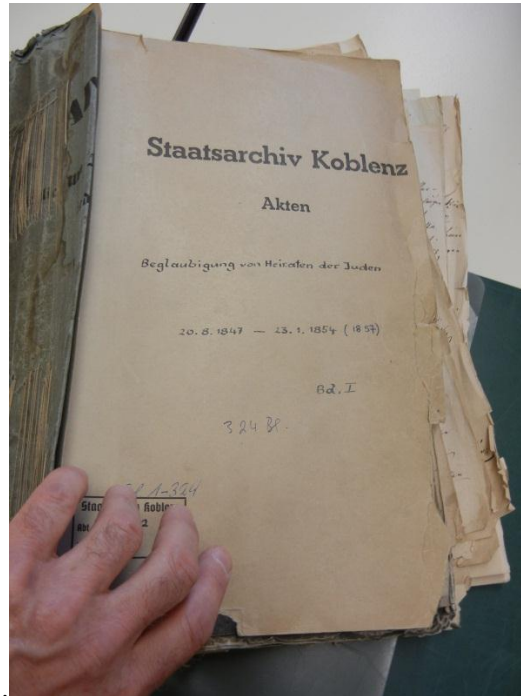
<sup>6</sup> The family took on the Aron name in 1846 when the French under Napoleon controlled the portion of Germany west of the Rhine River. Up until this time the Jews used no surnames but were identified by their fathers' names. For example, Samuel, son of Salomon would be known as Samuel Salomon. The French required that they use self-selected surnames. My 3<sup>rd</sup> grandfather's sons became Salomon and Süssmann Aron. We have a copy of the name change register from Gemünden which clearly lists each Jew and their names before and after the change. Hopefully the archives hold such documents for Neuwied and the other villages.



## Neuwied.

**“Here lived Sofia Abraham, born Aron in 1886. Deported, 1941 to Lodz, murdered 9 Jun 1943”**

We visited Gerd Anhaeuser at the Neuwied branch of the Landeshauptarchiv [State Archive]. It was quite interesting. We reviewed and photographed the pages of interest in a wonderful original binder of detailed handwritten narrative records of Jewish weddings in the mid-1800s. I was surprised we were permitted to handle it as it was dog-eared and water damaged. Alas, a look at birth, death and marriage records was left for a future trip as they were unavailable on that day.



**16 Koblenz State Archive files**

**Certification of Jewish Weddings 20 Aug 1847 - 23 Jan 1854 (1857)**

Next we walked by the once Jewish homes of Neuwied, including all 34 of the Stolpersteine.<sup>7</sup>

We visited the Neuwied-Niederbieber cemetery where my Aron ancestors are buried. It's very well maintained and is a great example of the respect that the Germans can show for the Jewish cemeteries. I took no photos at this cemetery: Thanks to Ted Tobias, a cousin, I have a copy of a detail-filled book on this cemetery with photos of each grave, full translations of Hebrew to German, cross-references to death records and a variety of cross-indexing<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Encountering Stolpersteine yields ambivalent emotions: one the one hand, sadness at the reminder of another Jew lost and the thought of placing more stones for my family and on the other, warmth for the Germans who push to place these memorials.

<sup>8</sup> Der Jüdische Friedhof in Neuwied-Niederbieber by Naftali Bar-Giora Bamberger, Copyright 2000, Publisher: Deutsch-Israelischer Freundeskreis Neuwied e. V.

**Meudt:** Birthplace of my 3<sup>rd</sup> great grandmother Eva Isaak (on my father's side) and 3 prior generations. She was born in 1809 on what would be my birthday 138 years later.

We were hosted by Stefan Assmann, editor of a comprehensive history of Meudt<sup>9</sup>, written to celebrate its 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The book includes 180 pages devoted to the history of the Jewish community including extensive genealogies.

Mr. Assmann took us for a tour of the key Jewish homes and the cemetery, one of the few in-town cemeteries we visited. Pit took videos of his presentation at each home.

He showed us the memorial monument to the Synagogue and the Jewish community and told us about the triennial memorial meeting of survivors and their families held in Meudt. A memorial like this is remarkable for a town with less than 2,000 residents and an example of what is possible in small towns.



17 Memorial Monument to the Synagogue and Jewish Community of Meudt

In memory of the synagogue built in 1880/81  
by the Jewish community of Meudt.

It was destroyed on 9 Nov 1938 by supporters of the authority in power.  
Meudt on 9 Nov 1988

They have cast fire into thy sanctuary,  
They have defiled by casting down the dwelling place of thy name to the ground. Psalms 74.7

<sup>9</sup> 900 Jahre Meudt 1097-1997

We then visited Meudt's Bürgermeister [Mayor] Müller to chat and to buy a copy of Stefan Assmann's book, which was commissioned by the village. Also remarkable for this small town is its modern and spacious village hall and surrounding grounds, not to mention the desire and resources to commission and publish a 948 page history.

**13-Jul** **Koblenz:** Birthplace of Fred (Siegfried) Aron, my father and Sam (Sally) Aron, my grandfather, as well as my 2<sup>nd</sup> great grandmother, Sara Michel, and two generations before her.

Our plan was to spend the morning at Landeshauptarchiv [State Archive] Koblenz, and then take some time off in the afternoon for a leisurely Rhine river cruise. The archive is a very modern large, several-story, high-security building, jam-packed with records and microfilm.

I had scheduled this appointment by email and included very specific research topics. We arrived on time and were ushered into a public room which (to our surprise and regret) prohibited photography. The next surprise was that the person we were to meet was on holiday and that no one had done any advance work to find the requested records. Frank Neupart was assigned to help us, which turned out to be fortunate. He has had much experience in researching Jewish families and was very helpful, especially in the two hours we had to wait for our first files when he helped research some emigration questions.

The archive works like a research library. It has indexes you can review to determine which files you want to see and then you fill out a request and drop it into a basket. Every two hours the forms are processed and the files brought to you. It turned out to be very efficient. I reviewed birth, death and marriage records for Gemünden and Mandel and found information on many family members.

Bottom line: We found much information, but only scratched the surface. The resources there are huge. Adding to the challenge is that no photography is permitted anywhere in the building. Printing from the microfilm is easy, but not always legible. For the paper records, you either have to transcribe the information you want or order copies which is very expensive. Future visits are in order.

With all this process, we ended up spending from 9am to 3pm in the archive and missed the Rhine cruise we had planned. Luckily, Pit found a one hour cruise where we could sit, enjoy a sausage and beer and see the Rhine. It was nice to relax after a hard day at the archive.

**14-Jul** **Koblenz:** We met with Peter Kleber at the Koblenz town archive before it opened for general business. The archive is in a beautiful old castle on the Mosel, very close to where it meets with the Rhine river.



#### 18 Koblenz town archive

Peter, the archivist, responded thoughtfully to my initial request with abbreviated genealogies of my three Koblenz ancestor lines that included information that could not have been in the archives. This showed an unexpected level of interest and research on his part and raised my expectations for this visit.

Peter was all I had hoped: he declared himself to be the epicenter of Jewish genealogy research in Koblenz and he showed us some of his work to prove it.

He took us out to the document storage room with about 20 large moving archive shelves full of original document binders organized so complexly that he had to stop and think each time he went to fetch a binder.





**19 Peter Kleber, left, Hans-Peter Klein, right, in the archive storage room.**

His method was simple: I identified a person, town and timeframe I was looking for. He then referenced the genealogies he had sent me in which he had inserted index numbers directing him to the right shelf location. He fetched the binder, found the document I wanted and let me take photos. We spent about 2 ½ hours doing that. How wonderful.

**Koblenz Cemetery:** I had a chart I found on the Internet and found the grave locations of four relatives. Finding where the rest of the Koblenz family is buried will be left for another trip. Pit also found a couple of graves there for another family's project.

The cemetery is well maintained and the chart information which I'd found earlier was accurate.

One feature of this cemetery was disturbing: The center walk was walled on each side. The walls were constructed of parts of broken Jewish gravestones.



**20 Wall in Koblenz Jewish Cemetery**

It's not clear to me if this is a respectful way to deal with these fragments that probably were the result of Kristallnacht, when Jewish properties were burned or trashed.<sup>10</sup> While these walls were

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<sup>10</sup> Afterword: Peter Kleber sent me the story of this wall. He is writing a history of these gravestones. The grave stone wall was erected early in 1914 by the Jewish community. As the cemetery had reached capacity, per Jewish tradition, they raised the level of the west side of the cemetery (on the right side of the photo) by dumping additional soil so that new graves could be put above the old. According to Peter, the old Jewish cemetery in Prague has 13 layers of graves.

In 1942, during the Nazi era, gravestones were taken from the cemetery and were used as paving stones. They remained in place, in use as stairs leading to a kindergarten until September, 1950, shortly after their scandalous use was publicized in the international press (see below) and the Jewish community was permitted to take back the stones. Those stones, including those that were destroyed on Kristallnacht that could not be identified with a specific grave were used to reconstruct the wall corresponding to its state in 1914.

The New York Times, Wednesday, August 23, 1950:

#### **JEWISH GRAVESTONES FORM GERMAN STEPS**

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES, Frankfurt, Germany, Aug 22 - United States High Commissioner John J. McCloy has called the attention of André François Poncet, French High Commissioner, to a confirmed report that a stairway constructed of headstones from Jewish cemeteries was being used at a children's school in Coblentz in the French zone.

In writing to the French official, Mr. McCloy expressed his incredulity and enclosed photographs in which the inscriptions on the gravestones were discernible. Continuous use of these stairs would lead to violent sentiments both in the United States and France, Mr. McCloy declared.

unsettling, in my opinion, they represent a better treatment than what we found in Frickhofen that afternoon. At least the inscriptions can be read.

This is an actively used cemetery. As Heinz Kahn, the survivor we visited in Polch, had indicated, it appears that the great majority, if not all, of the recent graves are Russian. His comments about their lack of knowledge of Jewish traditions are confirmed by the floral arrangements on the graves. Adjacent to the cemetery is what appears to be a Jewish Community Center. Nearby is an active Synagogue.

**Frickhofen:** Birthplace of my great grandmother Karoline Katta Heilbron Aron and the three preceding generations of Heilbrons. Karoline immigrated to Chicago in 1938 with my grandparents, father and uncle.

We met Hubert Hecker, Peter-Josef Mink and Mr. Mink's daughter at the Frickhofen cemetery. Mr. Hecker is a history teacher and has written about the Jewish Community in Frickhofen<sup>11</sup>. Mr. Mink is a pastor and author<sup>12</sup>. They, like Pit, are involved in various ways in preserving the memory of the Jewish community of the area around Frickhofen.

The Jews of Frickhofen were buried in the Ellar cemetery until 1916. The newer Frickhofen cemetery has only 20 graves. It was destroyed on Kristallnacht. In 1971, two grandsons of a couple buried there decided that the then completely barren cemetery with unmarked graves was unacceptable, and, at their own expense and with their own labor, brought the cemetery to its current state. There are two rows of graves each outlined in concrete and marked with a small square marble headstone<sup>13</sup>.

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The school, attended by children 3 to 6 years old, was built before the war, but had been bombed out and temporary wooden structure put in its place. The stairway, however, remained.

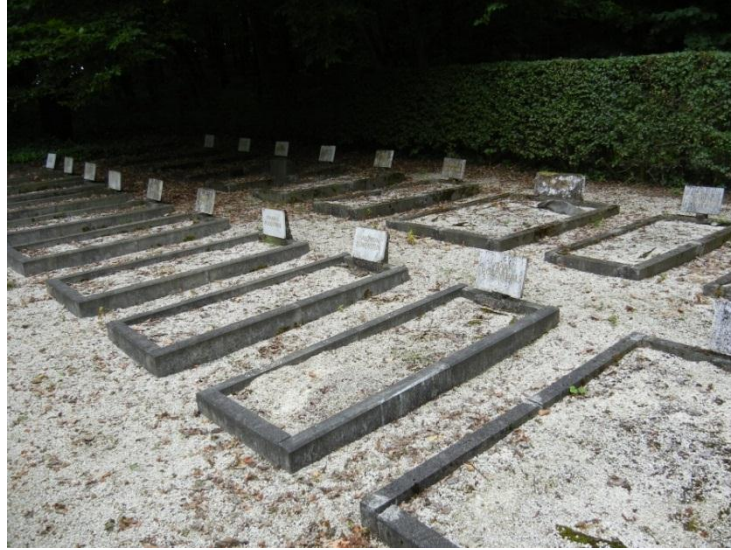
Recently, a series of incidents in which headstones in Jewish cemeteries throughout Germany had been overturned, aroused the country. However, it was pointed out that the stones on this particular staircase originally had been put in at the time of its construction.

Subsequent to Mr. McCloy's complaint, the inscriptions were scraped off. But a new set of photographs showed that the stones still were there.

<sup>11</sup> *Historische Ortsbegehung zu den Häusern ehemaliger jüdischer Mitbürger in Frickhofen (Historic site visit to the homes of former Jewish citizens in Frickhofen)*

<sup>12</sup> *Die Jüdische Gemeinde Ellar (The Jewish Community of Ellar)* Ellar is 5.5 km from Frickhofen.

<sup>13</sup> Afterword: Per Mr. Hecker, the mayor of Frickhofen ensures that the cemetery is maintained annually, including hedge trimming, fallen branch removal and occasional thorough repairs. A few years ago, the name plates were replaced and the names of the most recently buried were indicated in gold lettering.



**21 Frickhofen Cemetery**

A memorial to those lost in the holocaust stands at one end of the cemetery. In an adjacent corner is a moss-covered random pile of broken gravestones. After Kristallnacht, the stones were discarded in the forest. Years later, someone decided to gather them and pile them up in their current location.



**22 Frickhofen Jewish Cemetery - pile of broken gravestones**

All agree that the current situation is unacceptable, but my contacts were unsure of the appropriate action to take. I have since consulted with a Rabbi, who indicated that any fragment that can be identified should be placed on the appropriate grave. For the others, he liked the idea of burying them and having a memorial placed over them. We discussed this idea at the



cemetery. Others have since raised the issue that burying them would lose valuable genealogical information. As usual, there are no easy answers.

Mr. Hecker gave us a tour of the Jewish homes of Frickhofen based on his book. He's engaging and passionate in telling the story. He gave me a few copies. He also gave me several pages of work he had done on genealogies of Frickhofen's Jewish families and other information. It included 3 generations of the Heilbron family with several relatives of whom I was not aware.

**Ebernberg and Norheim (in the area of Bad Kreuznach):** Sabine Borlinghaus suggested we stay in Ebernberg on the Nahe river for our days visiting Simmern, Gemünden and Mandel. The river and the surrounding cliffs are beautiful.

Beyond all her help leading up to the trip, our time with Sabine was a pleasure -- I thoroughly enjoyed the time we spent together. She was excited to have us visit so we could attend the annual Norheim hot air balloon festival. It is an annual highlight for her and was a welcome break for Pit and me from the intensity of the rest of the trip. This year's show was somewhat limited due to high winds, but close to 1,000 people of all ages gathered to have a great time. Pit and I met much of Sabine's family and enjoyed our time with them, drinking, eating, chatting and watching the show.



**23** The balloon show consisted of loud music and the balloons being lit in a pattern with the music. Much fun.

**15-Jul** **Simmern:** Location of the Rhein-Hunsrück Archive and the Hunsrück Museum, both run by Fritz Schellack, the son of Gustav, an archivist with whom I corresponded in 1982<sup>14</sup>. We met at

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<sup>14</sup> In 1982, with the help of Otto Wirth, one of my grandmother's cousins, I wrote to the Baron of Gemünden inquiring if the castle archive had any records which referred to the Wirth family. The Baron's wife forwarded my request to Gustav Schellack, the castle archivist. Apparently, the castle archive had no relevant information, but Mr. Schellack kindly researched at other archives and sent several pages of information and copies of relevant book

the museum. Fritz provided some archival material that I had requested including the details of the 1808 name changes that Jews were required to make. While at the museum, I picked up two books for my library.<sup>15</sup> Fritz also gave me his father's article on the old cemetery in Gemünden. This was of great interest. No one in my family had ever specifically mentioned the existence of the older cemetery to me. At some point all the stones (it was not clear if this included the remains) from the old neglected cemetery were transferred to the current Jewish cemetery.

We then met Doris Wesner. She is a published researcher from Simmern who heard about my trip from Sabine Borlinghaus and decided to get involved. She was wonderfully helpful and greatly enriched our visit to Gemünden. As an example of her determination to help, she tracked us down after I had inadvertently neglected to contact her about a specific time and place to meet.

Mrs. Wesner spent what must have been a huge amount of time researching at the archive in Kirchberg and gave me:

- A thorough genealogy of the early generations of the Wirth family reflecting the 1808 name changes and filling in people and facts that I hadn't known before.
- Copies of original school records of some of my grandmother's siblings and cousins including some letters of recommendation for high school.
- Copies of newspaper advertisements placed by the Wirth family to announce deaths or thanking for condolences.

**Gemünden:** The birthplace of my grandmother, Selma Wirth Aron and the nine generations that preceded her.<sup>16</sup>

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chapters. By coincidence, Mr. Schellack had been friends with my great uncle Paul Wirth when they were in high school. By even greater coincidence, I now met with his son.

<sup>15</sup> I just wanted to own them, to have another piece of the lost heritage. Whether I ever read them, given that they're in German, remains to be seen. The book by Christof Pies is illustrated, so it will certainly get some attention.

- *Jüdisches Leben im Rhein-Hunsrück (Jewish Life in Rhein-Hunsrück)* by Christof Pies, a history of the Jews in the Rhein-Hunsrück region including a town-by-town discussion with cemetery charts and some descriptions of return visits by survivors and their families.
- *Juden in Gemünden -- Geschichte und Vernichtung einer jüdischen Gemeinde im Hunsrück (Jews in Gemünden – History and Destruction of a Jewish Community in Hunsrück)* by Volker Boch, a history of the community in my grandmother's town which does not pull any punches in its description of the Nazi period.

<sup>16</sup> The thought of nine generations makes me pause and wonder what long family traditions and heirlooms were lost and what it would have meant to fall into that succession. Would it have been limiting or stifling to be born into the context of an Orthodox Jewish family in Germany, noted for its rule orientation or would it been a natural progression? Given my upbringing and current perspective, I think it would have been stifling for me. I grew up with few religious traditions and attended an ultra-reform synagogue which did no Bar Mitzvahs and had services on Sundays. I suspect my parents' experiences and losses may have led them to be less interested in religion as my brother and I grew up, but that was never a discussion point. My mother's family had been Orthodox; my father had a Bar Mitzvah, but his family was not very observant. In his last years, though, my father took great comfort in Shabbos services.

I had visited Gemünden in 1973 prior to my interest in genealogy. On that trip, I found my grandmother's house, spoke to a couple of people who remembered my grandmother and looked at the cemetery, but I learned very little. So, this was like a first visit.

Mrs. Wesner was our guide in Gemünden. The cemetery was our first stop.<sup>17</sup> A Holocaust memorial, installed since my visit in 1973, stood at the entrance gate. The cemetery was in generally good maintenance, but Pit took it upon himself to clear the overgrowth that buried one of the gravestones. It was satisfying to help him. The cemetery was small enough that I took photos of each grave.

Mrs. Wesner introduced us to a woman she met who remembered the Wirth family. She (her maiden name was Grün, I don't recall her married name) speaks excellent English, having married an American GI and lived in the US. She is in her mid-80s, has a great memory, and runs a beer garden. She remembered my cousin Margit, Uncle Richard and Aunt Adele Wirth very clearly and even had pictures of them.



**24 Great Uncle Richard Wirth and Great Aunt Adele Wirth Anspach circa 1925. Both of the old pictures I was given were of a fairly large group with a band in the foreground.**

Gemünden and the area around it appear to be economically depressed. A comment was made

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<sup>17</sup> Otto Wirth, my grandmother's cousin, had mentioned that the cemetery had family graves going back to the 1400's. This could not be confirmed. As mentioned above, the remaining graves from the old cemetery were moved to the back row of the cemetery we visited. They are no longer legible.

that the community would probably be in better shape if the Jews hadn't been driven out.

**16-Jul** **Mandel:** Birthplace of my great grandmother, Mina Hirsch Wirth, and the preceding four generations of the Hirsch family.

My goal here was to meet Karin Vesper-Stumm, whose research formed the core of the Hirsch family tree, and to see the town and the cemetery.

Our guide in town was Mr. Kurt Stroh, who heard about my visit from Sabine and who, by coincidence, is related to Mrs. Vesper-Stumm. He took us to see a memorial to those from Mandel who fell in the world wars. There was one stone listing the dead from World War I, which included at least two Jewish names. There were three stones listing the dead from World War II, with 4 times the number of names, but of course no Jews. As far as I know, Mandel has not memorialized the eleven Mandel Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

We saw the former homes of various members of the Hirsch family and stood on the former site of the synagogue which was adjacent to the home of Isaac Hirsch II, my 2<sup>nd</sup> great grandfather. Both structures were burned on Kristallnacht.



**25 The Mandel Synagogue is in the center of the background. To the right is the home of Isaac Hirsch II. I do not know the identity of the fellow in the foreground.**

As in other towns, the Jewish homes were quite large, reflecting their success in the few



occupations they were permitted to have.

The main street of Mandel has been under construction and impassable for some time with no forecasted completion. The area, like Gemünden, is depressed, as evidenced by our inability to find an open restaurant at lunch time in Mandel or in any of the surrounding four villages. We ended up having lunch with Mr. Stroh and his wife at their home, which was a pleasure and unexpected kindness.

The cemetery was in reasonably good shape. There are two parts, one a fairly large space filled from end to end with gravestones with an empty section in the middle. The other had only 3 graves from the 1930's. As Mrs. Vesper-Stumm told the story, the community had filled the original cemetery and bought an adjacent parcel of land to be used as an annex. They had only just begun to use it when Nazis took power. I suspect that the open section of the main cemetery was fully populated prior to Kristallnacht; otherwise they would not have needed the additional land. There was no evidence of destroyed gravestones.

**17-Jul** Our visits over, I drove Pit back to Melsungen where we had a nice farewell lunch with Vera and Justin, his wife and son. I then drove to Frankfurt where I spent the night, watched the American team lose the Woman's World Cup soccer final in the hotel lobby and departed the next day for home.

## Observations

- Kristallnacht became tangible for me on this trip. It's one thing to read about the atrocities and to hear the terrible stories of peoples' personal experiences on that awful night, but for me the word horror was just a word
  - until, in village after village, almost without exception, I saw the damage in the cemeteries and saw the locations of the burned down synagogues and homes and then visualized that all the destruction was orchestrated to take place, essentially simultaneously, in hundreds of towns all over Germany;
  - until Peter Kleber, the archivist, asked me, as we paged by his death certificate, if I thought the Nazis killed my grandfather's first cousin Joseph Schubach;<sup>18</sup>
  - until I later learned that the Nazis then made Schubach's son bury his father.
- Were all Germans Nazis? Of course not.<sup>19</sup> My reading during this trip included "*Everything is Illuminated*" by Jonathon Safran Foer, which I highly recommend. It's

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Schubach died of a heart-attack the day of Kristallnacht. I found, on the Internet, the 2005 obituary of Julius Schubach, Joseph Schubach's son. A quote: "His father, Joseph Schubach, died of a heart attack on Kristallnacht and young Julius was forced by the Nazis to bury his own father." The obituary also named Julius's children. I was able to locate them and sent a photo of their grandfather's death record.

<sup>19</sup> Afterword: My intent in this paragraph was to emphasize the phrase: '*Of course not*'. Yet, even raising this issue turned out to be insulting to at least one reader. I extend my sincere apologies to anyone who misread my intent. **No** insult or implication thereof was intended. Part of what led me to even address this issue was a not-infrequently held generalization to the contrary. *Every Man Dies Alone* by Hans Fallada is remarkable novel which addresses this point directly. It is based on true events about a couple who decided to take a stand against the Nazis and includes several examples of various attempts of resistance against the regime.

about the grandson of a survivor of the Holocaust who travels to his grandfather's shtetl to see it and find the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Given the parallels to this trip, my wife Jackie recommended I read it. In retrospect, it was a trip enhancer. (For those who have seen the movie of the same title based on the book, an important *illumination* at the end of the book is reversed in the movie.) **(Spoiler alert: don't read the rest of this paragraph if you plan to read the book.)** In a key scene where Nazi's take over a shtetl village in Ukraine, a non-Jew is faced with a horrific choice. He could identify his best friend as a Jew to be killed by the Nazis. Or he could refuse and be killed, leaving his widow and baby to cope in those horrible times without him.

Clearly, there was a large core of Germany committed to the Nazi agenda. But I suspect that many were terrified or coerced into acquiescence or worse through being given horrific choices like the character in Foer's book. I cannot otherwise explain parents who made sure their children were aware of their former Jewish neighbors (Mr. Strohm in Mandel was told by his parents that the children in the distant background of a family picture were members of the Hirsch family), or the woman in Gemünden vividly remembering their Jewish neighbors and keeping pictures of them. The Jews had been members of these communities for centuries.

- Any remaining perpetrators of the Nazi horrors will be dead in 10 years. The few remaining are over eighty and probably couldn't cause much trouble if they tried.
- There are growing Jewish communities in Germany. I'm aware of those in Hamburg, Gudensberg and Koblenz. There are probably several more. According to the web site [www.simpletoremember.com](http://www.simpletoremember.com) there are 115,000 Jews in Germany of which 100,000 are from the former USSR. Many of these Soviet Jews have little training in Jewish tradition. That the Jews are there is consistent with my observations above, but still strikes me as surprising, given the history.

My emotions obstruct my understanding of those who personally suffered under the Nazis and returned to live in Germany after the war, even having talked to Inge and Heinz Kahn about it. This is in spite of the wonderful respect, companionship, friendship and hospitality I experienced with every single individual that I met on this trip. I felt totally welcomed ... but I can never forget.

- The German baby-boomer generation had no personal involvement in or responsibility for the Nazi atrocities, yet they bear the burden of the acts of their fathers. While that burden might generate bitterness and resentment, what I found was a cohort of people who feel great responsibility to do what they can to foster the memory of the Jews, their artifacts, their culture and the horrific actions of their forbears. Those Germans that I met have an incredible openness and generosity to survivors and their children that is genuine and heartfelt. I do not mean to infer that all Germans are that way, and they are not, but I could not come away from this trip with other than a warm feeling for everyone that I met along the way.

Anyone researching Jewish genealogy in Germany will find people in virtually every town who will go to extraordinary lengths to help them.

- It appears that each level of German government has commitment to and a budget category allocated to maintain Jewish cemeteries, synagogues and memorials and to place new memorials as opportunities arise. The local governments' use of that budget wasn't always apparent as in the lack of a memorial in Mandel and in several examples mentioned by Gunnar Richter of the Breitenau Memorial. I suspect if a champion arose for such action, the money would be there with a little pushing.
- **Irony 1:** Up through the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jews were not permitted to own land and were limited to occupations like trading, dealing and brokering. While my initial impression was that this was an intended discrimination against the Jews I have learned that the rulers in the various regions put limits on various constituencies including the Jews<sup>20</sup>. As I was being shown the former Jewish homes throughout these villages, they were very large and impressive. What jumped to my banker's mind was that the majority of those permitted Jewish professions were those where capital was not required to do business. In those businesses, one could (and can) make a substantial living if one is focused, works hard and is clever – all characteristics that many of the generally well-educated Jews in Germany possessed. Any intended discrimination, if there was any, clearly failed. But, the question comes to mind: Did such Jewish success create jealousy that made it easier for their neighbors to support the Nazis?
- **Irony 2:** Today's Germans are subject to anti-Germanism, just as Jews are subject to anti-Semitism. Think of the people who will never buy anything German -- from Beck's Beer to Mercedes Benz automobiles. Very few of the living Germans and none of the living Jews have personally done anything to earn such hate.
- **Irony 3:** The only permanent graves in Germany are Jewish. Non-Jewish German citizens rent their gravesites for 30-40 years. At the end of the term, the stone is ground down and re-engraved for another and the grave used again. I do not know if old remains are exhumed or if they are what their disposition is. I also do not know if the graves of the current Jewish population will be permanent.
- The German's have an incredible interest in and commitment to local history. It is hard to imagine American villages commissioning village history books to commemorate their 900<sup>th</sup> or 1200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, assuming of course that they last that long. Every book store I visited had a full tier of books devoted to local and regional history.
- **Stereotypes confirmed:** The Germans, in general, serve great sausage, enjoy their beer and wine, keep incredible records and as you'll see in Rules of the Road, below, follow rules.

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<sup>20</sup> In some regions, after the occupation limits were lifted and they were free to choose any occupation, many Jews continued, generation after generation, as if the limits were still in place, to take on the occupation of their father. For example, my father represented the 4<sup>th</sup> successive generation of Aron butchers.

- **Rules of the Road:**

- Other than in well-established old towns, at least the ones I saw, there were very few stop signs or traffic signals. They have been replaced by traffic circles. Apparently a government official made the decision that this was a good idea and it was done. It appears that they didn't take the pulse of the nation or put it up for political approval – they just did it. There are very clear right-of-way yield rules and the circles keep traffic flowing well.
- Contrary to my prior understanding, much of the Autobahn is subject to speed-limits. Speed-limit enforcing cameras on each lane are frequently present. There are sections of road where the speed-limit is explicitly reduced when the road is wet.
- The blood alcohol threshold for drunk driving is at .05%, 0% for new drivers, and .03% if behavior is erratic.
- Violations of any of these rules are very expensive and as a result of consistent enforcement, compliance is high.
- I can't help but draw contrasts to the US system. We can do better.

**Final Thought:** This trip gave me a sense of fulfillment, the satisfaction experienced when seeing the image take shape as you assemble a puzzle. It gave me a connection with the past, an understanding of what happened to us and a sadness that reoccurs when I continue my research on the family history. It left me wondering if my rejection of organized religion would have emerged had the holocaust not occurred.

I treasured and will always treasure my unexpectedly warm connections with Germans of my generation.

I will go back to Germany. I have more towns to visit, more information to gather, friends to see, new friends to make. In spite of my history and my feelings expressed above, I felt more at home there than I ever would have expected. Do your genes carry some comfort with a region in which they have resided for centuries? It's hard to imagine that could be true, but that first night in Melsungen, sitting alone in the square having dinner, it seemed just right for me to be there.



## **Acknowledgements**

**My thanks to all those who provided their thoughts, insights and additional information on the early drafts of this document including Jackie Aron, Hubert Hecker, Janet Isenburg, Peter Kleber, Charlie Ortman, and of course Hans-Peter Klein.**

**I also want to thank everyone mentioned throughout the document who helped me to organize this trip and who generously shared their valuable time with me in Germany to create this wonderfully rewarding experience.**

**Dennis Aron**

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