Fragments of the life of the Melchikers, a Jewish family from Berlin (1933-1945)

Collected in Germany, France, Great Britain and The United States of America by Axel Huber and Alexander Watson
Preface

In this small book the sadest and most cruel moments in the history of the jewish family Melchiker are united. When the world slowly came to rest after 8th May 1945 only Rolf Melchiker had survived in South Africa. After he had experienced a well sheltered youth in Berlin the National Socialism destroyed every sureness and certainty like a twelve years lasting creepy thunderstorm.

Rolf Melchiker did not let empoision his heart from the traumatic experiences. He married and enjoyed a long and happy married life. His daughters tell still today what a loving father he was. And that’s the reassuring thing: Love has won. If Rolf Melchiker would still be alive he would see his four grandchildren happily married and he would play with his four great grandchildren.

I would like to thank the daughter of Rolf Melchiker. She allowed me to research her family history.

On the way from the first contact until the laying of the Stolpersteine I met a lot of wonderful people who helped me and whom I want to thank from the bottom of my heart. With Alexander Watson from France I’ve found a friend who I want to mention separately: Alexander Watson has unearthed with huge effort, persistent demands and always new ideas the fate of Werner Melchiker in France from the depths of the far-flung archives. He also designed the lovely invitation card for this Stolperstein laying and this book. Thank you!
The fatal tempest began on January 30, 1933 - the day the German Reich appointed Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor. The fascist dance of joy began that night as torchlight processions of SA and NSDAP marched through Berlin. The masses cheered. The Jews did not.

The good middle-class, affluent Melchiker family lost their secure grip over the course of many small steps. Business losses began right after January 30, 1933, as did their social decline. Werner, a son of the family, fled to France in 1933 - but that didn’t save him from his henchmen. Rolf, another son, left Germany in 1936 for the safe South Africa, where he began the painstaking process of building a new life from the ground up. Joseph and Elise, the parents, stayed in Berlin and, faced with the national-socialist terror, fell into despair. On the evening before their planned deportation, they committed suicide.

This is the story of these four people.

Flight to France: Werner Melchiker (1933)

The last journey of Werner Melchiker began on September 4, 1942, in Drancy. His destination: Auschwitz-Birkenau. Barely three weeks after his 32nd birthday, death took this young man who had left his native city Berlin nine years earlier. In France, he searched for his happiness. And he kept on searching, even when world history already didn’t give him any chance anymore.

Werner Melchiker left the Maybach Gymnasium (secondary school) in Berlin-Friedenau on Easter 1928, at the age of 17 – two years before he would have completed his “Abitur” (final secondary-school examinations). Like father, like son: He wanted to become a merchant, began a commercial education at the Deutsche Gasglühlicht AG (Auergesellschaft), and, after completing his education, got a permanent position at the export department for business with Poland. But the tails of several crises then hit the young Berliner: The young Weimar Republic floundered alarmingly as the Great Depression ushered in mass unemployment and hopelessness. On top of this, the Gasglühlicht AG opened its own plant in Poland, which led to the downsizing of the company’s export department. Like so many other people, Werner Melchiker lost his job. But only for a brief period.

His father Joseph had withdrawn from active business at the Betriebsgesellschaft
Berliner Mühlen mbH & Co in the year 1928, and developed his own commercial agency, for which he was approved for the Berliner Produktenbörse (Berlin Commodity Exchange). So Werner Melchiker began to work together with his father. According to statements made by his brother Rolf Melchiker during the 1950s, business was going excellent. But then came January 30th, 1933. Over the course of just a few weeks, business plummeted abruptly to zero. Joseph Melchiker lost his approval for the Berliner Produktenbörse. The family moved from its spacious 7-room-apartment at Goßlerstrasse into a 4-room-apartment at Prinzregentenstrasse 84. And 22-year-old Werner Melchiker asked himself: are there any future prospects for me in Berlin?

The answer was: no. During this eventful spring of 1933, political activists, artists, writers, and regular people like Werner Melchiker hopefully looked towards their neighbour in the West: “France with its centre Paris were the most important place of refuge at that time”, writes historian Julia Franke. Werner Melchiker joined the first wave of refugees from National Socialist Germany and left his native city of Berlin early in June of 1933. Crossing Belgium, he travelled to France on 13 June 1933 and crossed the border to France at Jeumont in northeastern France, carrying regular visa documents. When questioned about his reasons for fleeing Germany, Werner Melchiker stated in his application to be recognised as refugee, dated 16 December 1936: “I was laid off because my religion is Jewish, and I don’t want to – in total opposition to any human rights – be treated as if I was an inferior individual.” (In his application, he wrote: “Etant deréligion israélite on m’avait congédié de mon emploi, et je ne voulai pas melaissé traiter comme individu inférieur, hors des droits humains.”)

His first address in Paris was 228, Rue de Vaugirard in the 15th arrondissement. Werner Melchiker could reach the Eiffel tower on foot within half an hour. Werner’s central problem, and that of many other emigrants, is reflected in two words on his registration card of the Paris police headquarters: “Profession: Sans”. In English: Without employment. For a while, he made do with small jobs, offering his services as a freelance photographer, correspondent and merchant. He did so until other envious emigrants reported him to the authorities. That’s when the problems began. The only emigrants who were allowed to work were those who had received a work permit. Applying for this permit was a cumbersome and complicated procedure, and on top of it, it was often granted for only a few months. By November 1933, according to a report by the Paris police headquarters, only 34 refugees had been granted an indefinite work contract, 100 more were allowed to work for a period between two and six months – and 370 applications were still sitting on the desks of the ministry, waiting to be processed. Werner Melchiker did not receive a work permit, as his brother Rolf recalled in 1959, in a letter to the Office for Compensation. Julia Franke writes: “The most miserable were
those who gave up their former profession and tried their luck in a completely new industry.” Werner Melchiker had to seek help at the Central Aid Committee for Jewish Emigrants in Paris (”Comité central d’assistance aux émigrants juifs”), which between the years of 1927 and 1936 assisted a total of 34,574 refugees.

Werner Melchiker was a descendant of a wealthy family and was completely on his own at the age of 23. This freedom came at a high cost as things weren’t going well in Paris. No job and no future prospects.

In the middle of 1934, crisis hit the Paris labour market. Large aid committees shut down, the willingness to donate diminished. In some instances, newspapers campaigned against so-called ”freeloaders”. Werner Melchiker became anxious and began looking for a new destination. On 30 October 1934, he had new identity documents issued by the Paris police headquarters which were valid for two years. On 17 November 1934, he left the big capital and moved to the countryside.

This next new beginning led Werner Melchiker to the tiny village of Saint-Eutrope-de-Born, more than 600 kilometres to the southwest of Paris and located roughly in the middle between the cities of Bordeaux and Toulouse. Werner planned to begin a new life as a farmer. The agricultural organisation ”Le Renouveau” (Association pour des intérêts agricoles israélites) had bought des Château de Born in 1934, a lordly castle dating back to the 12th century that came with 60 hectares (about 148 acres) of land. Albert Einstein had been appointed honorary president of ”Le Renouveau”. His Son-in-Law, Dr. Dmitri Marianoff, a lawyer who had fled Berlin, was managing the organisation. The organisation incurred debts in order to renovate the castle lavishly: Craftsmen installed central heating, as well as showers, baths, and water taps in all rooms. The basic idea was to provide an opportunity for Jewish emigrants to complete an agricultural education as a way to begin a new life. Around 100 students lived in the castle, each paying 75 reichsmark for board, lodging, and their education each month.

Toward the end of 1935, Werner Melchiker sent a photo to his brother Rolf, which shows the 25-year-old in plain, tattered clothes in front of the castle. The greeting on the back reads: “To my brother! From the beginnings of a new profession. Château de Born, December 1935.” As can be gathered from his application to be recognised as refugee dated 16 December 1936, Werner saw himself working in agriculture for the foreseeable future. Question: ”What plans or propositions do you have regarding your future (professional activity)?”. Answer: ”1. Purchasing property and practising farming as a profession after completing my agricultural education. 2. Submitting my naturalisation application.” (in the original document: ”1. Après un stage agricole achat d’une propriété pour y exercer la profession d’un agriculteur. 2. Déposer la demande de naturalisation.”).
But as Werner Melchiker was busying himself with botany and the joys of agriculture, dark clouds gathered over the Château de Born, which received generous donations from the American Joint Committee. In the spring of 1935, the representatives of the organisation in Paris recommended to the Americans to stop supporting “Le Renouveau”, because the work was being conducted with no solid planning and experience. Furthermore, the financing was deemed more than dubious. Even though “Le Renouveau” had proudly reported that the Château de Born was, “despite big problems at the beginning and teething troubles” now well “on its way to self-preservation” as recently as February 1935. There are no further details concerning precisely what was going on. In mid-1935, “Le Renouveau” ceased its operations, “under less than desirable circumstances”, and at the end of 1935, most of the teachers, and the poorer students left the castle. In July 1936, the training farm shut down completely.

Another lost hope for Werner Melchiker. But yet again, a new beam of light brightened up the life of the young man. In Villeneuve-sur-Lot, just a few kilometres away from the Château de Born, a farming settlement had been founded and developed, lead by the ORT. The “Obschtschestwo rasprostraneniija truda” had been founded in Russia in 1880, relocated to Berlin sometime later, and from there, fled to France in 1933, assuming the new name of “Union des Sociétés pour la propagation du travailindustriel et agricole parmi les Juifs”. Part of the concept of ORT was that the refugee Jews – merchants, engineers, intellectuals – invested between 5,000 and 10,000 francs in a small farm which they then ran with the support of the Union. In September 1934, 15 families were living on their own property near Villeneuve-sur-Lot. In February 1935, the number had increased to 18. According to other sources, at times there were only eight recent settlers living in Villeneuve-sur-Lot during 1936. In Germany, the refugees had been working all kinds of different professions, in France they began a completely new life as farmers without expertise.

Max Wachenheimer had been working as a journalist for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung until 1933, and had later bought a farm in the vicinity of Villeneuve-sur-Lot. His residence address was in Bourbon, a registration card from 1936 lists as residents: Max Wachenheimer (born in 1900 in Berlin), his wife Claire (born in 1908 in Berlin), daughter Marianne (born in 1930 in Cologne), his mother Marguerite (born in 1874 in Berlin) and Werner Melchiker. Werner was still a farmer in training and diligently worked at the family’s farms – either in Bourbon, and/or in Courbiac. The source material does not allow for any definitive statements in this regard. Bourbon is located six kilometres away from the town centre of Villeneuve-sur-Lot, Courbiac is located about 30 kilometres away. Max Wachenheimer owned property in both locations.

The mostly untrained farmers began to run into major difficulties as they found
themselves overstrained by the demands of the day-to-day work as a farmer. The German refugees were dissatisfied with the support by the ORT. In the spring of 1935, Max Wachenheimer presented the ORT with a resolution, on behalf of all 18 families. According to the resolution, ORT had sent an agronomist to assist them after their arrival in winter. However, just in time for spring, when farmers saw themselves faced with pressing problems concerning the cultivation of land, this expert was removed again, leaving the new farmers to their own devices. The results were catastrophic in some instances. Wachenheimer bemoaned the “complete lack of conscience of the ORT employees, who left them in the lurch”. Because there weren’t any better alternatives, the emigrants around Villeneuve-sur-Lot stayed, and beginning in 1938, they brought in a good harvest for the first time.

During these chaotic times, Werner Melchiker searched for orientation and made a wrong decision. His brother Rolf had emigrated from Berlin to South Africa in February 1936 and had managed to organise identity documents for Werner as well. But Werner had fallen in love and refused the offer. He applied to be recognised as German refugee, to get one step closer to his dream: The dream of being a self-sufficient farmer in the south of France and starting a family.

Of course, his application led to correspondence between the authorities. On 26th February 1937, the immigration authority of the Lot-et-Garonne prefecture wrote to the ministry of the interior: “In the period during which MELCHIKER has been living in Lot-et-Garonne, he has never been the target of any complaint; his conduct and his morals appear to be good and his attitude concerning the national stance appears correct. Under these circumstances, I submit a favourable opinion concerning this application.” (in the original document: “Depuis qu’il séjourne en Lot-et-Garonne, MELCHIKER n’a pas fait l’objet de plainte; sa conduite es sa moralité semblent bonnes et son attitude au point de vue national correcte. Dans ces conditions, j’émets unavis favourable à la prise en considération de cette requête.”) The refugee committee at the ministry of the interior approved the request, and on 15 April 1937, the clerk in charge stamped the following onto the application: “The status as refugee from Germany is approved.” (in the original document: “LA QUALITÉ DE RÉFUGIÉ PROVENANT D’ALLEMAGNE EST RECONNU.”)

The year of 1937 granted Werner Melchiker the most beautiful and exciting moments in his short life. The fruit of love sweetened the heart of Werner Melchiker during these days. As part of his work, the young agricultural student regularly visited the seeds shop of Egon Smilowski in Villeneuve-sur-Lot. Egon Smilowski was born in Berlin on January 14th 1891 as a son of the Russian immigrants Icek and Ida Smilowski. As a young man of 18 years, he emigrated to England in 1909. During the census for England and
Wales in 1911, the 20-year-old lived as a boarder with the married couple John (23) and Esther (19) Rowan at 23 Parron Street in Liverpool, and worked as an office clerk. He searched for love and found it – in 1912, he married Helene Wagner, who was born in Breslau (born October 3, 1888). Rose, their only child, was born in Liverpool on 12 April 1913. One year later, World War I broke out, and the Smilowskis were considered enemy foreigners in England. A list by the International Committee of the Red Cross, carrying the number 28.XXIII, lists the names of German prisoners of war. According to this list, Egon Smilowski was interned as a civilian at Camp Handforth with prisoner number 27261. Sometime during the war, the young father was moved to the POW camp Knockaloe on the Isle of Man – a 52 kilometres long and 22 kilometres wide island in the Irish Sea. After the end of the war, Germans were not very welcome in England, and in 1919, the young family returned to Egon’s former home, Berlin. Egon Smilowski worked successfully as a merchant. And then came the year 1933. Egon Smilowski tried to make his own new luck in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, and on 12 August 1934 he moved into the 23, Avenue de Paris. Presumably, Egon had joined the German emigrants who were looking for a new profession in France. In 1942, he indicated on a questionnaire that he had always worked as a merchant, and that he had been trained in the farming profession through a re-education. Shortly after, he went into business for himself as a seeds merchant in the blue shop (“Au magasin bleu”) at 29, Rue de Penne. Temporarily, the family Smilowski must have lived in Lédat, northwest of Villeneuve-sur-Lot, too. The specific date remains unknown, but at some point, his wife Helene and his daughter Rose followed him. The young daughter had attended the home economics school in Söhle, near to Neutitschein between 1 November 1933 and 24 February 1934. This was a place in the far east of Czechia which today carries the name “Žilina”. Among the grades in her leaving certificate, several “excellents” and “laudables” can be found. Following the demands of that time, Rose Smilowski also had to deal with subjects in which she wasn’t as apt: Agriculture (“sufficient”), large animal breeding (“sufficient”), small animal breeding (“satisfactory”), Calculus and bookkeeping (“satisfactory”), or dairying (“sufficient”). Other subjects came easier to her: in gardening, she received a “laudable”, in home and commodity economics, as well as in food education, food preparation and serving, Rose received an “excellent”. With this certificate stowed in her suitcase, Rose Smilowski arrived in Villeneuve-sur-Lot and in all likelihood worked in the shop of her father. And one day, agriculture student Werner Melchiker must have walked through the door of that shop...

The young lovers found each other at a time when tensions in Europe intensified. Between 2 October 1935 and 9 May 1936, fascist Italy had conquered the East-African kingdom of Abyssina (today: Ethiopia) in an extreme act of violence like it had never been witnessed before – using poison gas and mass shooting. Historian Aram Mattioli
calls it an “experimental ground of violence”. In Spain, led by general Francisco Franco, the rightist rebels rose against the democratically elected government of the Second Spanish Republic in the summer of 1936. The civil war gained international dimensions through the support that was given to the opposing parties. On the side of the putschists stood fascist Italy and the national-socialist Third Reich, whereas international militiamen and international brigades from countries all over the world fought for freedom. Villeneuve-sur-Lot was located only 200 kilometres away from the Spanish border.

Rose and Werner were in love and gave little thought to world politics. In spring of 1937, Werner’s mother Elise, whom he hadn’t seen since 1933, visited. In present-day Europe, there are open borders, and under normal circumstances, Germans can cross the border to France with no controls. In the Europe of the 1930s, Elise Melchiker submitted a visa request at the French consulate in Berlin on 6 May 1936. Her reason for the trip: “Pour revoir mon fils, que se trouve en France depuis 3 ans.” In English: “To see my son again, who has been staying in France for 3 years.” From the consulate in Berlin, the request was sent to the French ministry of the interior for a diligent review. In Paris, authorities wanted to avoid more German refugees in France, so the clerk at the consulate made a note on the request, stating that Elise Melchiker “hadn’t fled” (in the original document: “non réfugiée”). Faced with constant distrust, the clerk requested a statement from the immigration authority at the prefecture of Lot-et-Garonne. This authority replied: “J’ai l’honneur de vous faire connaître que je ne vois aucun inconvénient à ce que satisfaction soit donné à Mme Melchiker, Elise.” In November, approval was granted in the ministry of the interior, and the visa approval was sent to the French consulate in Berlin, in a letter dated 26 January 1937. And in mid-February of 1937, Elise Melchiker arrived in Bourbon near Villeneuve-sur-Lot at last. The visa granted her a visit for a duration of eight to ten days.

They must have spent a nice time in Bourbon and its surrounding area. After almost four years, the mother met her son again. Werner had left his home at the age of 22. And more and more Jews fled Germany. The beautiful appearance of the 1936 Olympics had deluded only a few people. The mask of harmlessness, which had never been very convincing to begin with, began to slide off the national socialists’ grimace of hatred more and more obviously. On a further escalation level, starting in 1936, the national socialists began to push the Jews out of the world of business more and more violently, much to the delight of the winners of Aryanization. For Elise Melchiker, her trip to France was a short excursion from pressing hardship, which made life in Berlin more and more difficult.

There is a photo, dated 18 February 1937, which shows Elise Melchiker amidst the new
life of Werner. Rose Smilowski has wrapped her arm around her lovingly, her son looks at her with a laughing face, and next to him stand Helene and Egon Smilowski. A second photo from the same day shows Rose and Werner laughing heartily. Both photos were taken in La Sartresse, about 20 kilometres south of Villeneuve-sur-Lot. Werner sent them to South Africa to his brother, with a loving greeting: “To our beloved little brother! From Rosy and Werner.” A little piece of happiness in precarious times.

The young lovers in times of crisis soon thought about marrying and got engaged. Werner Melchiker moved to Lédat to the Smelowskis. For reasons unknown, the engaged couple went to England – to Liverpool, in all likelihood. A photo taken on 18 February 1938 shows a very different Werner Melchiker from who he was in 1935 when he was wearing the plain clothes of an agricultural labourer. Rose is wearing a classy fur coat, while Werner is sporting a fashionable hat, a classy coat, leather gloves, suit, dress shirt, and tie. An air of noblesse surrounds the two. The photo was taken at Calderstones Park, a central, public park in the middle of Liverpool. Rose and Werner were in love and wrote “little pancake” and “little punch” on the backside, before sending the photo off to South Africa. There are no sources at all about this time, but during a police interrogation in 1941, Werner Melchiker stated that he returned to France in August 1938. Alone. To Paris. Into 6, Rue Lebouteux in the 17th arrondissement. The only documents Werner Melchiker carried at that time were those that identified him as German refugee approved by France. His German documents had expired and were invalid. Maybe Werner was expelled from England because the English authorities didn’t want any more refugees. No documents could be found in the National Archives in England that could illuminate this open question. At the census on 29 September 1939 – only a few weeks after World War II had started – Rose Smilowski lived in the house of George and Rose Michael in Hendon in Greater London, where she worked as a housemaid. The same document indicates that Rose was unwed at the time.

The two lovers must have suffered a lot.

When the German Reich pulled the world into the Second World War with its attack on Poland on 1 September 1939, France and England declared war to the Reich on September 3. For the time being, little to nothing was happening at the borders, apart from a few skirmishes. The term “drôle deguerre”, phoney war, was brought up. In Paris, Werner Melchiker was arrested as enemy foreigner, and was put into an internment about 130 kilometres south of Saint Jean de Ruelle, a small town near Orléans. He shared this fate with tens of thousands of other men who had fled the sphere of influence of the national socialists after 1933. In this situation, the only way out presented itself in the form of the French Foreign Legion, who was looking for “volunteers” at the internment camps. “Prestataires”, indentured labourers who
enlisted into the Foreign Legion were able to leave the camps. Werner Melchiker signed the declaration of commitment for his service in the Foreign Legion “pendant la durée de la guerre” – for the duration of war – on 27 November 1939 at 5pm in Orléans. And the journey went on: As Foreign Legionnaires were not to be deployed against their own home country, the Germans were transferred to Africa – into a hot climate they weren’t used to, and in which hard work awaited them. As instructed, he had made provisions: in case of an accident, Egon Smilowski in Villeneuve-sur-Lot was to be notified. Werner Melchiker’s place of deployment at the Second Foreigner’s Regiment was Meknès in Morocco. A photo dated 30 April 1940 shows Werner Melchiker in his uniform, amidst his comrades in a brisk march. It is the last known photo of Werner Melchiker.

World history delivered renewed unrest into the life of the young Foreign Legionnaire. On 10 May 1940, the German Reich began the Battle of France, conquering France within just a few weeks. The armed truce in the forest of Compiègne on 22 June 1940 divided the French territory into an occupied zone in the north, and an unoccupied zone in the south, which covered about 40 percent of the country and which, lead by prime minister Marshall Henri Philippe Pétain, took its seat of government in Vichy.

Werner Melchiker’s service in the Foreign Legion ended on 23 October 1940. The exact circumstances remain unknown, his log book only shows the entry: “Dépêché et renvoyé dans ses foyers le 23.10.20. Se retire à Villeneuve-sur-Lot [Lot et Garonne] 29 Rue de Penne.” Yet again, potential future prospects had been shattered, and the 30-year-old returned to his former parents-in-law Egon and Helene Smilowski, into the officially unoccupied part of France.

The storm clouds gathered and each day the storm was blowing stronger.

In a letter dated 15 November 1940, the Secret State Police [Gestapo], federal police station Berlin requested the “withdrawal of citizenship of the Jew Werner Israel Melchiker” at Reich Security Head Office – department I A 11. As a reason for this, the Gestapo officer noted: “Melchiker applied for a refugee passport at the French authorities, and hence expressed his renunciation of German citizenship.” The whole process was to be conducted according to form, so on top of the Gestapo, the Reichsführer-SS and Head of the German Police at the ministry of the interior of the Reich, the department I of the ministry of the interior of the Reich, and the Federal Foreign Office became involved in the process of the withdrawal of the German citizenship of Werner Melchiker. Following the completion of the process, Werner Melchiker’s German citizenship was annulled on 18 March 1941. Officially and in public. The following announcement was published on 18 March 1941 in the Deutscher
Reichsanzeiger und Preußischer Reichsanzeiger [National gazette of the German Reich and Gazette of Prussia] Nr. 65: “Based on §2 of the Law about the revocation of naturalizations and the annulment of German citizenship, dated 14 July 1933 [National Gazette I S. 480] in conjunction with §1 of the regulation on the annulment of citizenship and the revocation of citizenship acquisition in the Ostmark, dated 11 July 1939 [National Gazette I S. 1235] and in agreement with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Reich, I declare the following persons as having been revoked of the German citizenship:” The announcement is followed by a list of 127 names, on position 82 it read: “Melchiker, Werner Israel, born on 12. August 1910 in Berlin-Charlottenburg.”

In the presumably free part of France, Werner Melchiker caught the attention of the authorities as well. Postal censorship intercepted a letter Werner had sent to one of his comrades in Marocco, Foreign Legionary Jaconson (personal identification number 89351). Jaconson was staying at the hospital St. Louis in Meknès – about 150 kilometres to the east of Rabat. As summarised by the police department Villeneuve-sur-Lot in a report dated 24 January 1941, in said letter, Werner Melchiker “demonstrated sentiments and a poor mental attitude in all of his views, which is why he was questioned by the Special Commissioner in Agen last year on December 14”. (In the original document: ”Dans cette lettre, Werner Melchiker montrait des sentiments et un état d’esprit fâcheux à tous points de vue et une enquête a été effectuée per M. le Commissaire Spécial à Agen, suite à une de vos notes du 14 Décembre dernier.”) According to the commissioner, Werner Melchiker had never raised any suspicions during his time at Villeneuve-sur-Lot and had always expressed francophile sentiments. (In the original document: “Durant son séjour dans ma résidence Melchiker n’avait fait l’objet d’aucune remarque particulière et il avait toujours affiché des sentiments francophiles.”) As a consequence of this one intercepted letter, the commissioner suggested a clampdown against Melchiker to the prefect of Lot-et-Garonne: internment in a concentration camp. (In the original document: “En conséquence, je crois qu’il y aurait lieu de ne pas laisser cet indésirable bénéficier du droit d’asile et que son internement dans un camp de concentration constituerait une mesure administrative opportune à prendre à son égard.”) A few days later, on 7 February 1941, the prefect wrote to the immigration authority at the ministry of the interior in Vichy and asked for the permission to intern Werner Melchiker in the concentration camp in Vernet. The reply came on 4 March 1941, consisting of an unambiguous order: “J’ai l’honneur de vous faire savoir que par suite des mauvais renseignements fournis sur le compte de cet étranger et, conformément à vos propositions, il y a lieu de le diriger sur le camp du Vernet. Vous voudrez lieu avertir de sa mise en route votre collègue de l’Ariège.” On 21 March 1941, the prefect of Lot-et-Garonne informed his counterpart at the prefecture L’Ariège, in Foix, that he would move Werner Melchiker, born 12 August 1910 in Berlin,
into the camp of Vernet. Presumably, Werner Melchiker was arrested at his last home address at 29, Rue de Penne in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, in front of the eyes of Egon and Helene Smilowski. On 30 March 1941, he was registered as a new inmate with prisoner number was 7495 at camp Vernet, 170 kilometres south of Villeneuve-sur-Lot. He was assigned to Quarter B, barrack 8.

Hermann Langbein, a former communist soldier with the international brigades in the Spanish civil war, and who would later go on to found the International Auschwitz Committee, was interned in the camp of Vernet between April 1940 and April 1941, in which, as he recalled, a very militaristic and harsh manner of conduct was the norm. His report is representative of Werner Melchiker’s own experiences at the camp. Hermann Langbein described his arrival at the camp as follows: “We are crammed into an empty barrack in which we are supposed to spend the night, with no straw and no food. Early in the morning, we look around ourselves with growling stomachs and stiff limbs. The surrounding area looks beautiful. On one side, the area stretches downhill toward a river valley and on the other side of the river, steep hills rise. A few scattered trees mark a path, gentle mounds lend that lovely impression to the whole image which brings to mind our hills at home. We have to report for duty, stand and wait, and are led to our barrack at last.” According to Hermann Langbein’s report, everyday life at the camp was characterised by boredom. There wasn’t a lot of work, and during their time off, the interns read books and took walks around the camp. In autumn, however, life grew uncomfortable: “Autumn is coming. The forest is gleaming with all colours. There are beautiful days now, it’s not as hot anymore. But there’s also rain, wind, and fog in between. Our roofs are unfit to keep the rain out. Again and again, someone has to climb up and repair it. Our food rations are being reduced, too. The bread in particular, even though that is the most important thing.” Later on, he talks about the cold, hunger, and misery in Vernet. And then, winter came: “Life at the camp is frozen by frost. The basins, which are outside, are full of ice. There is not a single oven at the camp, not a single barrack is heated. I keep a bottle next to my straw mattress. One morning, it was full of ice. […] These winter months around here are long, terribly long.” When spring came, all prisoners were suffering from hunger and they protested. After that, they received slightly better rations. Three weeks after Werner Melchiker’s arrival, Herrmann Langbein was moved from Vernet to the Dachau concentration camp.

The shock of internment persisted for a long time. In June 1941, Werner Melchiker wrote a letter to his cousin Gerhard Graupe. Only fragments of that letter have been conserved: “Why am I interned here …We promenade in our barbed wire environs like at a beach…I was a soldat for France…Then I carried the same gun that I am now guarded with…I see children playing behind fences not understanding …We have learned to get
used to sorrow...” Werner Melchiker didn’t want to resign himself to this situation, and so he began a passionate fight for freedom – and ultimately, for his life. Officially, he was merely a suspect, “dangerous with regard to the national perspective”. Werner wrote to the prefect of L’Ariege à Foix and asked for his release. He wanted to return to Villeneuve-sur-Lot and his boss, the farm owner André Tournie. The camp commander of Vernet supported the request and referred to the faultless behavior of Werner Melchiker. The prefect passed the letter to his colleague at Lot-et-Garonne. On August 3, 1941, he referred to the negative assessment of the police in Villeneuve-sur-Lot about Werner Melchiker on January 24, 1941, and rejected the request for release. The camp commander of Vernet toed the line, Werner remained a prisoner.

One of the last signs of life of Werner Melchiker has been preserved in the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. At the beginning of March 1942 a begging letter from the young man from the Vernet camp was sent to an aid organisation in Marseilles: the Committee for the Support of Refugees from Germany ("Comité d’Assistance aux Réfugiés d’Allemagne"). The letter is hardly readable. The few words adumbrate the despair. His situation must have been bad, he wrote several times of his fate. That he did not get any packages and no other substantial aid. He asked the committee for help to “pull himself out of the misery ....”.

In July 1942, the trap sprung irreversibly. On 18 July 1942, the ministry of the interior issued an order to stop the emigration of foreign Jews at once, exit visas that had already been granted became invalid. In an official meeting on 27 July, representatives of the SS and the two French zones agreed upon the extradition of the Jews from the internment camps to the occupied zone. At the end of July, the first prefects in the unoccupied zone received the order to prepare deportation lists. And one day, reserve police officers of the “Groupes mobiles de réserve” (GMR) dressed in black uniforms arrived at the camp. Camp inmates in the internment camps knew something uncertain was awaiting them. Rumours spread. The Jews were to be extradited from the free part of France and to be deported to Poland. One eyewitness: “Depressive atmosphere, everyone was afraid to be brought to Poland.” There were desperate suicide attempts, sometimes attempted escapes, but hardly and rebellion.” When the black uniforms of the special police appeared, the journey began.

On 31 August 1942, Werner Melchiker left Vernet together with 252 more Jews. On his prisoner card, Vierzon, about 500 kilometres north of Vernet, is indicated as his destination. Presumably, their guards brought the doomed inmates only to Toulouse. On 1 September at 6:50AM, a train with 501 Jews departed from Gurs in South France. It made a brief stop at La Fauge in the Département Haute-Garonne where 161 additional deportees boarded the train, then made another stop at Toulouse sometime between
2PM and 3:26PM, where Werner and the other inmates from Vernet boarded the train.

Captain Annou of the Constabulary in Cahors managed the transport until it reached its destination in Vierzon (2 September 1942, 7:42AM). He submitted a report in which he described the harsh conditions of travel: “The transport of 1 September carried a group of men, women, children, and sick people. Except only a few who travelled in one of two Third-Class-passenger coaches, the majority was deposited on the urine-soaked straw. [...] Many blacked out due to the heat and the stench.” The captain complained that the sight of the train at several train stations left a deeply unfavourable impression on the local non-Jewish population. He recommended better organisation of any future transports.

On 2 September at 2:13PM, the train with 750 persons on board reached Drancy, the large transit camp northeast of Paris. Last hours in chaos. Under catastrophic conditions. Georges Czaczkes belonged to those who had been deported from the Vernet camp. He recalled his arrival at Drancy in a testimony after the war: The deportees were told that they would be questioned and then sent to Germany to work. They were accommodated in rooms which were empty except for some straw on the floor, and each prisoner received a blanket. All 780 Jews who arrived in Drancy on 2 September were put onto a train which departed on 4 September. Its destination: Auschwitz. It was the last sign of life of Werner Melchiker. 4 September 1942. Report for service, then marching off. About 90 Jews were put into each cattle wagon. As they registered the names, the accomplices to murder made a mistake and registered Werner Melchiker as Werner Melochirer. The doors were closed so the deportees couldn’t see anything anymore.

Train 901-23 left the train station Le Bourget-Drancy on 4 September at 8:55AM, a total of roughly 1,000 Jews on board. According to the schedule of the first deportation from Drancy, the train presumably took the following route: After leaving Drancy, it passed through Bobigny, Noisy-le-Sec, Épernay, Châlons-sur-Marne, Revigny, Bar le Duc, Lérouville and Novéant (Neuburg), the last stop before crossing the German border. After that, it continued through Saarbrücken, Frankfurt on the Main, Dresden, Görlitz, Neisse, Kosel, Kattowitz, and finally terminated at Auschwitz-Birkenau. According to eyewitness Georges Czaczkes, several men died from heart attacks during the trip and their bodies were removed from the wagons by the Germans when the train reached a stop. This was the only time that the doors were opened.

SS doctor Johann Paul Kremer arrived at his new place of work on 30 August 1942: the Auschwitz concentration camp. The man diligently kept a diary and on 2 September he noted: “Been present at the special action outside for the first time this morning at 3AM.
Compared to that, Dante’s Inferno appears to me almost like a comedy. It’s not for no reason that Auschwitz is called the camp of extermination!” It was in a gleeful mood that he experienced September the 6th 1942, after having suffered a severe diarrhoea before: “Today, Sunday, excellent lunch: tomato soup, a half chicken with potatoes and red cabbage (20g fat), sweet dessert and delicious vanilla ice cream.” Only later that day a little disturbance interrupted the cosy, hot late summer day: “In the evening at 8PM, outside at the special action again.” Transport number 28 from Drancy.

For over 60 hours, people had been sitting, standing, and laying together in the excruciatingly cramped cattle wagons when the train slowed down on Sunday evening. Arrival at the so-called “Judenrampe” [Jews’ ramp] several hundred metres away from the camp gate of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Any hope evaporated the second the wagon doors were thrown open. Move it! Move it! Get off the train! Get into line! Women and men separately. Men in SS uniforms, SS doctor Paul Kremer among them, inspected the newly arrived and pointed their index to the left or to the right. 16 men were allowed to live, the numbers 63065-63080 were tattooed onto their skin. 38 women were given the numbers 19170-19207.

The rest of the men, women, and children left everything they brought with them behind and began their march. A small field road. Through the gate. Past the construction sites for the large-scale crematories. At that time, the killers murdered their victims in makeshift death chambers: two farmhouses, converted into execution sites, the so-called Bunker I and Bunker II. In a barrack, the victims had to undress, and then walk the few metres to the farmhouse naked. The provisional gas chambers in Bunker I had a size of 90 square metres, in Bunker II, the size was 105 square metres. Each was large enough for more than 700 victims.

What happened next was described by SS-Unterscharführer Oskar Gröning on 21 April 2015 with cold precision in the trial against him. He had witnessed a murder operation in one of the farmhouses: “One person dumped the gas through the lid, then the screams became louder, but soon they became quieter again.”

Inmates of the so-called Sonderkommando pulled the bodies out of the chambers, and buried them in mass graves right next to the farmhouses. This approach caused problems. In the summer heat of 1942, the air in that area was filled with the awful stench of death. Gas rose up from the ground, and the corpse water threatened to contaminate the groundwater. Starting in the second half of September 1942, the Sonderkommando had to dig up the dead bodies again, burn them on a pyre right next to the murder houses, and grind the bones when the fire stopped. The Sonderkommando then transported the last remains of the murdered to the Sola, the river which to this day runs
in soft bends through Auschwitz and the surrounding area. Here, they dumped ashes and bone fragments into the river. Towards the end of November 1942, the mass graves at the farmhouses had been removed, the Sonderkommando became superfluous. SS-men killed the witnesses of the operation.

The stories of death repeat themselves on each square metre of the area covered by the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Each small crumb of soil could be a grave. In a trial against SS-Unterscharführer Oskar Gröning on 2 June 2015, witness Angelia Orosz-Richt said: “My father does not have a grave. His remains were burned, his ashes were scattered in Auschwitz. Shovelled into the forest or used as fertiliser on the fields. My father’s grave is Auschwitz. When I visited Auschwitz for the first time, back in January, I walked around like in a trance. I could barely breathe. I was afraid: with each step, I step onto the grave of somebody. Nothing can erase this nightmare.”
Rolf Melchiker got acquainted with the everyday anti-Semitism when he was still a young boy. Whenever he was on his way to visit the synagogue, he kept his prayer book wrapped up in paper, since otherwise he would have been bullied. Like his big brother, Rolf Melchiker attended the Maybach Gymnasium, at which he obtained his university entrance certificate around Easter 1932, after nine years in school. In the yearbook, each student indicated their career aspirations. Rolf noted “merchant” – like his father. On 1 April 1932, he began his education to become a merchant at the Farmey GmbH Großhandelshaus Pharmazeutischer und Kosmetischer Spezialitäten und Parfümerie [pharmaceutical and cosmetic specialty products and perfumery wholesale] at Alexandrinenstrasse 97 in Berlin-Kreuzberg, and after successfully completing his education, the company hired him as a full-time employee, beginning on 1 October 1934. In Rolf’s job reference, his boss wrote at the end of 1935: “At our wholesale company, Mr. Melchiker had the opportunity to gain knowledge about the entire range of pharmaceutical and cosmetic specialty products that are available for sale, and he also got acquainted with the mailing, procurement, and incoming goods departments in which he trained as well. Mr. Melchiker showed a lot of interest for all of these areas and we were so happy with his performance that, after the completion of his education, we employed him as a warehouse clerk. In this role, his task was to fulfil the daily orders, to check the products, etc. Mr. Melchiker was honest and diligent; his conduct was excellent.”

In 1935, the German Reich prepared for the Olympics, which were planned to be held between 6 February to 16 February 1936 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and between 1 August and 16 August 1936 in Berlin. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) had decided on Germany as the host for the Olympics on 13 May 1931 already. After January 30th 1933, and the open anti-Semitism which was demonstrated at once, there were strong movements in France and the USA that argued for a boycott of the Games in Germany. In 1933, the National Socialists ensured the IOC that the Games would be open and welcoming to “all races and confessions” – then turned around and unabatedly continued their agitation against the Jews.

In the compensation files of Rolf Melchiker, two tangible examples of the way in which he was discriminated against are recorded. As a young German, he intended to complete his military service at the young Wehrmacht, and applied for service in a letter dated 12 July 1935. Thirteen days later, the relevant laws had been changed, and the chairman of the examining board for the admission to active military service replied curtly: “According to your application to be admitted for active duty dated 12 July 1935, you are a Volljude. Following §2, section 1 of the Regulation on the Admission
of Non-Aryans for Active Duty dated 25 July 1935 – National Gazette I p. 1947 – you are not eligible to be admitted for active duty.”

Grave consequences then followed from the Aryanization of his employer, the Farmey GmbH. On 11 November 1935, Rolf received his letter of dismissal, effective by the end of the year, and his old boss briefly noted in his job reference: “His dismissal was effected on 31 December 1935, since the company had been turned over into Aryan hands.” In 1938, the business was liquidated completely.

In the autumn of 1935 – on 15 September – the Reichstag in Berlin passed the Nuremberg Laws. They constituted the legal basis on which Jews in the Third Reich were degraded to second-class citizen.

The Reichsbürgergesetz divided Germans into Citizen of the State and Citizen of the Reich. Full civil rights were granted only to citizen “of German and related blood”, Jews were considered citizen of the State of the German Reich without any political rights from then onwards. They were not allowed to hold any public office and lost their voting rights. According to the law, anybody was considered a Jew who had three Jewish grandparents, was a member of a Jewish congregation, or was married to a so-called “Volljude”. Later in November 1935, the legal classification as “Volljude”, “Halbjude”, and “Vierteljude” was written into the law with a supplementary regulation.

The “Gesetz zum Schutze des Deutschen Blutes und der Deutschen Ehre” penalised marriage and extramarital intercourse between Jews and “citizen of German blood”. The administration of Berlin announced that any streets that were named after people who had any relation at all to Jews would be renamed. The district mayors decided to lay off any Jews working at the district administrations.

A future in Berlin? Under these threats? Without any prospects of leading a free life? No. In his compensation request, Rolf Melchiker wrote on 22 February 1957: “Since, of course, I did not have any chance of finding another job in Germany as a Jew, I decided to emigrate to South Africa.”

It was a small farewell party at the Prinzregentenstrasse 84 on 11 February 1936. Rolf, his parents, as well as Alice and Bruno Warschauer – a family they were friends with – sat together. Drank to the future of the 21-year-old in a new world. At the other end of the world. On this day, a last, self-timed photo was taken – presumably with the Warschauers’ camera. The Warschauers and father Joseph look into the lens with a happy expression while the sad gaze of mother Elise strays off towards nothing. That day, her second son was leaving her, too. Bruno Warschauer had the photo quickly developed as a postcard and on 15 February sent it to Rolf Melchiker, including a friendly greeting:
“Dear Rolf,

In Africa – in desert sand
You certainly think of all sorts of things.
Of parents, friends, and so on
The places you’ve been to, sometimes sad, sometimes cheerful.
Certainly it won’t be easy for you there
So I wish you tremendous luck
Stay healthy, earn a lot of money, Be joyful in the other world!
This picture at last reminds you
Of us and our farewell party!
Yours truly, the Warschauers”

An uneasy feeling must have crept into the hearts of the Warschauers and the Melchikers when they said their goodbyes. And surely, Rolf Melchiker kept turning around towards them a lot as he left. When the train left Berlin. He would never see his parents again, nor the Warschauers.

The Melchiker Family, who had always been prosperous, had bought a first-class ticket to Southampton in England for their son. There, he boarded the passenger steamer Balmor Castle, flying a British flag. The steamer reached Cape Town on 9 March 1936. Presumably on his 22nd birthday – March 10th – Rolf Melchiker boarded the train which would carry him to the final destination of his journey: Johannesburg. A linear distance of roughly 9,000 kilometres away from Berlin.

And then, at 22 years of age, a harsh reality began. At first, Rolf Melchiker was unemployed. He later told his children that he would often eat sardines and bananas during this early period since both was available pretty cheaply. Around the middle of the year, he landed a job at the company HARDWARE BAZAARS (Pty) Ltd. in Johannesburg. Door-to-door selling, monthly salary around ten pounds. Below the subsistence minimum. Yet, Rolf saved up as much money as he could, and began to send money to his parents in Germany, since they were left with no income at all from 1936 onwards.

The Melchikers in France, Germany, and South Africa stayed in touch through letters. Rolf and Werner, being young fellows, used to butt heads, sometimes harshly, and only found the way back to each other over the distance between France and South Africa. In one of his letters to Rolf, Werner wrote: “I lost my country, but gained a brother.”

From autumn 1942 onwards, no further letters reached South Africa from the Vernet camp, and, starting in December 1942, no further letters from Germany. None whatsoever. And nobody knew anything. Nobody could do anything for Rolf Melchiker. Just before the end of the war, he finally learned that his parents had passed
away on the evening before their planned deportation. And that Werner had been deported to somewhere in the East. His fate remained uncertain until as late as 1958. On 13 February 1958, Rolf Melchiker wrote to the Office for Compensation: “My only brother [...] was deported by the French police after the occupation of France by German troops, and was brought to an unknown extermination camp in the East, and he didn’t return.” The name “Auschwitz” appeared in the files a short time after the date of Rolf Melchiker’s letter.

The everyday demands distracted him. He married a Jewish woman who had fled from Vienna and fathered two children. 16 years after his emigration, economic security became permanent at last in Rolf Melchiker’s life. “From mid-1952 onwards, I worked as a purchasing agent with the company GREATERMANS [SOUTH AFRICA] LIMITED, Johannesburg, and since that time I had an income that permitted sufficient livelihood to me and my family, even though I don’t have a work contract and could lose my job any time”, he wrote to the Office for Compensation on 22 February 1957.

As a father, his daughter writes, he had always been a loving, nice, and gentle man, who shared his love for music with his daughters. Simply a wonderful father. A gentle soul who lived with a deep inner sadness. He had tried hard to bring his brother and his parents to South Africa. But he had no success. He felt deep-seated guilt and lived with it. This is phenomenon which is often observed in survivors: this feeling, this open question: why did I survive and the others didn’t?

The daughters grew up in an environment in which no family was complete. Many friends of the parents were Jews who had fled from Germany and Austria, who had last family members. As the daughter writes: “But as children you accept your circumstances without question, and so this is what we did.” Since she knew neither her grandparents, nor her uncle, the pain wasn’t too bad, and she says: “But this terrible time was really not a focus of our lives, we lived in a loving family and had very happy childhoods.”
Photo 1: A last time united (from the left): Rolf, Elise, Joseph und Werner Melchiker (approx. 1932).

Photo 2: Werner Melchiker as agricultural student in Château de Born (December 1935).

Photo 3: A last moment of happiness: Rose Smilowski and Werner Melchiker in the Calderstones Park in Liverpool (18 February 1938).
Photo 4: Farewell from Berlin (from the left): Alice und Bruno Warschauer, Elise, Joseph and Rolf Melchiker (11 February 1936).

Photo 5: A last reunion in La Sartresse (from the left): Egon und Helene Smilowski, Elise Melchiker, Rose Smilowski and Werner Melchiker (18 February 1937).

Photo 9: The graves of Joseph and Elise Melchiker on the Jewish Cemetery Weißensee (November 2015).
From the very beginning, the national socialists stirred up the public with murderous antisemitic rhetorics. The first Jews were beat to death by the SA-gangs as early as 1933, throughout the Third Reich. Jew-baiting, humiliation, and hatred rose further with each day of Adolf Hitler’s reign. In his speech on 30 January 1939, while he was already planning to start the Second World War, he threatened with these menacing words: “Today, I want to be a prophet yet again: Should the international Finanzjudentum [financial Judaism] inside and outside of Europe manage to pull the people into a world war once again, the result won’t be the Bolshevization of the earth and thus the victory of Judaism, but the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe.”

The professionalised mass murder machinery first began on 27 November 1941 with a train that travelled from Grunewald train station inside the capital of the Reich towards the execution sites in the East. 1053 men, women, and children – 38 of the latter were younger than 10 – were transported towards Riga in a special train. Immediately after their arrival, the murderers led their victims into the forest of Rumbala near Riga and shot them all without exception.

A frightening silence settled around Joseph and Elise Melchiker. Those who could had fled in time. Since the beginning of the war in 1939, leaving the country was next to impossible, and after the ban on leaving the country ordered by the authorities on 23 October 1941, it became completely impossible. The trains now regularly departed towards the East. Friends disappeared. Rumours spread through all the uncertainty. Theresienstadt was said to be a special institution for older Jews where they would be taken good care of. Postcards sent from Theresienstadt and from the camps in the east – all written under compulsion and strict censorship – suggested that the deportees had arrived safely and had been accommodated just fine. Between the lines, the senders hid the real messages, so loved ones back home suspected more and more that the fraudulent evacuation to the east was supposed to hide unfathomable mass murder inside of harmless sounding words.

It was in this atmosphere of fear that the year of 1942 began for Joseph and Elise Melchiker. The year of the many farewells.

17 July 1942: The sister of Elise Melchiker was the first who had to leave: Rosa Rebecca Selten. Her husband Heinrich Selten had passed away on 27 November 1935. Presumably, a few months after, she moved in with Joseph and Elise Melchiker at Prinzregentenstrasse 84. Being a childless widow, her funds were small, and at that time, the Melchikers still lived in a four-room-apartment. At the census on 17 May 1939, Rosa Rebecca Selten was officially counted as a household member with the Melchikers.
The notice of deportation reached Rosa Rebecca Selten only a few days before her departure. Usually, the Gestapo “offered” a so-called “home buying contract” for Theresienstadt. However, “enforced upon” would be a better fitting term for the procedure. The signatory had to deposit their bank deposits into a bank account of the Reichsvereinigung der Juden, the remaining property and belonging were confiscated without exception. The Jüdische Kultusvereinigung informed the victims about how they should behave before and during the deportation, and asked them to complete their preparations calmly and prudently, in order to allow for a smooth transportation procedure.

100 men and women departed towards Theresienstadt on 17 July 1942. Rosa Rebecca Selten was number 55 on the transport list, her brother-in-law Fritz Selten (born on 4 September 1875) was travelling in the same train. Both were considered unfit for work due to their age.

48-year-old Dr. Israel Friedrich stood bent over the dead body of Rosa Rebecca Selten at 1:15PM on 7 March 1943 and began the inspection of her corpse. A few minutes before the widow from Berlin had died at the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Aged 67. Dr. Friedrich, himself only deported from Berlin on 28 January 1943 noted “cardio muscular degeneration” as cause of death on the standard form “Todesfallanzeige” of the presbytery. Because of her heart disease, the Berlin woman had been treated for some time already by Dr. Erich Fantl, who had been deported from Prague and brought to Theresienstadt on 20 November 1942. Rosa Rebecca Selten died at the ghetto. Weakened by life in the misery of the hopelessly overpopulated ghetto Theresienstadt and without proper medical care. After a winter without proper heating. After months of absolutely insufficient food supply. After years of humiliation.

24 July 1942: Joseph Melchiker’s sister Dora and her husband Paul Graupe had to leave their apartment at Bayrische Strasse 29 – about two kilometres away from the Melchikers – a week later. Once again, 100 older men and women sat on a train to Theresienstadt, Dora and Paul had numbers 64 and 65 on the transport list. It was the 29th “Altentransport” from Berlin to Theresienstadt.

The sons Heinz (born in 1906), Ernst (born in 1908), and Gerhard (born in 1911) had left Germany in time. At the time, in autumn 1942, they didn’t know about the fate of their parents, as demonstrated by a letter from Dr. Heinz Graupe dated 8 September 1942, relayed by the Red Cross. Around that time, he lived in Haifa, together with his wife Hella and his son Daniel and wrote as concisely as possible, since a Red Cross-letter couldn’t have more than 25 words: “Worries about you. Us healthy. Both working. Dani gifted, wild boy. Never forgets grandparents, needs you. Stay healthy, strong. Happy New Year, goodbye. Heinz, Hella, Daniel.” The letter reached Joseph and Elise Melchiker, who
replied on 22 November 1942: “My dears! As reported 5/8 Red Cross-letter, parents 24/7 calm and strong departed to protectorate, unreachable by letter, no news so far.”

Four months after their departure, neither the sons abroad, nor the Melchikers in Berlin had received any sign of life from Paul and Dora Graupe. That was not a good sign. Only after World War II the sad certainty about the fate of their parents reached the Graupe-children. Dora Graupe died at the central hospital of Theresienstadt from bilateral pneumonia and cardiac insufficiency resulting from this condition, two weeks after her deportation. For time of death, the doctor noted 6 August 1942 at 7:10AM. Husband Paul Graupe was left behind alone at Building No. L 217, room 18. Only for a short period. The train to Treblinka, carrying 2002 victims, departed from Theresienstadt on 21 September 1942. Immediately after arrival, the murderers forced their victims to undress and to run into a so-called shower. In a neighbouring room, the murderers gunned the engine of a captured Russian tank and funnelled the exhaust fumes into the gas chamber. In a verdict on 3 September 1965, the Landgericht Düsseldorf (LG Düsseldorf dated 3 September 1965, 8 I Ks 2/64) summed up the procedure as follows: “The better part of the remaining victims, who were led to the gas chambers using whips and rifle butts, once they were crammed into the confined space of the chambers, not only suffered unfathomable psychological distress, but for several minutes – or even, during the occasional engine failure, several hours at times – intense suffocation agony, before they lost consciousness and died. Those waiting in the tunnel even had to listen to the screams of the victims who went ahead of them in death before it was their turn.”

On 11 May 1945, the sons Heinz, Ernst, and Gerhard Graupe published an obituary in the exile newspaper “Der Aufbau”, using the following words: “Only recently we received the sad news that our beloved mother Dora Graupe, nee Melchiker (formerly Berlin) passed away on 8 August 1942 in Theresienstadt, being 67 years of age, and that our beloved father Paul Graupe, being 73 years of age, was further deported to Poland shortly thereafter.”

4. August 1942: Recha Frankenstein had to go to Theresienstadt in the 36. “Alterstransport”. She was a very lovely friend. As Ernst Graupe recalled on 12 May 1960: “My own family and the Melchiker family were close friends of the Frankenstein family who lived in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, Pariserstrasse; the deceased husband Frankenstein was a schoolmate of my father. Even after the death of Mr. Frankenstein, the friendship and the relationships between the Melchiker family and the widowed Recha Frankenstein continued in the same manner. Since Mrs. Frankenstein found herself being a single woman, she often visited our families.”

At 66 years of age, Recha Frankenstein was considered unfit for work, as is noted on the
deportation list dated 4 August 1942. Surprisingly for her social circle, she disappeared from Berlin. 20-year-old Marie Jalowicz, distantly related, learned about it as she was about to say goodbye to Leo Davidsohn, her mother’s cousin. She had decided to stop wearing the yellow star and go underground into illegality – rather than letting herself be deported and murdered. The dialogue between the buoyant Marie and the frightful Leo is representative of many conversations in Berlin at the time:

“You’re going out without star?”, he asked first, without any real greeting. He was visibly indignant.

“Yes, I want to try to survive. I came to say goodbye. I’ll visit Recha Frankenstein, too, later today”, I replied. Recha was the favourite cousin of my mom and her closest confidante.

“Don’t bother. They’ve taken her away last week”, he said bitterly. The pince-nez on his nose trembled. Leo was enraged because of me because I was facing him without a star. “You’re disturbing”, he said harshly, “we don’t have time. The sisters are busy with the preparations for the evacuation we’re awaiting shortly.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to hold you up for long. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

“What are you thinking, just not coming along when you are called upon?”

“I’d like to survive.”

“But when they catch you ... do you know what they’ll do to you?”

“What?”

“They’ll deport you straight to the East.”

“That’s just what I’m trying to avoid.”

Recha Frankenstein survived Theresienstadt. She worked there as a nurse. And she met so many old friends from Berlin, who had been brought there just like herself. Most of them didn’t stay for long and were further deported to the various execution facilities. When at the beginning of February 1945 rumours that the SS was preparing a transport to Switzerland made the rounds in Theresienstadt, nobody believed those rumours. In fact, however, a transport carrying 1,200 primarily elderly men and women left Theresienstadt on 5 February 1945 at 4PM. In Konstanz, the train left the German Reich and, after a hearty welcome at Kreuzlingen, continued its trip to St. Gallen, where it arrived on the evening of 7 February.

The agonies Recha Frankenstein, who was only 1.44 metres (4’7”) tall, had suffered over the years had weakened her body, and attacked her heart in a double sense. She was carrying a heavy burden, so many sad stories had she seen unfold at Theresienstadt, heard about them, or lived through them herself. She wrote long letters, one of which
was addressed to Ernst Graupe in London, and in which she told him about the fate of his parents and that of the Melchiker family.

Recha Frankenstein planned to leave Europe. Her relatives in North America tried to get documents for her. Meanwhile, the stateless pensioner was moved from the reception centre to the refugee centre “Bristol” in Territet near Montreux. A medical examination in May 1945 at the hospital of Montreux uncovered a severe heart disease. Recha Frankenstein was unfit for any long travels or large physical efforts. In July 1946, Recha Frankenstein moved to the refugee centre “Mirabeau” in Clarens, which was part of Montreux as well. She would never recover.

Recha Frankenstein died aged 70, on 7 November 1946 around midnight, from the consequences of angina pectoris. Four days earlier, she drew up her will and arranged the following: “I wish for a funeral according to Jewish rite, with the respective prayers, and a gravestone with my name, birthday, dying day, and a reference to the yearlong internment at Theresienstadt. My relatives, whose addresses I’ve recorded, are to be informed.” Among witnesses, she had deposited 250 Swiss francs for her own funeral and gravestone into the bank account of Louis Salomon, a Theresienstadt survivor born in 1872. And her will was granted. In the letter to her relatives, one can read: “Considering what she went through during the last years and her old age, the passing away of your sister could not be prevented, despite the caregiving granted to her. Your sister was buried on the Jewish Cemetery in La Tour de Peilz (canton Waadt), with consideration for the traditional ceremonies.”

Week after week, the world around Joseph and Elise Melchiker grew more lonely. On top of their close relatives, more and more friends and acquaintances disappeared. The prosperity of the 1920s had passed, the financial reserves had been used up, gold and jewellery had to be given away under compulsion. Rolf, their son, sent money from South Africa. From the 19 September 1941 onwards, Jews were obliged to wear the yellow star in public. Elise Melchiker was doing forced labour at the locksmith’s shop of Ernst Starke (Rathausstrasse 90, Berlin-Mariendorf) since 3 November 1941, Joseph since 22 October 1941. After many years in the luxury of a seven-room-apartment at the Goßlerstrasse 23 (Berlin-Friedenau) and after that, in a four-room-apartment at Prinzregentenstrasse 84, the Melchikers had crammed themselves into a two-room-apartment. According to an order by the Gestapo, Joseph and Elise Melchiker were due to move into Prinzregentenstrasse 89 towards the end of 1942, a few houses further down the road, to the Jacoby family.

But things would unfold very differently. At Burgstrasse 28, where the Berlin Commodity Exchange Market used to be based, and where Joseph Melchiker used to work in his
first job, the Judenreferat of the state police control centre of the Gestapo resided from 1941 on onwards. From here, the murderers of the Gestapo organised the deportation of the Jews of Berlin. On of them put the names "Joseph Melchiker", "Elise Melchiker", and "Rosa Jacoby" on the list for the transport departing to Auschwitz on 9 December 1942.

The Jews of Berlin, for the most part, were aware that the so-called evacuation to the East was synonymous with their own murder. The notice of deportation brought people face to face with their own, other-directed date of death. In the case of the Melchikers that date would have been 10 December 1942. Immediately after the arrival and the screening at Auschwitz. Author Christian Goeschel sums the situation up as follows: “From October 1941 onwards, the emigration of Jews was prohibited. Up till then, younger Jews were able to leave Germany. However, they had to jump many hurdles before their actual exit. Then, at the time of the deportations, young Jews could still go underground. For older Jewish people, this wasn’t really an option; when they had used up all of their self-assertiveness in the face of this difficult situation, they chose suicide. Considering the humiliations and degradations of the national socialists, they preferred to die by their own hand.” Beata Kosmala adds: “In many who had lost any support, the official order to vacate the apartment and to stand by for evacuation led to the decision to commit suicide.”

When exactly Joseph and Elise Melchiker made the decision to depart life on their own terms is impossible to reconstruct. They had organised sleeping drugs in time. And they announced their departure. They ended their letter to Heinz Graupe dated 22 November 1942 with the following word fragments: "... us preparing long journey – heartfelt goodbye greetings. Jockel Elise. While the words “long journey” and “heartfelt goodbye greetings” in this letter allowed for several different interpretations, the last letter to the son Rolf and his first wife Gerda was unambiguous:

"Dearest little ones!

Last heartfelt goodbye before departure – we’re very tired – parental blessings, God’s blessings for your distant journey through life! – stay strong and well – Thanks loving care.

Most heartfelt greetings

Farewell kisses

1 Dec. 1942                        Joseph, Elise Melchiker”

The day of their deportation approached. Until the very end, Joseph (63) and Elise (61) had to show up for forced labour every day. It appears that Joseph Melchiker and his employer Ernst Starke were on good terms, and thus, a memorable meeting took place.
In a letter dated 24 October 1947, Martha Starke told Rolf Melchiker about this meeting: “During the war, my husband employed many Jews at his company, your father among them. Now, my husband was supposed to give these people a special treatment, I’m sure you know what I mean, but my husband didn’t do that – on the contrary, he dealt with people person to person, one human being to another, and he did so with your father, too. They had both worked well together and had gotten along very well. Then, your father invited my husband to visit him at home, of course that was very difficult, but my husband didn’t care and he visited him. Your father was full of joy about that and, out of gratitude, gave my husband an encyclopaedia as a gift, which we keep in high regard, and our little girl has used it often for school. It was probably the last time that my husband met your father, because the next day, your father took his own life. We were terribly sorry and very sad about that.”

The Melchiker couple spent a last, sad evening together. Those must have been dark hours, spent with all those memories of happier times. In the hope that their sons would end up better off – not knowing that Werner had been murdered at Auschwitz in September – they took the sleeping drug and passed away slowly.

When the Gestapo was about to pick the Melchikers up at the assembly point on 6 December, they found the limp bodies. Joseph Melchiker was already dead, his wife Elise was brought to the Jewish hospital at Iranische Strasse, where she died on 7 December. The Gestapo sealed the apartment and deposited the keys at custodian Albert Kordylewski’s. Neighbour Rosa Jacoby was brought to Auschwitz on 9 December as planned, where she was murdered very soon after her arrival on 10 December.

Rosa Jacoby was one of 994 victims who were brought to Auschwitz with the 24th Eastern transport. Not even a fifth of those people survived the screening at the Judenrampe which took place immediately after the arrival. The doomed victims marched to the so-called bunkers, two farmhouses which had been converted into execution sites, where they were gassed. Members of the Special Unit removed the dead bodies from the gas chambers and burnt them outside. The ashes were used as fertiliser or dumped into one of the many peaceful ponds which can be found scattered around the Auschwitz-Birkenau territory in large numbers to this day, hiding their gruesome secret.

The bodies of Joseph and Elise Melchiker were kept at the pathology department of the Jewish hospital and were buried at the Jewish cemetery Weißensee with dignity on 21 December 1942 on 2:15PM. Their graves have the numbers 110392 and 110393. The funeral costs of 306.40 reichsmark each were paid by the Jewish congregation. However, Joseph and Elise Melchiker were buried under the last name “Milchiker” which had been imposed upon them. Olga and Samuel Milchiker, the parents of Joseph Melchiker, presumably arrived in Berlin from Russia in the spring of 1877. Sometime
around the turn of the century, the entire family had changed the name from “Milchiker” to “Melchiker”. In 1939, the national socialists forced the family to re-adopt the typically Jewish last name “Milchiker”. At the census on 17 May 1939, the couple themselves hand-signed with “Milchiker”.

In his memoirs, Rabbi Martin Riesenburger describes his work at the Jewish cemetery Weißensee: “I was at the cemetery from early morning to late evening, surrounded by a small circle of Jewish workers, who completed their immeasurably hard work with a commitment and a sense of duty which cannot be outdone. Every day was enshrouded by fear, every hour brought new suffering, each minute brought us face to face with tasks that were almost impossible to complete. [...] Day after day, many people were brought to the cemetery who, torn apart internally, had preferred suicide to the dreadful suffering, torments, and maltreatments. All sorts of poison were highly popular. People in their prime, but also those who were living the autumn of their lives, put an end to this existence by taking these poisons and sleep drugs. How often did I stand here before these coffins, the four shelves of which sheltered a life which had once been hopeful, a life which could have done so many worthwhile things, a life which maybe could have given many beautiful things to humanity? There were weeks in which the number of these suicides was so large that we often performed burials until the evening hours.”

Astonishingly, a new tenant for the apartment of Joseph and Elise Melchiker was ready to move in immediately after the removal of the dead bodies of the deceased married couple: SS-Obersturmführer Heinrich Volke, employee at the Reichssicherhauptsamt – the centre of the terror in the middle of Berlin. More than 20 years after taking over the apartment, this man remembered the first moments at his cosy new home with an astonishing clarity when he was questioned by the Compensation Office. In a letter dated 5 February 1963, he wrote: “The assigned apartment consisted of one room of about 20 square metres, another room of about 15 square metres, a kitchen of about 15 square metres, bathroom and corridor.

When I entered the apartment together with my wife, all rooms were empty except for one in which the furniture and other belongings of the former occupier were piled up. It might be that there were a kitchen table and two chairs and a kitchen cupboard in the kitchen, too, however, neither myself nor my wife remember this clearly.

Immediately after the day when I collected the keys I contacted the authorities in charge of the vacation of the apartment, since I wanted to move in with my own furniture as soon as possible. I don’t remember how these authorities were called. One or two days later, an official came along who asked me whether I had any interest in the inventory of the apartment myself. I listed two white, simple wardrobes, an old sewing machine, a kitchen cupboard, and two kitchen chairs as furniture which I wanted to acquire. [It
must be noted that the kitchen furniture was simple and old, too. – As your own files prove, I paid 440,- reichsmark for the furniture I had chosen.)

I asked the official to see to it that the piled up inventory would be removed as fast as possible. One of the following days, all the furniture etc. in the mentioned room were collected, so that we could take over that room empty.” There are no files regarding the question of what happened to the collected furniture. Usually, forwarding companies cleared the apartments, destroyed all personal belongings and sold the rest cheaply.

Of course, the buying of several pieces of furniture by the new tenant was completed and documented diligently. On 14 December 1942, Official Dietrich at the Reichsfinanzzverwaltung diligently listed all the belongings of the Melchiker family which SS-Obersturmführer Heinrich Volke appropriated to himself: ”2 wardrobes old = 80 RM (reichsmark), bed frame including cushion and sheets = 40 RM, 1 small mirrored wardrobe brown = 25 RM, 1 slide table including 2 chairs = 50 RM, 2 easy chairs = 40 RM, 1 smoking table = 10 RM, 1 bed stand white = 5 RM, 1 sofabed, defect, including cushion sheet = 35 RM, 1 suitcase, wicker trunk, old laundry and household stuff = 30 RM, 1 old pedestal, defect = 5 RM, 2 small cupboards = 5 RM, 3 blankets and and dirty laundry = 30 RM, 2 small tables, defect = 10 RM, 1 trunk with tableware and coat rack and electric lamp = 75 RM, 1 sewing machine Singer = 75 RM.” The 440 reichsmark of proceeds were received by Official Dietrich and were deposited into the account of the Oberfinanzpräsident of Berlin-Brandenburg.

SS-Obersturmführer Heinrich Volke was prevented from enjoying a longer stay at his new cosy home. During an air raid of Allied forces on Berlin in the night of 1 to 2 March, consisting of 250 bombers, the house at Prinzregentenstrasse 84 was hit badly. In some instances, apartments in the house burnt out.

The formal deprivation of rights of the Melchiker couple was completed by the national socialists during the month of December 1942. On 18 December 1942, the state police control centre of the Gestapo in Berlin (reference Stapo IV C 3 – J. E.) issued a collection order which was covered by four different laws regarding the assets left behind by various deceased Jewish victims – among others, Joseph and Elise Melchiker. This was done in front of the eye of the public: The collection order was published in the Deutscher Reichsanzeiger and Preußischer Staatsanzeiger Nr. 301 dated 23 December 1942. Regarding the Melchikers, it stated succinctly: “They are Jewish suicides”. On 5 January 1943, the GestaposentthesedокументstotheChiefFinancePresident of Berlin-Brandenburg, asset reclamation office, so that the authorities could legally collect the remaining assets of Joseph and Elise Melchiker for the benefit of the German Reich.

One thing remained uncleared for several years: the unpaid electricity bill. In the spring
of 1945 the storm reached Berlin. From mid-April, the Russian armies stormed the capital of the German Reich. Fight zone. Final fight at every corner. Curt Riess wrote years later: “The city of Berlin was dying. Death was very near, if there was anything like the death of a city.” Only a few people believed in miracles. At the beginning of May the storm ended: “Suddenly it was quiet in Berlin. The Berliners felt this silence so strongly that they thought they heard it; they heard that the bombs were no longer falling, the shells were no longer exploding, the Stalinorgels no longer sounded, the engines of the low-flying planes no longer buzzed...”

When the Second World War ended a few days later, the tidying up began. The National Socialists were removed from their offices. Often not. Every day, new refugees arrived from the East who were desperately seeking refuge. And their families. The victorious powers urged the Berliners to carry the ruins away for the new beginning.

The case of Joseph and Elise Melchiker immediately employed the new magistrate of Berlin, in August 1945, more precisely, the asset reclamation office at the financial department of the Finance and Tax Department. The couple Melchiker had committed suicide in December 1942 without paying the electricity bill.

The Bewag (Berliner Kraft- und Licht-Aktiengesellschaft) had prepared a final statement on 2.1.1943 according to which a debt for electricity consumption of 7.84 reichsmark remained open. The Bewag had assumed that the Melchikers had been “evacuated” - the contemporary paraphrase for deportation and assassination. Bewag arranged investigations and found in the spring of 1943 that Joseph Melchiker had “poisoned himself” directly before the transport to Auschwitz.

In a letter addressed to the asset reclamation office at the reginal finance office of Berlin-Brandenburg on May 10, 1943, Bewag asked to pay the invoice: “We ask you to transfer the outstanding debt of the above mentioned amount of RM 7.84 to our postal check account Berlin No. 38122. Heil Hitler!”

The process must have been forgotten in wartime. In the first summer of peace, the case fell to the hands of a clerk in the capital administration office in the City Council of Berlin. And he concluded it in a last letter to the Bewag: „Subject: Joseph Melchiker, Wilmersdorf, Prinzregentenstrasse 84. The former inhabitant is not mentioned in my register, and further investigation can no longer be made on this matter. I cannot comply with your request of 31.1.43 K / R 02191 for payment of electricity consumption costs in the amount of RM 7.84. I therefore regard the matter as settled for me.”
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