

# A Family's Split Decision

Our Berlin-born mother's restored citizenship extended only to the youngest of her three children

By Joanne Ruby

My mother Helga Ruby, born Ringel, escaped from Berlin at age 13 in September of 1938, two months before Kristallnacht. She and her mother were smuggled across the Belgian border in the dark of night, and then lived without papers in the south of France for the next 20 months. In July 1940, after the German Army had occupied half of France and set up a puppet government in the other half, they were able to cross the Spanish border and reach safe haven in Lisbon.

My family members were two of the lucky ones, the approximately 280,000 German Jews who had the means and the determination to flee the country between 1933 and 1939. Helga's mother took very little with her, but was able to receive funds in Nice sent to them through intermediaries by her mother who had remained behind in Berlin. This was the money my grandmother used to "buy" the documents needed to get through and out of Europe: the phony Polish passport, the visas across Spain to Portugal, more visas for potential South American destinations, and finally ship's passage to Havana and New York.

Today, in August 2016, I am the lucky one. Because my grandmother and her teenaged daughter had the strength of character and the resources to survive the genocide, I am here in Berlin for the third time in a decade but for the first time as the holder of a German passport. As the youngest of Helga's three children, I was the lucky

one in our family who was eligible to reclaim her German citizenship under Article 116, Paragraph 2 of the German Basic Law, while my older brothers Walter and Dan were unfortunately not.

Because of that circumstance, I feel an even greater desire to connect with our family roots, to understand the life of my grandparents in Berlin before the scourge of National Socialism ended their history here. On this day, I feel as I have entered a portal into my mother's childhood world. I have visited my grandfather's grave at Weißensee Cemetery, as I have done before. But this time I also tracked down the gravesite for my grandmother's two parents, and learned for the first time my great-grandmother's place and date of death during the period of the deportation of the Jews of Berlin. In

Charlottenburg, I arranged with the building architect and got an inside tour of the gorgeously renovated apartments at Schlüterstraße 12 where my mother grew up. I also met the rabbi and attended Shabbat services at the preserved neighborhood shul on Pestalozzistraße where my grandfather belonged

in the 1930s. (See the sidebar "Expropriated: A Berlin family loses more than its clothing business" by my brother Dan Ruby for more on the history of our family in Nazi Berlin.)



A visit to Hermann's one-time synagogue on Pestalozzistraße was a highlight of my third trip to Berlin.

I never expected that I would make these personal connections to my family members' past lives in the country that had deprived them of their rights, property and, for some, their lives. My mother never forgave Germany for what had happened here, though in her later years she began to appreciate Germany's role in new Europe. Following her death in 2005, my brothers and I embarked on a family history project. Walter wrote a first-person narrative of Helga's early life based on interviews he had done with her during her last year of life. Equally revealing was the trove of documents and artifacts we discovered after her death. Dan focused on these to launch a genealogy investigation that continues to this day.

My own path and interests were more in the present. I reconnected with our family members in Israel (descendants of Helga's first cousin who left Berlin for Palestine in 1935), and I became more involved with my Jewish Renewal synagogue. In 2007, I went to Berlin with my husband and daughter and made my first visit to my grandfather's grave in the Jewish cemetery in Weißensee.

I began hearing stories about American children of German Nazi refugees reclaiming their parents' revoked German citizenship. It seemed like a crazy idea that the children of the same Germans who did all they could to kill us off would now be inviting back the Jewish children of those who survived. I remember talking to Walter about it. He was also familiar with the



I first visited my grandfather's grave at Weißensee with my family in 2007.

trend of American Jews reclaiming German citizenship, but personally he found the idea of it distasteful.

Life went on and in March 2012 Dan had a health emergency and wound up in the hospital. It was right at the time that the U.S. Supreme Court was hearing arguments about possibly overturning President Obama’s healthcare law, of which I had been a big supporter. I was also volunteering at the time on behalf of the Brady Campaign, focused on another issue—sensible gun legislation—where I felt American society was on the wrong track.

I was feeling despondent about all this while sitting one evening in the hospital waiting room and watching cable news. Suddenly I had the thought that possibly we could exercise our right to become German citizens. Maybe we could take advantage of our historical ties to a country, whatever its past, where health care is a basic right and where guns are not carried around on people’s hips and in their pockets.

I mentioned this to Walter, who called the next day to the German consulate in New York. He spoke to an official and learned the essential information about Article 116: The law was part of the German Basic Law put into effect in 1949. It was designed to restore citizenship to former citizens whose rights had been deprived on political, racial, or religious grounds, and it



The investigators: My brothers Dan (left) and Walter tracing our roots and Helga’s journey in 2006.

applied not only to the former citizen but also to that person’s legal descendants.

Walter pressed the official on the subject of dual citizenship, and was assured that it is



allowed under the law. They did not address the question of the gender of the former citizen, however. When Walter reported the results of his call, we felt like this crazy idea could be a real option for any of us who might chose to exercise it.

A week later was Pesach, and I organized a virtual seder with my brothers via Skype, during which we reviewed the citizenship situation and shared our feelings over wine and matzoh. I began by reminding them of the story Helga told of the seder she celebrated on Ellis Island in 1941, where she was held as an alien before shipping off to the next port on her journey. It was her moment of coming out of the “narrows,” like the original Israelites in Egypt, I said. Could it be that our prospect of obtaining European citizenship—with all the potential benefits that entailed—was our own such moment?

Then Dan reviewed his genealogy work, displaying on the computer screen the original German documents he had assembled for use in our applications. He showed the German birth certificates for Helga and her father Hermann Ringel, as well as the death certificates for Hermann and Hermann’s mother. These were among the pieces of evidence that would prove that German citizenship had passed from our grandfather to our mother and down to us.

Walter gave voice to his conflicted feelings—both practical and psychological—about the idea of reconciling with Germany or of ever considering a move there. He reminded us that, for Helga, America was the promised land. Renewing ties to the hated place she had come from was the last thing she would have done. Still, with the provision that the law permitted dual U.S. and German citizenship, Walter conceded there was no downside in starting the application process. We could proceed without risk or commitment.

Wrapping up, I said that the Shehecheyanu prayer felt especially appropriate as we reflected on our mother’s story and on our potential participation in a new culture and society. And so I led a chant of (the Jewish Renewal version of) the blessing:

Baruch ata " Eloheynu ru-ach ha-olam  
Sheh-heh-cheh-yanu v-ki-y'manu v-higi-anu la-z'man ha-zeh.

We bless the Source of life and strength, majesty of the universe,  
that we are alive, and that we thrive, and that we have arrived at this very moment.

The Skype session was wonderful, and I followed up the next day by making an appointment at the German consulate in San Francisco. We were feeling confident about our chances until the night before the appointment when Dan's daughter Twyla raised a red flag. Had we looked into the issue of maternal citizenship and the significance of the date April 1, 1953?

Dan did a quick study and explained the situation to me as we drove to the appointment across the Bay Bridge the next morning, April 16, 2012. While we qualified for citizenship under Article 116, we might not qualify under a separate, long-standing article of German law that held that citizenship passed to offspring only through the paternal line. A German-citizen mother married to a non-citizen father, as in our case, did not pass on her status to her children. However, a law that went into effect on April 1, 1953—a date four months after Dan's birthday and 18 months before mine—seemed to create a waiver. If so, it was possible that I would be eligible but it was most likely true that my brothers would not.

During our appointment that morning at the elegant German consulate building in San Francisco's Pacific Heights neighborhood, we met with consular official Antje Metz to present our documentation and completed applications. She was personable and friendly, impressed with our dossier of documents, but reticent to render a prediction on the outcome of our applications. When Dan pressed her about the significance of the April date, she said that she did not want to predetermine the case but that we would get a complete explanation from the Bundesverwaltung (Federal Office of Administration) in Cologne. She cautioned that it might take as long as a year or even more before we heard an answer. We went away that day still with unanswered

questions but with the expectation that we were looking at a split decision—where my application would be approved but that Dan’s would not.

The first word that either of us received came to me in early November, a request for more documents about Helga’s 1947 U.S. naturalization. We had submitted only a short form of her Petition for Naturalization, and Cologne needed the full version of that document as well as a separate form called a Declaration of Intention. Dan went online and found that historical immigration records are available through the genealogy program of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). We submitted a search request for Helga’s record via U.S. Mail (now you can do it through the agency’s website).

In a few weeks we got word that the record had been located, and then shortly after that the certified copies arrived by mail—along with an added bonus. I had ordered only Helga’s forms but the clerk had found her file together with her mother’s and she kindly sent both. The documents were tremendously detailed but Dan and I did not take the time to examine them closely before I presented them on February 25, 2013 to another official, Mr. Gunther Zeiller, at the San Francisco consulate.

In March Dan received the expected news. It was a preliminary determination from an investigator in Cologne, pending any further information he could provide. The letter explained the reasons why “the requirements for naturalization are not available” in this case. I’ll let Dan explain the details.

The letter began by noting that there are two separate laws in effect covering eligibility for restored citizenship, and that both must be satisfied. One is Article 116 paragraph 2, under whose terms Helga was certainly covered, having lost her citizenship as a result of the 11th Decree of the Reich Citizenship Law of November 25, 1941, which revoked the nationality of every Jewish citizen living outside of Germany as of that date. Although the investigator didn’t mention it, Helga would have been eligible to reclaim her own citizenship at any time in her life after the Basic Law went into effect in 1949.

But the issue here was about her children, and in this matter the second law came into effect. “The right of naturalization is attributable to the descendants of an expatriate who are subject to a legal relationship in which the nationality law entails the legal

acquisition of German nationality,” wrote the investigator in a particularly large mouthful of German legalese. He referred to a legal test used to determine cases: Would the condition of legal nationality exist if the expatriation had not occurred? If so, wrote the investigator, then “the constitutional state that would have existed without expatriation should be restored.”

On this test my application failed because my claim comes through our mother. The law of patrilineal descent in which citizenship was inherited only through the father remained generally in effect in Germany until 1975. Since then, citizenship has derived from either parent, like it does in the United States. Thus, before that date, the children of a non-German father (such as ours, an American-born Jew who married Helga in 1947) were not eligible to take advantage of Article 116 regardless of the mother’s status.

Several exceptions were carved out of this general law in 1953, however. In one instance, children of a German mother and a non-German father born after April 1, 1953, could be retroactively declared to be German until 1977, when this particular waiver expired. The second exception was the important one in our case. Expatriated German women who were *made stateless by government action* could pass on their citizenship to descendants born after the April 1953 cutoff date.

The last paragraph summed up the situation: “In accordance with procedures for naturalization under Art. 116 para. 2 of the Basic Law, your father would have to have been deprived of German nationality for political, racial or religious reasons. Evidence for this is not available. That your mother belonged to this group of people is not relevant in the present case, because you were born before the date of April 1, 1953.”

As very close siblings, we were saddened to learn of the decision. Of the three of us, it was Dan who was most interested in taking advantage of citizenship. He speaks some German and had visions of continuing his historical research while living and working in Berlin. Although Walter, who is older than Dan, had not made his own citizenship application, we realized he would receive the same negative decision.

Then on April 17, 2013, a year and a day after I had made my original application, I received a letter from Herr Zeiller, passing on a further question from Cologne. Why was my mother’s “present nationality” listed as Polish on her Declaration of Intention form, when her later Petition for Naturalization said that her nationality was German? I wrote back with the explanation that my grandmother had acquired a false Polish passport in 1940 as a means of escape and had entered the U.S. as a presumed Polish



national, even though this was a ruse. In fact, she was a former German national whose citizenship had been revoked by the 11th Decree.

I was eager to receive notice of an approved application as I was planning a June trip to Germany and France, but unfortunately that didn't happen. I visited Munich, Bavaria, the Rhineland, and stayed in Berlin for a week. Witnessing Berlin's memorializations of Jews and the Jewish experience struck me powerfully, even more so because of my pending citizenship. I was haunted by the Holocaust memorial, moved to tears by the Stolpersteiner, and amazed by the scope and depth of history in the Jewish Museum. I took notice of the German schoolchildren visiting the museum and learning the facts of this terrible period in their nation's history. I also met a group of young Israelis at the provocative "Jew in the Box" exhibit, and they eagerly shared their positive experiences of moving to Berlin.

In mid-September, I received notification from the consulate that my application for naturalization had been approved, along with a photocopy of the provisional certificate to be reviewed for errors. Next I was to schedule an appointment where the actual naturalization certificate would be presented to me in person and become legally effective.



False Polish passport issued to my grandmother and mother on July 3, 1940, in Toulouse, France.

On September 30, 2013, I went with Dan to the consulate and we were met again by Angie Metz. I was a little surprised when she made something of a ceremony over the naturalization, administering a formal declaration that I agreed to. She reassured me that I was not swearing loyalty to the German government but only to uphold the German Basic Law and the laws of the country. Of this I had no hesitation since the information packet she gave me cited the core principles of German constitutional law as protection of human dignity and personal freedoms, as well as equality before the law.

On October 25, I returned to the consulate to apply for my passport, which then took two months more to arrive. When I opened the crisp new Reisepass for the first time at the consulate, it felt even more significant than the naturalization certificate I already held, maybe because passports were always of such importance for my mother and grandmother. I felt a rush of pride, as if some kind of justice had been done. In some way, my grandmother—buried in San Jose, California, so far from her homeland and her husband—could now go home again. I strongly felt my mother's presence, imagining her satisfaction at the incredible opportunity available for my children to grow into more global citizens while studying or working anywhere in the EU. I only felt sad that brothers and their children would not have the same opportunity.

Since that time, my daughter applied for and received German citizenship after her graduation from college—an amazing gift to her from her departed grandmother. Because of my previous approval, her application moved more quickly and she received her naturalization after seven months. She is now 24 years old, living and teaching English in Spain, and thrilled that with her German passport she is able to obtain employment across the continent as an EU citizen. My 28-year old son is not pursuing citizenship at this time.

As for me, I live in Oakland, California, with my husband. Neither of us is ready to move to Germany but I do have a greater sense of personal security knowing I have the

option of living with full rights outside of the United States. My father always encouraged us to “keep your options open,” and I feel I am living that mantra now.

I have my descendant’s Berlin—a thriving, dynamic city where I have friends, new contacts, and increasing familiarity. I’m pretty good with languages and though I am starting from scratch, I look forward to learning some German and using it during future stays. I can imagine a transition into retirement by renting an apartment in Berlin for three or six months at a time, to test how it might feel to live there on a more permanent basis. Being in Berlin allows me to vacation more readily throughout Europe, and to visit more often with our family in Israel. Perhaps most comforting of all, I now have a place to go if ever politics turn really ugly in America.

On this most recent trip, I spent two full weeks in the city, experiencing the flavors of life in my mother’s onetime neighborhood—the zoo, the Tiergarten, and farther afield to the lake district. I have a new appreciation for her love of dark bread, ripe cheeses, smoked fish, and farm produce—all available at almost every street corner. That was



Former Ringel apartment building at Schlüterstraße 12 after 2015 renovations.

how Helga liked to shop for groceries, with daily stops at specialty stores, not in the American style of stocking up weekly at the supermarket.

My mother, the refugee who quickly became a proud and active U.S. citizen and who challenged violations of civil rights when she saw them, would have cheered Germany’s response to the Middle Eastern refugee crisis. To witness the welcoming of the refugees and their culture in Berlin is astounding and beautiful given the horrors committed by an earlier generation of Germans. The joy-of-living vibe at the Turkish

Market is infectious, transmitted through the wonderful tastes, smells, costumes, music and more that these new Germans have brought here from their native lands.

It remains to be seen how fully I will embrace my newfound German nationality. I am sorry my other family members did not qualify for the same opportunity that my children and I now enjoy, and that gives me extra incentive to follow through and share my good fortune with them. Walter, Dan and their children do not have German nationality, but they are more likely now to travel or study in Germany using their American passports. Our family may have received a split decision on citizenship, but all of us can benefit from even this partial restoration of our family's stolen German birthright.

## **Expropriated: A Jewish family from Berlin loses more than its clothing business**

By Daniel Ruby

Our mother was born Helga Fanny Ringel at Empress Auguste Victoria Hospital in Charlottenburg on October 20, 1924, the daughter of menswear manufacturer Hermann Ringel and his fashionable wife Elly, born Wohlgemuth.

Hermann was a native Berliner, having been born in the city's Spandauer district in 1885, the son of Galician Jews from the city of Rzeszów, then a part of Austria. After returning from his military

service in World War I, Hermann opened an import-export clothing business together with a partner. His widowed mother and two older sisters and their families also lived in Berlin.

Hermann married Elly Wohlgemuth, daughter of a West Prussian merchant who had moved his family

to Berlin from Danzig before the war. Elly's younger sister Hilde later married another eligible Jewish businessman, Herbert Peiser.



Hermann Ringel and daughter Helga on the Kurfürstendamm in 1932.

Hermann and Elly lived at first in Weißensee and later moved to the upscale Charlottenburg neighborhood, where they enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. In the year of Helga's birth, Hermann opened a second business as a manufacturer and wholesaler of outerwear for men and boys.

Differences in Hermann's and Elly's family backgrounds were reflected in their differing interests and even values.<sup>1</sup> Hermann identified more as Jewish and attended the Orthodox synagogue on Pestalozzistraße, just a few blocks from the family's spacious apartment at Schlüterstraße 12. When Elly went to synagogue, which was rarely, she went to a liberal congregation.

Hermann took a particular interest in Zionism and its ideal of a national homeland in Palestine. As much as he appreciated his status as a Jew in Germany, he believed in the Zionist idea and supported Zionist organizations. By contrast, Elly had little interest in Zionism or any notion of resettling in some godforsaken place in the desert. She was raised to appreciate the luxuries of life. Both Hermann and Elly enjoyed vacationing in mountain resorts and spas, but Elly went for the baths and nightlife while Hermann liked rugged hikes and physical culture.

As a girl, Helga was attracted more to her father's outlook than her mother's, which she found less meaningful. Her father prevailed on the question of schooling, and Helga



Hermann and Elly in Charlottenburg.

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<sup>1</sup> Recollections about the Ringel family during the 1930s are from interviews with Helga by Walter Ruby in 2004.

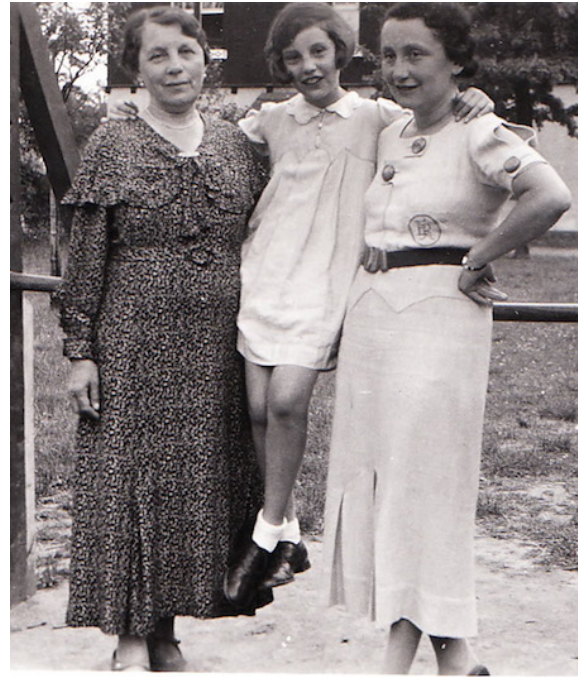


was educated at the Theodor Herzl School, a liberal institution named for the founder of the Zionist movement.

The first physical actions against the Jews of Berlin came in February and March 1933 with SA raids in the Scheunenviertel, the city's old Jewish district.<sup>2</sup> Anti-Jewish signage was unfurled in the city's market halls. The Nazi Party called for a boycott of Jewish shops and department stores.

Over the following months, crackdowns on Jewish professionals, civil servants and academics culminated in public book burnings. These measures hit other Jewish sectors hard but early attempts to shut Jews out of the city's commercial markets, including the garment industry, were more difficult to implement.

Years later, Helga recalled watching from the apartment balcony as brownshirts paraded on Goethestraße with their arms outstretched while shouting "Heil Hitler." She also witnessed the impact of the new regime in education, where restrictions were imposed at every level from kindergarten to university. Public primary and secondary schools raised fees and set quotas on Jews, driving students into Jewish schools such as Theodor Herzl, where enrollment swelled in 1934 and thereafter. By the end of 1937, there were just 2000 Jewish children in Berlin public schools, down from 13,000 in 1933.



Betty Wohlgemuth with Helga and Elly Ringel in a Berlin playground.

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<sup>2</sup> Facts, dates and figures about the Nazi repressions in Berlin were sourced from *The Persecution of the Jews of Berlin, 1933-1945: A Chronology of Measures by the Authorities in the German Capital*, by Wolf Gruner (Topography of Terror Foundation, 2014).

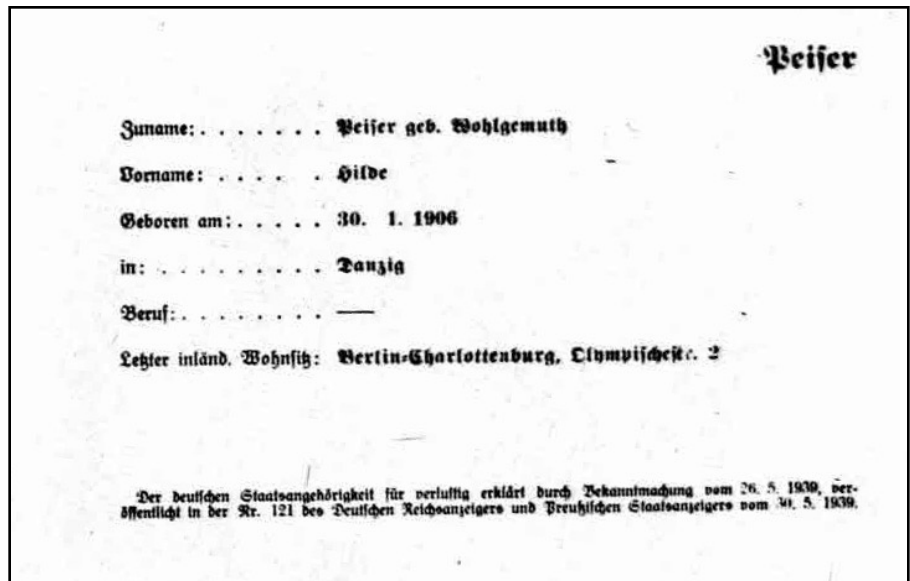
Many families sought opportunities to emigrate and by the end of 1934 about 20,000 Berlin Jews had done so. The trick was to get out with any of your assets, which were subject to confiscatory taxes or forfeiture. Hilde's husband was able to move his business to Holland and soon after they went there themselves. On the Ringel side, Helga's cousin Wolfie Shatner fulfilled Hermann's dream and left for Palestine with a group of Zionist pioneers.

During these years, street violence and personal assaults were commonplace on the Kurfürstendamm. Jewish-owned ice cream shops were a particular target. In the summer of 1936, the Nazis

whitewashed evidence of official and unofficial anti-Jewish actions while hosting the Olympic Games in Berlin. The Olympic stadium was nearby to Charlottenburg, and Hermann was able to get tickets through his Jewish sports club. Helga attended several events

and later remembered cheering for the African-American Jesse Owens.

When the Games ended, the hammer came down on German Jews in the form of the Nuremberg Laws, issued in September, stripping Jews of most citizenship rights, prohibiting intermarriages, and banning commercial interaction between Jews and Germans. These laws would provide the legal foundations for all of the repressions to follow.



Index card for Hilde Peiser in a file of Jews whose citizenship was revoked in 1936.

One consequence of the law was that it immediately stripped citizenship from German Jews who had left the country and were living elsewhere, which is why Hilde Peiser shows up in a database of people whose German nationality was annulled in 1936.

Hermann's sister Rosa Shatner, the widowed mother of Wolfie (now Ze'ev) in Palestine, fled with her daughter Margot to her in-laws' home in Belgrade in Serbia. His other sister Bette and her two daughters were able to get out to London.

Of course, Hermann was also planning an escape for his family and business assets, but he was doing it deliberately. He had been squirreling money away in his export business, skirting the laws governing financial transfers. Hermann knew that his every move was watched by the Gestapo.

Family and home life was disrupted when it was ruled that Jewish households could no longer employ German maids or other help, though some exemptions were granted to alleviate German unemployment. Among other measures a child might have noticed, Jews were banned at beaches, baths and sports facilities. Yellow notices barring Jews from some park benches went up first in Prenzlauer Berg, then Wilmersdorf and eventually citywide.

Nazi crackdowns now hit hard in the commercial sector. Jewish dealers in eggs, poultry and game were

among the first targets of the odious new

“aryanization” policy,

under which Jewish

business owners could be

forced to sell their assets or

suffer liquidation. By the

end of 1937, more than 30 percent of Jewish businesses and stores in Berlin had been expropriated or liquidated in this way.

**Hermann Ringel & Co, Herren-, Burschen- und Jünglingskonfektion**

**Herren-, Burschen- und Jünglingskonfektion (textiles and clothing)**

*Founded 1924 , Possession Transfer 1938 , Liq.: 1939*

Memhardstrasse 12 (Mitte)

**Reichenthal & Ringel Herrenkonfektion Engros-Export**

**Herrenkonfektion Engros-Export (textiles and clothing)**

*Founded 1919 , Liq.: 1939*

Schönhauser Allee 8 (Mitte)

Liquidation records for the Ringel businesses following his death.

Hermann had to see the writing on the wall. In June, there would be a deadline to register all firms for aryanization, and after that he would have even fewer options. By the time that a new wave of street violence erupted in the spring of 1938, his exit strategy was in place and near to execution. Feigning normality, he took his wife on a early summer holiday.

Tragically, Hermann came down with an infection that turned to sepsis. He died at age 52 on June 24, 1938, just as the wave of Berlin's summer violence was peaking. Up and down Berlin's best streets, shops were marked with "Jude" in graffiti as Hermann was laid to rest at the Jewish Cemetery at Weißensee.

During the following weeks, Elly took over arrangements for their departure. She discovered that Hermann's partner had shockingly absconded with the money he had socked away, and now Elly had to rely much more heavily on her mother Betty Wohlgemuth to finance their flight. She left Berlin with 13-year-old Helga in late August or early September, saying goodbye to Betty at the train station with as little fanfare as possible to escape suspicion.

Proceedings to aryanize Hermann's businesses continued after his death. The records of the *The Database of Jewish Businesses in Berlin, 1930-1945*<sup>3</sup> show that Hermann Ringel & Co., the manufacturing business, was transferred to new ownership in 1938 and liquidated the following year. Hermann's import-export partnership was also liquidated in 1939.



Betty Wohlgemuth died in Berlin February 26, 1942, and was buried at Weißensee.

<sup>3</sup> Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften (Berlin, 2012)

Most of the Ringel family members who escaped from Berlin before 1939 survived and ended up in New York, London and Israel. Hermann Ringel's sister Rosa Shatner and her daughter Margot were rounded up and murdered in Belgrade in early 1942, according to testimony in the Yad Vashem database of Shoah victims. Helga's grandmother Betty Wohlgemuth, who chose to remain behind, died in Berlin at age 67 in February 1942 and is buried at Weißensee Cemetery. Her cause of death is not known.