

Hertha Nathorff (1895–1993)



Almost twenty years separate Gretel Bergmann and Hertha Nathorff, both from Laupheim. They serve as examples of two completely different ways of coping with and adjusting to the new and unknown circumstances of life after emigrating from Germany. The German Emigration Center in Bremerhaven highlights the biographies of Hertha Nathorff and her relative Carl Laemmle as remarkable examples of the emigration process.

Hertha Nathorff's father, Arthur Emil Einstein, owned a tobacco shop. However, the increasing discrimination and deprivation of rights under the Nazi regime after their takeover in 1933 put an end to the wealthy, middle-class lifestyle of the Einstein family. Their fate is portrayed in Hertha Nathorff's diary, which represents an important source of information for us today. The efforts of Hitler's small profiteers to take possession of the Einstein family home, as part of the process of "de-jewification of business establishments and land property", are also recorded in municipal council registers. This aspect of the prosecution of Jews is an inherent example of that time and affected every person portrayed in this book. The following excerpt from the Mayor's report to the municipal council addresses precisely this issue.

13th December 1938:

Einstein's tobacco shop represents another ongoing Aryanization case. Initially, Einstein had allegedly

leased his shop and his house to F. N. The authorized committee, however, held the opinion that the Jewish tobacco shop should be closed down. Hence, no act of Aryanization was carried out. Nevertheless, N., resp. his father-in-law A. B., still intends to buy the property. Another prospective buyer for the property is H. R. who would like to move his cigar shop from Radstrasse to Einstein's property, which is located much more conveniently. The authorized committee will most likely not prevent him from doing so, as this would be a mere case of business transfer within the same sector. O. Sch., the owner of a shoe shop, has also shown interest... Sch. has already been assured support in this matter by local Reich party officials, as well as the Mayor. Since there are several other prospective buyers for the Einstein property, the Mayor has explained to Einstein, that the city will buy it. The city will then still be entitled to resell the house. The Mayor was also convinced that Sch. would then have a chance in becoming the next owner of the house...

Through her publications after emigrating, Einstein's daughter was considered one of the well-known surviving representatives of Laupheim's Jewish community in New York. The constantly changing course of her life is exemplary of the fate of the German-Jewish bourgeoisie and intellectual elite. Her recollections of Berlin (1933–1939) and New York (1940–1945), reflect her personal

impression of the crucial years that caused radical changes in her life.

Born in 1895, Hertha Einstein spent her childhood in her family home. Her social environment was typical for the wealthy, Jewish middle-class who was willing to assimilate and prioritized education and the cultivation of culture. There are almost no memories of Laupheim noted in her journal, except for the occasional visits to the city while she resided in Berlin, which is why her childhood memories can only be found in later reports. She renewed her connection to Laupheim in 1986, when she sent a letter to the Mayor expressing her intention to set up a scholarship for the highest achieving student. The scholarship has been awarded since 1987.

In her letter from 1986 she describes her recollections of the difficulties of getting permission to attend Laupheim's *Lateinschule*. This letter is an important document that serves as evidence of the ambition of women to acquire a higher education, despite gender inequality:

Therefore, I was completely surprised when my father told me at the end of the summer break that I would have to go to the Lateinschule. He had organized the change of schools without saying a word ..., but when people found out that a girl was attending a boy's school, a big furor

arose among the citizens of Laupheim. Many people were enthusiastic about this progress. However, even more were outraged that a girl was sent to a boys' school. So the days went by monotonously until we unexpectedly received a letter from the school authorities in Stuttgart. 'The girl must leave the school. Coeducation is not permitted.' Everybody was shocked: my professors, my father, classmates and, of course, me. In a flood of tears, I packed my books and had to say good-bye with a heavy heart. Back to my former school... My classmates visited me almost every day and told me what they had learnt at school. We did our homework together and usually started with the Latin exercises that I was so fond of.

A year later Hertha Nathorff was readmitted to the *Lateinschule*. Even at the *Gymnasium* in Ulm she was the only girl in the class.

In 1914, her classmates enrolled in the military service as the First World War began: "It was heartbreaking to say good-bye and it deeply grieved me. Suddenly I heard one of my classmates say 'See, you're just a simple gal.' These words hit me like a slap in the face. I was just another gal, unable to keep up with the boys."

As she saw a lot of seriously wounded soldiers and since her father's cousin was a head doctor at a military hospital, a great desire to become a doctor awoke inside of her.

In a remembrance book she wrote in America for her husband, Hertha Nathorff expresses her attitude towards other religions; she would never deny her Jewish roots, but subscribing to a particular religion or accepting a different God for each religion was impossible for her. The strong identification of the educated German-Jewish middle-class with German culture, particularly with the literary tradition of Classicism, is reflected in her affectionate description of her bookshelf as a "home altar with a precious Weimar collection of Goethe's works in many volumes, and other pieces of literature that my husband and I have been carefully selecting and collecting with love all these years."

During her years as a medical student in Heidelberg and later in Freiburg, Hertha Nathorff was for the first time confronted with the increasing anti-Semitism in Germany. In 1920 she obtained her doctorate in Heidelberg. Three years later she became the chief physician at the Red Cross maternity hospital in Berlin and in the same year married. Together with her husband, Dr. Erich Nathorff, she also ran their private medical practice. As early as April 1933, the newly elected Nazi government began their policies of discrimination, when all Jewish

businesses, law offices, and medical practices across the Reich were boycotted. These tragic occurrences and their repercussions are depicted in Hertha Nathorff's diary entries.

In the years that followed, the lives of Jewish people in Berlin were marked by state-imposed mistreatment and harassment. However, it was positive experiences and pleasant recollections of her childhood that counteracted a dark and one-sided image of Germany and the Germans during the period of her emigration, and intensified her touching and ever so slightly embarrassing attachment to Germany.

In 1938, all Jewish doctors were deprived of their medical licenses. Only Erich Nathorff, who was a doctor at a hospital in Berlin at that time, was allowed to continue his work treating the Jewish population as a so-called *Krankenbehandler*. In August 1938, the Nathorffs sent a request for their emigration to the Consulate General of the United States.

The family's decision was reinforced by Erich Nathorff's arrest during the pogrom in November 1938, which was euphemistically called "Crystal Night". His wife and son feared for his life during his five-week long imprisonment in Sachsenhausen, until he was finally released and returned home, albeit in ill health. Hertha Nathorff's sick father was also imprisoned in Laupheim.

When the family moved to New York in 1940, Hertha Nathorff was 45 years old. After Laemmle's death, the Nathorffs no longer received any financial support, neither from relatives nor organizations. Erich Nathorff's German medical license was not recognized in the USA, and so he was compelled to prepare for and take the American exam. During this time, his wife had to earn the money needed to live on and to eventually set up a new medical practice, by doing odd jobs as a charwoman or a bar pianist.

Erich Nathorff managed to open a medical practice again; his wife however did not succeed in gaining a medical license in the US as she had dedicated herself to providing for the family all those years. As her husband's idea of traditional roles did not include Hertha Nathorff's ambitions for professional self-fulfillment, she had to give up her beloved occupation. Her deep regret is openly expressed in her diary entries. Wolfgang Benz who presented Nathorff's diary in Laupheim in 1987 recognizes in this loss "the core of her self-confidence" and a "quintessential cause of her misery". In 1940, she entered a Harvard competition with the manuscript "My Life in Germany" and received an award for it.

Hertha Nathorff possessed an admirable power for engaging in a wide range of social activities as part of the *New World Club*, an organization that took care of

immigrants. She worked as a psychologist, was a member of the *Alfred Mental Hygiene Clinic*, the *Virchow Medical Society* and the *Association for Advancement of Psychotherapy*. She also wrote newspaper articles and gave radio lectures in German. On the occasion of her 60th birthday in 1955, *Aufbau*, a newspaper established by Jewish immigrants in New York, published an article in which her double-life was concisely but fittingly described as “Charwoman by day, chairwoman by night”. The family had hardly managed to get back on its feet again, when Erich Nathorff passed away in 1954.

Thanks to pension payments from Germany, Hertha Nathorff’s financial situation was not as bad as one would infer from visiting her apartment. One possible explanation for the disarray is that over the years, she got used to rather meager living conditions and was therefore no longer interested in changing anything about it. Hertha Nathorff never saw Germany again. No German institution ever invited her to come back. From 1942 until her death in 1993, she resided in the same apartment near Central Park and her husband’s office. Her son’s death in 1988 made her realize that she was left alone in a place that would never become her home. As she was bound to her wheelchair, she was unable to leave her apartment. It was only through extensive correspondence that she managed to stay in contact with the outside world.

After her death we fulfilled her wish and installed a memorial plaque in honor of her family at the Weisensee cemetery in Berlin. A similar plaque was installed on her parents' gravestone at the cemetery in Laupheim by her former school. Wolfgang Benz, publisher of Hertha Nathorff's diary, wrote about her life in his anthology "German Jews in the 20th century", using the unfortunately appropriate title "The Common Misfortune of Exile". The following poem from her booklet "Voices of Silence", which was published in 1966, evokes important milestones of her life and her memories:

Three cities

When I dream: LAUPHEIM

It is the land of childhood, the land of youth;
Swabian soil, fragrant and sweet, spicy and heavy.
And an old, familiar folk song: Rosenstock, Holderblüt...

And when I think: BERLIN

It is the land of my heart,
With the air of big cities, whirlwind
A woman's love, a mother's happiness, fulfillment.

Success

A sparkling, rushing, chiming melody
It is Beethoven and Mozart all at once.

And then when I feel: NEW YORK,

It is a mixture of people
Hustling and chasing through weather and storm
Sorrow and hardship –
And sometimes, dissolving in a babble of voices
Melodies in major and minor.
Gershwin it is, and Sousa and Jitterbug –

*Translated from the German by Olga Alirzaeva,
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