

Dahn in September 2022

Old Wrongs and New Friendships

Die Rheinpfalz, Pirmasenser Rundschau

Monday 26 September 2022

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Visit to the old homeland at the grave of Jakob Schwarz: local researcher Otmar Weber from Dahn (from the left), Malcolm Griffiths from Manchester, his partner Eleanor Wolff, her sister Janet Wolff, Peter Blystone from Arizona, whose mother Annemarie Müller came from Busenberg and who directed a film about Busenberg. Reiner Peter (right) brought everyone together.

Busenberg. In summer 2019, native Busenberger Reiner Peter and his wife Anita were sitting cosily in the Café der Bäckerei Busch, enjoying their afternoon coffee. At about 4 pm, a motorbike drew up. The rider and a woman dismounted and entered the café. They were strangers to the place and so stood out among the guests. Even for Reiner Peter, who likewise did not know the visitors. At least he thought so. But the woman went up to his table and introduced herself: 'I am Janet! We know one another from our email contact.' It became clear to Reiner Peter: this was his email partner, Professor Janet Wolff from Manchester in England. In their recent contact they had both agreed to meet sometime in Busenberg, but it was not certain whether this would happen. Peter and his wife immediately invited the visitors to join their table.

A special connection

Reiner Peter is still nearly speechless, thinking about the history that binds Janet Wolff and him together. He has discovered that Janet's great-grandparents, the Jewish family Jakob and Sara Schwarz, her grandmother Bertha and uncle Albert Schwarz had once lived in the house at Hauptstraße 49, in which Reiner Peter was later born. In the Nazi period the Busenberg Jews were expelled, transported away or perished in camps. The Schwarz house was probably confiscated and auctioned even before the war began. Reiner Peter recalls: 'My father acquired the house in auction then.' The exact circumstances are not known to him, there was no research done at that time.

The Busenberger is still perplexed. 'When I first saw the woman, it was very emotional for me, I was moved. Even today I can't understand why the Jews were driven from the house.' A 90-year old Busenberg woman, present by chance, joined the table and had experienced the fate of the Jewish family. She can still remember clearly how the Jews were transported out of the village. 'I can still hear them saying: "We will return!"'

Reiner Peter is happy that the old woman took over the conversation in the group. 'I only had to translate the Busenberger dialect.' But he is deeply moved. 'I was very excited and gripped. It was very difficult for me, to sit opposite a woman who had lost her house, in which I was later born. In the situation, I simply couldn't find the right words for her.' Reassuringly he felt that Janet Wolff had not said a word about her great-grandparents' house. 'In the following days much went through my head about what had been unfairly done to these people at that time.'

A visit to the cemetery

After the visit to the café, the Peters agreed to the visitors' wish and took them to the former family home. This was the next surprise for Reiner Peter. Janet Wolff only wanted to see the three Stolpersteine for her murdered relatives. She took no notice of the house, in which Peter's brother once lived, did not knock at the door. Instead they went together to the Jewish cemetery. There they visited the two graves of the Schwarz family and had a moment of silence. 'We went via Erlenbach to our house in Bundenthal. We sat together a little longer under the pergola' recalled Reiner Peter.

On flight and gas chamber

In a later conversation with the RHEINPFALZ Janet Wolff told about her ancestors who had lived in Busenberg, and their stories and fate. As one of a few memorabilia that she has, she presented an old photo of the family house from 1910. Her grandmother Bertha Schwarz, one of seven children of great-grandparents Jakob and Sara Schwarz, left Busenberg when she married and went to Fraulautern, where her husband Josef Wolff lived. Her father Arthur Wolff was born there in 1903. He studied chemistry at the Universities of Freiburg and Berlin, and worked in Oranienburg. He was forced to flee during the Nazi period, and came to Manchester in 1938. Janet Wolff: 'He was able to get his parents to Manchester in 1939. They had been attacked in their home on Reichskristallnacht.'

Janet was born in Manchester in 1943. Her aunt Leonie lived in Offenburg after her marriage to Sigmund Kahn. 'They tried to emigrate to join their daughter in New York, and later tried to get to Manchester – my father got visas for them. But the war started, and they were unable to leave', she reports. 'Sigmund died at Gurs camp in France, and Leonie was eventually deported from Marseille to Auschwitz where she died. She was on the same transport as my cousin Claude Levy's parents, Leo and Meta Levy. Rosa survived three camps in France and after the war emigrated to join her other son in New York. The family home in Busenberg was lived in by my great-uncle, Alfred Schwarz, and his family after his parents died. As you know, they were nearly all murdered – parents and two sons in Minsk, one son (Ernst) in France. One son, Albert, survived and went to New York. I knew him well, and am on close terms with his children and grandchildren. There are Stolpersteine outside the house for this family.' Janet has been so taken up with the terrible fate of her family that she has processed it and documented it in a book.

'Want to return'

When such an injustice has happened, one is inclined to say: I want nothing more to do with the old homeland. Perhaps because she was born in 1943 in another country, this is not the case with Janet Wolff. She first visited the old country with other American cousins in 2014. 'On that occasion, I was able to identify the family home, which was rebuilt in the 1990s, and I met the current resident, Reiner's brother.' After his death, Reiner Peter found a note, and started written contact with Janet Wolff. In summer 2019 she visited Busenberg again, when personal contact with Reiner Peter was finally made.

What feelings tie her today to the place, Busenberg? 'Of course I have no personal history there, but it has been so important in my family history, and I feel a strong connection to it', she says. 'It was an important occasion for me to visit, and as you can see, I always want to return!' In particular 'I feel very "at home" in the Jewish cemetery', she says. 'Only a few of my relatives are buried there, because many were murdered elsewhere, but my great-grandparents are there, and Rosa's husband Isaak Levy. I feel a strong connection with my father's family there, and with my grandmother, who lived with us until I was twelve years old.'

German again

Since her visit in 2019 she has had a warm relationship with the Peter family, Janet Wolff says. She is incredibly impressed by the work that Reiner Peter, Otmar Weber and their friends are investing in taking care of the cemetery. 'Of course the house was taken from my family, but I don't know the circumstances, and I don't really think about it.' And, she adds, after Brexit she applied for German citizenship. 'My sister Eleanor and I are now British-German citizens.'

Reiner Peter keeps in touch with her. And he cares with devotion for the guests, who stayed to visit again. 'We are bound in a friendly relationship, which has only been deepened through Otmar Weber', he says. And Weber emphasizes how important it is, to keep alive the memory of the time, and therefore to maintain the cemetery. It is an important contribution to understanding between people in order – as here – to bring people together again.

Peter Blystone from Arizona (USA) also joined those who came together here; his mother, Annemarie Müller, came from Busenberg, and he has directed a film about Busenberg.