

CONFRONTING RESTITUTION  
DR. LAURA SCHAEFER  
*FIRST EXAMINER OF THE VICTIMS OF NAZI MEDICAL EXPERIMENTS*

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When Laura came to pick me up at the train station in Kempen, in the Rhineland, a small town about one hour from Dusseldorf, I did not recognize her. She looked old and unkempt. Her clothes were ill fitting and mismatched and when we hugged I smelled alcohol on her breath. We had not seen each other in close to forty years. Was it a mistake to come, I suddenly wondered? A long time ago Laura was a friend of my parents and I had come to ask her what she remembered about them. I knew my father had taught her Hebrew but now I wanted to know more.

It's a short ride from Kempen to the community of Lobberich, where Laura lives. With the exception of her years in medical school in Munich and the long years during the war, crisscrossing Germany for the compulsory national service and as a young assistant doctor at the hospital in Traunstein, Bavaria, Laura tells me, she has lived in Lobberich all her life.

"I remember your parents' dry-cleaning business on Garten Street 27," I say and remind Laura of the Christmas tree she and her housemate Anne Lustig set up in their apartment, above the shop. It was the first Christmas tree we had ever seen, my brother and I, and we had come to visit from Dusseldorf, where we lived after my family left Tel Aviv in 1953. We were impressed, I tell her, and a little jealous. "I also remember your car," I added, "you had a Citroen DS 19. You and Anne took us to the 'Rhein Terrasse' café." I did not mention the expensive stylish clothes she and Anne had worn.

"Your parents were exemplary," Laura says looking at me in search of the child she once knew, "I came to visit you on Arndt Street 9 in Dusseldorf, near the Rochus church." The newly built copper dome replacing the one, which had been bombed during the war always reminded her of a synagogue, she said. "You had a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom. That was your apartment," Laura adds. "In the kitchen your mother cooked, that's where you ate, that's where they slept, that's where they received guests," she said as though she had just been there yesterday. "You children got the bedroom." Laura stops mid-sentence and shakes her head. "Is that how you remember it?" she wants to know.

Following Anne's death in 1958, Laura moved. We arrive at the house on Goerres Street 28 and Laura gives me a quick tour. Bookshelves line the walls in the living room. My mother told me to ask Laura for the Hebrew language book Harry made for her but I thought this could wait. I notice the bed in the guestroom is made up.

"Your father was a good friend. I learned a lot from him," Laura says. "I had studied Latin and Greek," she explains, "But I wanted to learn Hebrew. Of course there was no possibility for that in Lobberich. So, he came here, and we could not stop talking. Imagine," she says, "your father came from Dusseldorf by bicycle. That impressed my father, let me tell you. Rain or shine, Harry came by bike. That's 56 kilometers (34 miles), you know, sure, the traffic conditions were better then, much fewer cars then, but still."

I had set up my tape recorder and we continued to chat throughout the lunch which included a huge platter of thick white stalks of fresh asparagus Laura's sister, Gerti, had prepared with great care. I sensed that my visit had been anticipated with excitement. Suddenly it felt important to be here. Laura talked about the war, where she had been, what she had seen. She talked about her friend Anne and Anne's husband, Dr. Walter Lustig.

Here and there Gerti interjected with questions of her own, how and why Laura had traveled to Berlin, for example, and what, really, was known about Walter Lustig's fate.

"Are you ready for dessert? I have fresh strawberries," Gerti called out from the kitchen and before we answered, the conversation was taking an unexpected turn. "Came in very handy, Hebrew, later, when I was sent to Israel by the Federal Republic of Germany to examine the survivors of Nazi medical experiments." I was stunned. I had never heard my parents talk about any of this. Yes, yes, Gerti says. All the papers from that time are here. Laura bought a shredder, she adds, but never used it. "It's downstairs in the basement with all the files," Gerti tells me. There was a brief discussion of which pastry she should get later, at the bakery, to go with our coffee, and with that Gerti left.

In the long silence, which followed I could hear the ticking of the large, ornamental clock on the antique sideboard. Laura, a lifelong heavy smoker, coughs and lights yet another cigarette. I turned the tape recorder off. "That was a very black time for me," Laura finally says. "At night I thought 'I will never ever laugh again'". I don't dare to say a word. We sit in silence. "Here is how it was," Laura begins again. "The Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn decided to give surviving victims of medical experiments financial compensation. This was in 1952, before there were diplomatic relations with Israel, before the general restitution laws were in effect. It was decided within the German Ministry of the Interior. The victims were to receive 'Special Compensation.'" Laura worked with an Israeli doctor, Professor Herman Hirsch, and examined the survivors at the Sarafand Hospital near Tel Aviv, she said. "They had all been experimented on by Dr. Clauberg and Dr. Mengele."

Laura had two tasks, she explained. One task was to examine the victims of Drs. Clauberg and Mengele's medical experimentation and the other was to examine the invalids of the First World War. "You see," she tells me, "Jews at the time of the Kaiser were more German than Germans. They were nationalistic and patriotic and volunteered en masse for WWI. With the outbreak of the Great War they ran to fight for Germany. They were primarily from well-to-do families. They volunteered for combat. They were sent to the front. Many, many Jews fell in that war. And many returned wounded. Maimed. No arms, no legs. Blind." These Jewish WWI veterans renounced their claim to a war pension, Laura says and waves her hand dismissively. "Gift for the Fatherland," they said at that time. But then, when Hitler rose to power, and several managed to emigrate to Palestine, their financial situation became grim. "Suddenly a 'Deutsche Mark' didn't look so bad," Laura says, "that is when they also applied. 'Hey, give me my war pension,' they said."

Laura was eleven years old in 1933, when Hitler rose to power, she tells me, and twenty-three when the war ended. The immediate post-war years were hard. Entire

cities lay in ruins. Infrastructure was destroyed. She was just beginning to build her life, she explains. You were busy all day long, she recalls, just with getting food and starting over. "But now I return to that time," she says. "I think about the people I examined and I find it increasingly hard, you know?" Laura pauses. "The older I get the more difficult it gets to cope with the suffering these people had gone through," she finally says. "They were young women, you see. The Nazis had the idea to keep these women alive and use them for forced labor. 'Let's sterilize them,' they said."

The clock on the sideboard chimes. Laura looks straight at me. It seems she has waited to tell her story for a long time. She takes a deep breath and continues. "There were two methods. One was Dr. Clauberg's. He used a mixture of chemical injections. Irritants like liquid acid. He used a long needle. No anesthesia. Directly into the cervix and uterus to sterilize the women. The pain was excruciating. The other method was Dr. Mengele's." As the concentration camp prisoners stood in line for their meager bread ration for example, Laura explains, they pass a table and a hidden x-ray machine zaps them. Later Mengele cuts them open to examine the damage to the women's uterus and the men's testicles. "Not damaged enough? OK, no problem. Increase the dosage next time." Men were castrated and the women had scars across their entire stomach. "Grotesque scars as shiny as a mirror, I tell you, and hard. Not pliable or matt scars, no. They were glistening scars. The women had scars as hard as a shield across their entire stomach," Laura pauses. Her eyes are fixed at something in the middle distance. It was as though she was looking at a room filled with the ghosts of mutilated bodies. "I cried entire nights," she finally says and I saw a woman tormented by guilt, a woman haunted by crimes she had not committed.

The patients came from many different countries, Laura says, but she had no problem with them and seamlessly demonstrates two or three Hebrew phrases as though she had just uttered them. Ma nishma. Please come in, sit down. What is your name? How are you? "All had numbers tattooed on their forearm. Brutal. Unimaginable. I have all the files here," she says looking straight at me now, "I have them in this house. In the basement. I cannot bear to throw them away."

I heard the front door opening. Gerti had returned with the pastries. "What does 'eternity' mean?" Laura says to no one in particular, "Or 'forever'? That's unimaginable, isn't it? And what happened is just as unimaginable." Gerti did not say anything. She simply stood still holding the neatly wrapped package from the bakery in her hands. It was festively tied with a pretty pink ribbon. "So many Germans participated," Laura continued. "Start wherever you want. Chemistry. Trains. Start anywhere. Everyone participated. It is a part of me. It's under my skin."

I had asked for a "Bienenstich", a yeast cake with vanilla custard topped with caramelized almonds, but the bakery did have any, Gerti explained. "Next time," I say.

Laura thought I would stay overnight. "The bed is all made up for you," she said. I promised to come back. "We will do something with all this material," I told her as she led me into the living room and pulled the book my father made for her from a shelf. I noticed she knew exactly where it was and did not have to search for it.

The book is leather bound and contains meticulously hand drawn stick figures accompanied by simple text in the style of my father's favorite language learning method by I.A. Richards. Only here, my father created the entire thing just for Laura. I had no idea he could draw. "I'm not ready to part with it," Laura said. She found a pen and wrote 'On my death give this book to Eleanor' on the flyleaf.

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Some two or three weeks later I received a black-framed envelope with the notice Gerti sent announcing Laura's death. I returned to Lobberich for the funeral and returned again, this time with Stephen, my husband. Gerti showed us into the basement. It was clean and almost empty except for tall racks of metal shelves with cardboard boxes. The files Laura had mentioned, notebooks and little red annual agendas were in the boxes. There were pamphlets and newspaper clippings. Reports published by the State of Israel Ministry of Social Welfare, a Hebrew language correspondence course. Ruled composition books filled with Hebrew letters and word lists. It seems Laura kept every scrap of paper, every letter, greeting card and receipt from that time. We put everything into the bags we had brought with us. Stephen found a folder with letters in the old metal filing cabinet and showed it to me. I recognized my father's handwriting immediately. I was looking at a thick stack of letters Harry wrote Laura. As I turned the loose pages in the folder, several postcards fell to the floor and Stephen picked them up for me. The folder smelled musky and where it had gotten wet the ink had run and sections of the letters looked like the sky on a watercolor painting. "These are my father's letters," I said as calmly as possible and put the folder into our bag. "The book he made her is in the living room," I reminded Gerti, "Laura promised it to me."

### *STUDENT IN MUNICH*

Laura was born on September 21, 1921. She attended Catholic school and joined the Hitler Youth, compulsory for girls as of 1936, when she was fourteen years old. But while she excelled in all things academic, studying Latin and Greek in high school, Laura did not rise above the basic entry level in the "Jungmaedelbund". Records show her rank as "Maedel."

Her mother, a strict woman, attended early mass every morning. The family dry cleaning business founded by her father in 1897 was successful and Laura grew up in comfort. There was a photo taken in 1942 of Laura, sporting thick, long braids, standing with her mother next to an impressive four-door black "Ford VS Special" luxury limousine in one of the folders I had taken. Ford opened a factory in Cologne, close to Lobberich, in 1930, and their ads entice with slogans of superiority and privilege. The inscription on the back reads "My pride and joy was requisitioned by the Wehrmacht on May 28, 1942."

After a year or two at the university of Marburg, Laura moved to Munich in 1940. Of the 1877 total number of students in medicine at the Ludwig Maximilian University, 652 were women. Education was politicized and controlled by the Nazi party and students were indoctrinated in Nazi ideology. Records of her enrollment at the medical faculty

from 1940 to 1944 show that in addition to the obvious courses for the study of medicine Laura took classes in “racial hygiene” required at that time. Her professor was Ernst Ruedin, today considered the mastermind of “racial hygiene.” Hard to imagine that she would not have known that Ernst Ruedin was one of the authors, in 1933, of the Nazi eugenic sterilization laws which legitimized mass killings of 200,000 patients with mental disabilities between 1939 and 1945. Why is there a photo of one of her teachers, Professor Alfred Schittenhelm, an internist, among her papers? Dr. Schittenhelm was a member of the SS since 1933. Summarily dismissed at the end of the war for his outspoken support of Nazi ideology, he spent two years at the “Civilian Internment Camp” in Moosburg. As a student Fraulein Schaefer lived on Wald Street 5 in Graefelfing, an affluent area of opulent old homes and impressive Baroque churches some thirty minutes by streetcar from the university. She lists her address as “care of Seitz”. It was common practice, especially during the years of the war, to rent out rooms to students to help make ends meet as the widow Maria Seitz did.

Did Laura know that in July 1943, at the time of the catastrophic battle of Stalingrad, Klaus Huber, a member of the anti-Hitler resistance-fighters group “The White Rose,” was her Graefelfing neighbor? Huber was condemned to death following a very public show trial, guillotined just like Sophie and Hans Scholl, founders of the non-violent student group, before him. Sophie was just twenty-two years old. The same age as Laura. Had Laura read the leaflets these courageous students distributed, seen the “Down with Hitler” graffiti on facades of buildings all across Munich? Did she know Hans Scholl was studying to become a doctor, just like her?

You could buy the course catalogue for the winter semester 1944/1945 for one Reich Mark. Under the heading “Im Kampf fuer Deutschlands Groesse und Zukunft, starben den Heldentod” there is a list of the students who fell “In the Struggle for Germany’s Greatness and Future.” The list includes twenty-six students of medicine, who died “heroically,” during that semester, it says. Did Laura know any of them?

Laura graduated “Summa cum Laude,” receiving the “highest praise” from the University of Munich in May 1944. Her diploma is signed by the most senior official of the university, the “Fuehrer-Rektor” Dr. Walther Wuest, a committed Nazi and member of the SS who taught “Aryan Culture.” (He was considered an “Offender” by the Allied Forces at the end of the war and sentenced to three years in a labor camp. At his release he received no new academic position and retired.)

The second signature on the diploma is that of the dean of the medical faculty Dr. Alfred Wiskott. Today he is known for the Wiskott-Aldrich-Syndrome, an immune deficiency disease first diagnosed by him in children. But Dr. Alfred Wiskott was already considered Germany’s foremost pediatrician during the Third Reich. In his capacity as clinical director of the Hauner Children’s Hospital in Munich he was aware, so his own testimony in the post-war trial of his assistant Dr. Fritz Kuehnke, that Dr. Kuehnke was involved in Hitler’s euthanasia mass murder program, in which more than 300 children were killed in the Eglfing-Haar psychiatric hospital some twenty minutes by car from Munich.

## *MEETING ANNE*

By the time of Laura's completion of her medical studies in Munich, Germany is losing the war. After months of heavy combat in Italy, the Allies liberate Rome. At the same time many thousands of American, Canadian and British troops invade the beaches of Normandy on the western front by air and sea and begin the march towards the liberation of Paris. After the two-year-long siege of Leningrad the Soviet Red Army forces the German Nazi army to retreat. And on July 20, 1944, Claus von Stauffenberg and other Wehrmacht officers fearing for Germany's defeat plan to assassinate Hitler in his eastern front headquarters "Wolf's Lair," a bunker complex hidden deep in the Masurian woods near Rastenburg in East Prussia, today Ketrzyn, Poland. (The coup d'état failed and the Gestapo subsequently arrested more than 7000 people in connection with the plot. 4,980 were executed.)

And yet, until the end of the war Laura will be crisscrossing Germany. She will have adventures and meet people even as the campaign to destroy Germany's industrial centers had begun. Strategic firebombs were dropped from Essen in the Rhine-Ruhr area, where Laura had grown up, to Munich in the south and Hamburg to the north. Leipzig is all but razed to the ground. The Royal Air Force drops 2300 tons of bombs on Berlin.

The young inexperienced doctor is called up for the required national service and is deployed to Stettin, Pomerania, (today Szczecin, Poland) on the Baltic Sea, then the third largest seaport of Germany. She lives through massive Royal Air Force bombing destroying the port, factories, centers of weapon industry and transportation systems. Stettin turns into rubble. Civilians die. There are many casualties. Throngs of hungry refugees flee from the ruins their burning homes had become. Fraulein Dr. Schaefer provides emergency medical treatment for the injured.

While in Stettin the State Medical Board of Bavaria informs Laura that she must urgently go to Traunstein, in Bavaria, there to replace a doctor who had fallen ill. The letter concludes with the customary greeting "Heil Hitler!"

It is here, during the long bitter-cold winter of 1944, at the department for internal medicine of the Prinz Ludwig hospital in Traunstein, as the assistant to Drs. Schraube and Wirth, that Laura meets Dr. Anne Lustig who will be her companion for decades to come.

Annemarie, or Anne, nee Preuss, an internal medicine doctor, born in Breslau in 1897, 24 years older than Laura, was married to Oberregierungsrat Dr. Walter Lustig, senior government official, chief administrator and health director of the Berlin police department. She was a Protestant and he an assimilated and baptized Jew, a true Prussian, autocratic, pedantic and vain. A surgeon by training, he authored several medical texts. He was industrious and ambitious.

Drs. Anne and Walter Lustig were a good looking bourgeois couple, well connected and affluent. They remained childless and would have been seen during the "Golden Twenties," Berlin's most vibrant and sophisticated years, strolling along the

Kurfuerstendamm to the Café Kranzler, or Kempinski perhaps, or to one of the many nightclubs, cabarets or theatres. They would have greeted acquaintances and been surrounded by the cultural and intellectual giants, many of them Jews, of the Weimar era. There were writers, painters, composers, conductors, directors and actors of stage and film. There were leading scientists, architects and famous philosophers. But Hitler's rise to power on January 30, 1933, changed all that and the reign of terror began.

With the establishment of the Stormtroopers (SA) and the secret state police (Geheime Staatspolizei, Gestapo or SS) open anti-Jewish violence was followed, in very short order, by the introduction of Anti-Semitic laws, decrees and measures designed to systematically destroy the Jews.

After the April 1, 1933, "Boycott of the Jews," came the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" of April 7, affecting some two million Jewish state and municipal employees. The 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph, the so-called "Aryan Paragraph" reads: "Civil servants not of Aryan origin are to retire..." Walter Lustig was forced to comply and thus ended his public health career.

Although theirs was considered a "privileged mixed marriage" in the eyes of the Nazis, the authorities made it quite clear to Anne that a "patriotic gesture" for the German Fatherland was expected of her. She was urged to divorce Walter, her non-Aryan husband. But Anne refused. Consequently, she was forced to abandon her private praxis on 41, Eisenacher Street in Schoeneberg in 1943. (Telephone 24 23 77; office hours 9-10 and 4-6, according to her stationery I found in the boxes of Laura's basement). Dr. Anne Lustig was ordered to transfer to Traunstein where she was well established by the time Laura arrived.

#### *TRAUNSTEIN WITH ANNE 1944*

You can see the Bavarian Alps in the distance of the picturesque little town of Traunstein, but bombs from hundreds of Boeing B17 "Flying Fortress" destroyed most red roof tiled houses around the market square in four attacks between November 1944 and April 1945, while Laura was there. The baroque St. Oswald church remained standing, as did the seminary, where a seventeen-year old Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, along with the town's people awaited the arrival of the liberators. But even as you could hear the rumble of American tanks rolling into town, armed guards herded 61 emaciated and ghostlike Jewish prisoners from the Flossenbuerg concentration camp, near the Czech border, through town on their death-march. They were massacred on May 3, 1945 at the edge of a forest three miles away, near Surberg. The murderers then threw their weapons into the mass grave and fled.

At the end of the war, the U.S. Occupation Forces converted Traunstein's military hospital into a prisoner of war camp. The town was overrun with civilian evacuees and refugees, with displaced persons and Holocaust survivors. "You had to integrate them," Laura told me. "You had to care for them and feed them," she said. "Germany lay in ruins. There were rats everywhere. People were cold and hungry. There was nothing to eat, but, you know, Anne and I, we managed," Laura recalled, "You could always count



on finding food in the hospital." Laura and Anne worked in the department for internal medicine at the Prinz Ludwig hospital for the next two years, until the end of 1947.

Anne waited for news of Walter's whereabouts but after a while she had to assume he was dead. "Anne was devastated," Laura recalls, "but she never spoke of him again." A large black and white portrait of Anne and Walter found its way into the cardboard boxes I inherited. Walter's hair is thinning, he has a moustache. His face is turned toward Anne and it seems he is saying something pleasing to her because Anne, hair gathered into the same simple bun style she wore decades later, is radiant as she smiles directly into the camera.

Enigmatic rumors surround Dr. Walter Lustig's death. Coworkers reported that he was last seen in June 1945 as he left the hospital escorted by two Soviet officers and driven off in an automobile. "His lady friend, Illa Stein, fled to Sweden in the last days of the war, but he felt too sure of himself," Laura tells me, "he thought nothing will happen to him." A commonly accepted version of Dr. Walter Lustig's fate is that he was summarily shot by the Soviets for being a Nazi collaborator. "It's a mystery," Laura said.

#### *DR MED ET PHIL WALTER LUSTIG*

According to the census of June 16, 1933, a total of 499,682 Jews lived in all of Germany. By far the highest concentration of Jews, 172,672, lived in Berlin. It is estimated that by the outbreak of the war on September 1, 1939, some 270,000 Jews had emigrated from Germany, approximately 80,000 from Berlin alone. Many committed suicide. More than 190,000 German Jews were murdered by the Nazis.

Dr. Dr. Walter Lustig lost his formidable position as a senior civil servant with the Berlin police presidium in April 1933 when the Nazi Law for the "Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" commonly called the "Civil Service Law" for the immediate removal of non-Aryan "undesirable" doctors, lawyers and teachers, went into effect. But he did not lose relationships with certain former colleagues, relationships, which saved his life for the duration of the Third Reich. In particular there was Fritz Woehrn who rose rapidly within the Nazi hierarchy and became SS Hauptsturmfuehrer (captain) in the Gestapo under Adolf Eichmann's Department IV B 4 in the Reich Security Main Office, Reichsicherheitshauptamt, or RSHA.

Within a short time an ever-increasing flood of anti-Semitic measures and laws were instituted. The Jewish population was to be isolated, marginalized and pauperized. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935, the Law of "Protection of German Blood and German Honor" forbade intermarriage and the "Reich Citizenship Law" stripped Jews of their German citizenship and all civil rights. Assets were confiscated, businesses liquidated. Jews were banned from all professional jobs. The formerly economically vibrant German Jewry, their wealth plundered, became destitute.

It was at this time that Lustig turned to the Jewish Community, to the "Reichsvereinigung," to gain employment. He was put in charge of the department of health and welfare for the impoverished and needy.

Established by Hitler's government in July 1939, the "Reichsvereinigung," was a compulsory national association imposed on all Jews. ("Jews" in Nazi terminology according to the Nuremberg Race Laws included converts and children of converts). Like the future "Judenrat," the Jewish Councils, in the Ghettos, the Reichsvereinigung was a means of controlling the Jewish population. Deportations to ghettos in Eastern Europe began in October 1941. Renowned and respected Jewish leaders were used by the Nazis to implement orders and to give the appearance of order and calm. Jewish leaders, forced to cooperate, compiled lists of victims for "resettlement." They made decisions over life and death.

At the head of the Reichsvereinigung of 1939 was its chairman, Rabbi Leo Baeck. The main tasks of the organization were assistance with emigration (planning, finance, counseling, language learning), vocational training or re-training (agricultural training and basic skills for survival overseas).

During the massive raids the Gestapo conducted on the Berlin Jewish community in June 1942 and again in October, several hundred employees of the Reichsvereinigung and the Jewish Hospital were selected for transport to the East. Dr. Schoenfeld, the director of the hospital, and his wife were on the list. They chose to kill themselves rather than be deported. The Gestapo nominated Dr. Walter Lustig as the new director of the last functioning Jewish institution in Berlin, the Jewish Hospital on Iranische Street 4. It was placed under the direct control of Adolf Eichmann's Department of Jewish Affairs.

And when Rabbi Leo Baeck was deported to Theresienstadt on January 27, 1943, where he became the head of the concentration camp's Judenrat, Walter Lustig became the president of the Reichsvereinigung. "Walter was opportunistic, ambitious and ruthless," Laura tells me, "he was the most powerful Jew in Berlin."

A part of the hospital grounds was fenced off and served as the Gestapo's Sammellager, a temporary "collection" camp where Jews were held prisoner awaiting their deportation. By January 1942, 10,000 Jews were deported from Berlin to Auschwitz. In 1943 all Jewish organizations and offices were no more and the only functioning institution was the Jewish Hospital. "By then the hospital had become a kind of ghetto. It was used as a shelter," Laura tells me. "There was a man, for example," Laura continues, "Eugen Schiffer. A Jew who had converted to Protestantism. He had been the minister of finance during the Weimar Republic. He lived there with his daughter." There were patients, young and old, real and fake. There were children, mostly orphans. There were slave laborers, refugees, "full" Jews in privileged or non-privileged mixed marriages and "half-Jews". There were doctors, nurses, orderlies, pharmacists, kitchen staff, administrators, secretaries and groundkeepers.

SS Hauptsturmfuehrer Woehrn had the habit of appearing without prior notice. Walter Lustig was ordered to reduce the staff. He compiled lists for deportation. He sent Jews to their death.

At the end of the war when the German capital surrendered to the Soviets, 5000 Jews remained in hiding, underground, or living openly with false papers in Berlin. The

Soviets liberated 76 Jewish prisoners held in police custody awaiting deportation in the fenced off Sammellager on the grounds of the Jewish Hospital. They liberated the staff of the Jewish Hospital, 1000 doctors, nurses, administrators, assistants, slave laborers and people who were mysteriously protected from deportation. They liberated 370 patients and 93 children.

It may be argued that Dr. Walter Lustig, in his role as the last leader of the greatly reduced Reichsvereinigung and the director of the Jewish Hospital, was the only link between the disenfranchised Jews of Berlin and the murderous enemy. It was he who singlehandedly guarded and protected them long after the revered Rabbi Leo Baeck and other leaders of the community were arrested and deported. But history has not been kind to Walter Lustig. He is vilified cursed and hated. And yet, did he not intervene on their behalf, at great risk to his own life?

#### *SWEDEN AND DR. WALTER FALK*

Here is what we know about Laura in the summer of 1950. We know she was a twenty-nine years old single physician. She was an assistant medical doctor at the health department in Kempen. We know she lived nearby, in her native Lobberich, in the Rhineland, with her friend Anne. An apartment was built for them above her parents' dry-cleaning business, on Garten Street 27, when she returned to Lobberich from Traunstein in the fall of 1947 with Anne. (Anne did not want to return to Berlin and opened a medical praxis on Suechtener Street nearby.)

But after the long hard years of the war and its aftermath, Laura had still not quite found her way. And so it came to pass that she enrolled at the Academy for Public Health Services in Dusseldorf. While there, she applied and was accepted to participate in an international conference for medical doctors on the subject of social-pediatrics at the Svenska Institutet in Stockholm. The conference was scheduled to take place from September 1<sup>st</sup> to October 31, 1950. The program consisted of lectures on social medicine and field trips to several institutes with programs for preventive pediatrics and child welfare.

How exciting the preparations for the two months-long stay in a foreign country must have been! How exciting to travel abroad! She applies for and receives a stipend. Fraulein Dr. Schaefer's participation has been officially recommended by the administration of the Federal Government of Germany. "All expenses for travel, accommodation and meals, will be paid by the Swedish government and UNICEF." A certain E.W. Meyer, of the UNICEF Mission for Germany, informs her in August 1950.

There were twenty doctors from eleven countries and three continents at the conference, but it was meeting one participant from Israel, Dr. Walter Falk, that would change the course of Laura's life. At fifty, Dr. Falk cut a dashing figure. He was a well-educated and cultured German Jew. He was ruggedly handsome, tall trim and fit. He carried himself with easy confidence, the kind acquired through hard work and experience. Dr. Falk radiated courage and strength.

She would have gravitated towards him. He would have been reluctant, careful and suspicious. And yet over the many weeks of the conference they will end up spending a fair amount of time together. There are entries in the little red agenda books I inherited about a visit to Uppsala and the open-air museum Skansen. Concerts. Laura saved the tickets to "Der Rosenkavalier," the comic opera by Richard Strauss they saw together on October 11, one day after Falk's birthday. And she saved the map of Israel Dr. Falk drew on a paper dinner napkin showing her Haifa, where he lives.

Dr. Walter Falk married Luise, nee Peyser, called Lisa, in 1928 in Germany. He was a pediatrician in a municipal hospital in Hoechst, a city district of Frankfurt am Main, where their sons, Raphael and Theo, were born. When Dr. Falk lost his employment as a result of the Nazi regime's "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" of April 7, 1933, the family including his parents emigrated to Palestine. They settled in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. Dr. Falk worked for the 'Kupat Cholim,' the Workers' Health Fund providing public health services in the British Mandate Government of Palestine. He traveled to pioneer settlements far and wide in the northern area of the country and was responsible for children's health and nutrition. Soon he advanced to become the head of the children's department in Afula, where the couple's third son, Ruben, was born in 1937. By the time Laura met him in Stockholm, Dr. Falk was the head pediatric doctor of the Rambam government hospital in Haifa.

Laura would have marveled at his dedication and commitment to the young and struggling State of Israel. She would have admired his sense of purpose. His patriotism. Did he tell her about his volunteer work in Cyprus? How he felt compelled to help his people in a time of dire need? How he spent eighteen long months in 1946 caring for orphaned children in miserable crowded primitive detention camps set up by the British in Cyprus?

The British then still governing the Mandate of Palestine restricted immigration, Dr. Falk would have explained, and ships carrying Jewish Holocaust survivors and refugees were prevented from landing in Palestine. The passengers, considered 'illegal,' were barred from entry and sent to Cyprus. Conditions in the internment camps were harsh. The refugees were housed in tents or corrugated metal Nissen huts surrounded by barbed wire. It was either freezing cold, rainy and muddy in winter or insufferably hot in summer. Sanitation was poor. There were constant power outages and shortages of clean water. The Jewish Agency sent social workers and teachers for the youngsters. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the "Joint," sent clothing and supplementary food for the detainees. The Joint also provided medical aid. Clinics were set up. Nurses and doctors were needed and Dr. Walter Falk felt it his duty to join. The camps were in existence from August 1946 to January 1949 at which time a total of 55,000 persons had been there and 2200 babies were born. Dr. Falk was in charge of health services for infants in Camp 64 in Dhekelia.

How different their lives were. Is this when Laura shared the hardships she suffered during the war? Her national service in Schneidemuehl (today Pila in Poland)? The hunger and cold and constant fear? Her daring adventure in Berlin? And how she met Anne's husband, Dr. Walter Lustig?

It was during the bitter cold winter of 1944, she might have said, when the Wehrmacht army suffered heavy losses against the Soviets. She was working at the municipal hospital in Schneidemuehl, Pomerania, stronghold of the eastern front. She reported to Dr. Franz Jenrich, an ardent and committed Nazi trained as a surgeon, who cared for wounded soldiers. Her patients, complaining of run-of-the-mill colds or menopausal discomforts, were the so-called "Ostwallschuppen", matrons in their 50s sent from across the Reich to help build the eastern wall, the "Ostwall", a massive, fifty mile long and two mile wide system of fortifications and tunnels with bunkers, ammunition depots and warehouses, on the German defense line against the advancing Red Army.

And then, while Anne was permitted a rare, brief conjugal visit in Berlin in February 1945, Laura heard a radio address by Heinrich Himmler "Rettet mir mein Schneidemuehl," Himmler implored the greatly diminished German troops hoping the Ostwall would hold to save Schneidemuehl and stop the Russians.

Laura used a ruse, she would have told Dr. Falk, she lied and joined Anne in Berlin. "My bridegroom is on leave from the eastern front," she pleaded with her boss Dr. Franz Jenrich, "I am pregnant with his child and may never see him again."

Without further ado, Dr. Walter Lustig has Laura admitted into a private clinic in Berlin where an Aryan former colleague performed a fake emergency appendectomy operation on her (Jews were barred from practicing medicine on Aryans as of 1938) to prevent Laura from having to return to the collapsing eastern front. While she was in the private clinic, Schneidemuehl fell after heavy fighting, the city lay in ruins, the remaining population was expelled and the Russians marched in. "I didn't know where to go," Laura would have explained to Dr. Falk. "There was talk that Lobberich would be evacuated." She feared the Soviets would destroy Berlin, so she returned to Traunstein where Anne was.

The picture that emerges from deciphering notes written in pencil, perhaps hastily, and covering many pages of her agenda and vast amounts of letters in my possession it becomes clear that Laura and Dr. Falk engaged in earnest and often difficult conversations. "On the one hand we should all feel guilty," she scribbles, "and on the other hand we should prove our innocence to you." The notes seem to be her ruminations, explanations and justifications. "What is one's feeling about what happened in Germany?" she notes. "Whether you were directly involved or not, you feel guilty," she writes. Dr. Falk confronted Laura with his mistrust. "I was not surprised that you expressed doubt," she answers him, "that you were wondering, if I am not fundamentally Anti-Semitic," she continues, "but, do you think it possible that I would have approached you if I were Anti-Semitic? That I would have shared personal and intimate thoughts with you? Your doubts are painful to me," she writes. But Dr. Falk is not easily appeased and continues to challenge her. And she becomes accountable for Germany. "I am deeply ashamed at what happened in Germany," she writes, "I will be burdened by these things my entire life because I am German and I am from the land of the perpetrators." Being acquitted by Dr. Falk is of immense importance to her. "I cannot prove my innocence," Laura writes, "I know you doubt me. I cannot even blame you for doubting me. And that is the most painful."

On her return from Stockholm, Laura writes the president of the Academy of Public Health Services who made her trip possible. "The course helped to widen my horizon in addition to being an educational experience," she writes. She says she felt well accepted, especially as a German. "One thing was not good about the trip to Sweden," Laura concludes her letter, "I found it very hard to acclimatize myself to living in Germany again."

#### *EFFORTS TO OBTAIN A VISA*

Towards the end of her stay in Stockholm, Laura joined an organized tour for a trip to Lapland. There had been a rumor that Dr. Walter Lustig's mistress, Illa Stein, fled to Kiruna, the northernmost town in Sweden, even as the Russian Army liberated Berlin. Anne, back home in Lobberich, was wondering if it might be possible for Laura to search for her whereabouts during her trip. Perhaps Illa Stein could provide answers to questions about Walter Lustig's fate. But whatever efforts Laura undertook did not yield any results. And then again, perhaps Laura was glad to undertake the trip to Lapland to ease her difficult goodbye from Dr. Falk.

Barely back from Stockholm, Laura subscribes to the only postwar Jewish newspaper in Germany, "Die Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland." It is indeed the pre-war "Juedisches Gemeindeblatt," they inform her, and include an invoice for one Mark for the Jewish pocket calendar she requested.

While Israel was in the midst of economic hardships and severe food shortages, Germany was enjoying the "Wirtschaftswunder," the "economic miracle" as the rapid reconstruction and recovery of the immediate post-war years was called. It was a time of unparalleled growth and prosperity. Stores displayed enticing luxurious merchandize bordering on decadence and food in all its richness was everywhere in abundance.

The "Allgemeine" facilitated private shipments of packages to help ease shortages of basic commodities in Israel and over the next years Laura orders many packages of groceries, coffee, marzipan, chocolate, sugar and the like sent to Dr. Falk in Haifa.

Here a receipt for her order of September 13, 1951:

100-gram chocolate DM 1.20  
1 kilogram canned veal DM 8.90  
1 kilogram canned beef DM 8.00  
450 gram condensed milk DM 0.85  
Airmail postage for 3 kilos DM 14.25  
Total DM 33.20

She applies to the office of the Allied High Commission for Germany for a "Renewal and/or Amendment of Temporary Travel Document In lieu of Passport." It seems the travel document (number 0384128) she had received to be able to travel to Stockholm for the UNICEF conference was no longer valid. The application states her desire to visit Israel.

In the early 1950s no German had been allowed entry into Israel with the notable exception of Prelate Hermann Maas, a "Righteous Gentile," who saved many Jews during

the Third Reich at great risk to his own life. After the war, Prelate Maas became widely known through his books and lectures on the subjects of reconciliation between Jews and Christians and Jews and Germans. He had spent several months in Palestine in 1933, getting to know the country and meeting newly arrived Jewish immigrants from Nazi Germany. He was fluent in Hebrew. The Prelate's visit as the first German to receive an official invitation by the young State of Israel in 1950 received wide media attention. Laura seems determined to follow suit. Perhaps she too could be the "Good German?" Perhaps she could obtain a visa and visit Israel?

Laura wants to meet Dr. Falk's family, she wants to see his hospital and see him work, she writes him. "I am interested in your daily life, your homeland, your nation." She is not sentimental, she stresses, but deeply interested in Israel, in Judaism. "But I would be inhibited if I thought you still doubt me." She wants to be free of fear, she concludes, and not afraid to be condemned and banned. Here Laura uses the word "cherem," the term used in Talmudic law to mean "punishment" and total exclusion from the Jewish community similar to the Catholic concept of excommunication.

"I would like to repeat the invitation I extended to you in Stockholm in writing," Dr. Falk answers her. "My family and I would be delighted to have you stay with us as our guest in Haifa." He plans to show Laura things which will be of interest to her professionally, for example how the German immigrants have been absorbed and, lastly, holy sites of interest to a Catholic. "Given how often we have discussed the subject," Dr. Falk adds, "you will not be surprised to hear me repeat that I can only have a relationship with those Germans who stayed far from the atrocities and who have recognized the moral atonement as you have done."

Laura undertakes the task of obtaining a visa to visit Israel methodically and with determination but it will take two years to achieve her goal.

Among the papers I inherited after Laura's death I found countless carbon-paper copies of typed letters Laura sent requesting permission to travel to Israel. The sheer amount seems obsessive. There are letters to the Israel Consulate in Munich and follow-up letters and New Year Greetings cards. She begins to build a network. She searches for witnesses to her character. Her efforts are indefatigable. The quest to be permitted entry to the land of the Jews has given Laura's life a new meaning.

At the end of the war, the Czech-born diplomat Dr. Chaim Yahil of the Jewish Agency set up an office in Munich for the purpose of helping Holocaust survivors and DPs living in camps to immigrate to Israel. With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Dr. Eliyahu Livne, member of Kibbutz Givat Hayim, replaced Dr. Yahil and became the first Government of Israel consul on German soil and Laura addresses her request for visa to the offices there.

Laura writes Yissaschar Ben-Yaacov, the Secretary in charge of such matters at the Israel Consulate on Maria-Theresien Street 11, in Munich, on March 3, 1951. "Dr. Falk of Haifa, West Carmel, Ilanot Street 1, the head physician at the Government Hospital, has invited me to spend my holidays with him and his family this year as we would like to exchange professional experiences," Laura writes. She requests an entry visa, as she

would like to travel to Israel in May or June. "You may have to count with considerable delay until your request is granted because the paperwork is handled by the Ministry of Immigration in Israel," she is informed by return mail. "Please enclose a letter of recommendation from the Jewish Community in Dusseldorf," Yissashar Ben-Yaacov advises. The reply from Dusseldorf is negative, the chairman, Mr. Julius Dreifuss, does not cooperate. "You are completely unknown to us," Herr Dreifuss writes back, showing no interest to meet her in person as she had suggested. "We must therefore decline to give you a letter of reference."

Lobberich, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1951

Munich, Maria-Theresienstrasse 11

Re: Entry Visa to Israel

In answer to your letter of 13 March, 1951 please find enclosed the four forms, filled out, and photos as per your request. I am also enclosing references.

As I am Catholic, I do not belong to the Jewish community in Duesseldorf.

Thank you for your efforts.

Sincerely,

Dr. Laura Schaefer

But of course, Dr. Walter Falk supplied such letters of recommendation, for example this copy of a typed letter in Hebrew:

26 March 1951. To Whom It May Concern

I know Dr. Laura Schaefer from the time I was in Sweden. I know her as a forthright, moral person far from the ill spirit of Nazi Germany. She is well informed about Israeli customs and knowledgeable of all that is happening in Israel.

I have knowledge of her relationship and assistance to a persecuted Jewish physician and his widow and this permits me not only to vouch for her character, but to assure you that no harm whatsoever will occur to the State of Israel through her visit. I am certain that Dr. Laura Schaefer deserves to obtain the possibility to visit Israel.

Sincerely,

Dr. Falk, Director of the Children's Department, Government Hospital, Haifa.

Or this one, undated:

I hereby certify that I have met with Fraulein Dr. Laura Schaefer from Germany during the international conference, which took place under the auspices of UNICEF, which has taken place in Stockholm four months ago. We have become close friends after I was convinced that she has been against the Nazi regime all these years and has in fact helped Jews at that time. Her interest in the Jewish people and our state is serious as she has a deep knowledge of Jewish traditions and of our way of life.

Or yet another one:

I wish to recommend that an entry visa to visit Israel be given to a Christian German physician. The lady whom I recommend forms the exception as she is clearly outside the usual norm. I met Dr. Laura Schaefer during the physicians' conference, which took place a year ago in Sweden. I have found her to be devoted to the Jewish people. She strongly condemns the actions of the Nazi regime. She is an observant Catholic and has done all that she could to save the life of a Jewish physician from the claws of the Nazis.



When she did not succeed, she assisted his widow in any way possible. (The widow has a letter to that effect.)

Her interest in our people is quite extraordinary and as proof I am enclosing a letter she has written in Hebrew after she taught herself the language less than a year ago in order to be able to read Hebrew literature in the original. She is most interested to witness first hand how our people have achieved the rebuilding of our homeland.

I am herewith giving all assurances required from me so that the visa will be given to a human being worthy of it.

I hope that my assurances carry some weight and that you will judge according to the fact that she is vouched by a citizen of Israel who has lived here close to twenty years and has worked in a responsible position as is well known.

The name and the address of the physician is: Dr. Laura Schaefer, Lobberich/ Rheinland. Looking forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,

Dr. W. Falk

Did Laura know Dr. Falk would falsify the facts? To be clear, Laura did not save or even attempt to save Dr. Walter Lustig, or any other Jew for that matter, as Dr. Falk claims. Dr. Lustig was too arrogant, too righteous and sure of himself, too well connected to high Nazi officials, as Laura herself told me, to need help or fear persecution. Nor did Laura assist his widow, Anne, in any way for Anne was never in any danger.

Who decided to twist around Laura's very brief encounter with Dr. Lustig in Berlin? Did Dr. Falk compose those letters on his own accord? Let us not forget, it was Walter Lustig who "saved" Laura! It was Walter Lustig who orchestrated the elaborate and rather risky fake appendicitis surgery as a cover to prevent Laura's return to Schneidemuehl on the Eastern Front!

### *HARRY IN DUSSELDORF*

My father's temporary job at the "Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland", the only postwar Jewish weekly newspaper in Germany, headquartered in Dusseldorf, was coming to an end. Indeed, his four months "experimental" stay in Germany would soon be over. Harry Obermayer (later Maor), 37 years old, had come for an extended visit from Tel Aviv, where we were living, to explore better job opportunities than those available to him in Israel. Like many other Jews, he left his home in Munich hastily with Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and was lucky to find refuge in Palestine. But Harry had not completed his studies. My father was a bohemian at heart, an intellectual, an adventurous man relying on his wits. Through diligent hard work he eventually amassed certificates and diplomas as a teacher and as a social worker and provided for our modest existence. But he wanted more, and it would take him another decade before he obtained the longed-for Ph.D. degree and employment as a professor for sociology.

The other equally important reason for Harry's desire to explore life for us, an Israeli family, in postwar Germany was his mother. Amalie Obermayer survived the war in Munich because she was "Aryan". But she was frail, her health failing, and Harry, who

had lived so far from her these past 18 years, wondered whether we could spend a few years near her.

I have the letters he wrote my mother, who remained in Israel with us children, during these months. The economic situation was very difficult in the young State of Israel, food shortages were alarming, but he describes his ambivalence about emigrating. He writes about doubts and fears. Can one live in Germany again? Will the children adjust? He writes about the breathtaking beauty of the majestic German landscape. He feels alive within the familiar culture, the language. But he feels alienated. He does not feel at home. In the manner typical for my father, he had crisscrossed Germany for four long months of exhaustive exploration staying with Jewish friends who had left Israel along the way. Finally, he landed a temporary job as the editor of the "Israel Page" at Karl Marx's newspaper in Dusseldorf. But now, after endlessly weighing the pros and cons my parents decided to remain in Israel after all. "I love that silly country," Harry writes as he prepared his return. "I leave Europe with an easy heart," he adds a few weeks later. He bought a swim cap for me and a soccer ball for my brother and asks my mother what other than cans of corned beef and cocoa powder he should bring.

As luck would have it, one fine day in mid-November 1951, Karl Marx, the owner-publisher of the "Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland," fortuitously located in Dusseldorf, not far from Laura's home in Lobberich, walks into my father's office with a proposition. He just received a phone from a German lady, Marx says, a medical doctor, who was wondering where and how she might learn Hebrew. "Are you interested?" Marx asks my father.

And while it was but short weeks prior to his departure, my father found the opportunity to give a few Hebrew lessons to a German medical doctor fascinating and just as Marx had suggested, he gave Fraulein Dr. Laura Schaefer a call.

"Get a notebook for vocabulary," Harry writes on November 14, 1951, and encloses the first lesson he has prepared for her. He estimates three such lessons per week, "if that's not too much for you." He encourages her to write him her questions and advises patience. "Consider this an opportunity for intensive studying," he writes as he plans to leave Germany at the end of December. "I must admit," he adds, "this is a lot of fun for me."

The course by correspondence my father devised for her shows his deep love for teaching Hebrew. He begins with simple phrases. Explaining meaning and grammar along the way. He uses a red pen for word endings. He creates dialogue. "I wish to travel to Israel. I have two friends there. Obermayer and Falk." "Are you Jewish?" "No, I'm Catholic but I am interested in Judaism and Zionism." "I read in the paper that the economic situation is very bad. Do you have enough food? Is there something I can do to help?" Miraculously, one is immersed in Hebrew immediately.

Among Laura's papers I found notebooks filled with page after page of the Hebrew alphabet. She practices writing capital letters and even script. She writes her name. She writes Dr. Falk's name and address.

In her agenda as well as in Anne's, I see my father's name on the dates he came to Lobberich: Harry Obermayer Sunday, November 14 and Sunday, November 25. By Saturday December 1, Laura enters the date and time of his arrival with his first name only. It does not take long for their friendship to develop. Harry stays for hours, often catching the last train back to Dusseldorf, his bike in tow. Laura, Anne Lustig and Harry drink cognac until the wee hours of the morning. While Laura will use "Sie" the formal German salutation in all her letters to Dr. Walter Falk, Laura, Anne and Harry switch to the familiar "Du" in no time at all.

If he found the "perfect pupil" as he wrote my mother, following his first visit in Lobberich, "quick and eager to learn because she wants to visit a friend in Haifa," Laura found the perfect teacher. Harry's lessons plan, the texts he composed for her, focus on obtaining a visa and her goal to write Dr. Falk a letter in Hebrew.

The lessons move on to the usual topics: days of the week, times of day, how to order food and drink.

How much does this bread cost?

20 Grush per kilogram

And butter?

We do not have butter at the moment. We only have margarine.

What else do you have?

We have tomatoes and cucumbers. That's all.

Here and there my father adds personal twists as, for example, in a skit about getting directions to come to visit us at home in Tel Aviv.

They have only six weeks together. Harry fires off lessons, he bombards Laura with postcards. He recommends books she should have. He writes his good friend Hans Lamm, who was working at the U.S. Court of Restitution Appeals in Nuremberg at the time, to send her John Hersey's "The Wall." Popular at the time it is a fictionalized account of an escape from the Warsaw ghetto, which had just been translated into German. (Hans Lamm obliges. The book costs 18.80 Marks. Hans includes his bank account information and requests to be refunded.)

Harry showers Laura with his love for Judaism, for Hebrew and for Israel. His energy, enthusiasm and passion virtually leap off every page he writes.

"I am in hospital for surgery of an infected abscess," he writes my mother on Thursday, December 6. He is in terrible pain, but his two new doctor friends visited him in hospital. The Hebrew lesson for Laura my father produced there includes the appropriate dialogue: where does it hurt? Let me take your temperature, I must give you an injection.

The time to say good-bye has come. My father stops in Lobberich then continues on to Munich to spend time with his mother. He searches for suitable books in his mother's apartment. He sends Laura the famous Philo lexicon, "The Handbook of Jewish Learning," published in Berlin in 1935, and the "Berlitz Method for Studying Hebrew," published in 1936. Had these books belonged to his brother? Maimon Obermayer was

23 years old when, broken in body and spirit in the Dachau concentration camp and unable to escape the hell Germany had become on his release, had taken his own life in this very apartment in 1939. Now Harry dedicates his brother's books to Laura. "To my dear student Laura Schaefer from her teacher. Munich December 24, 1951 for Christmas and Chanukah," he wrote on the flyleaf.

Harry's mother made plans for the last week of his stay in Germany. It was Christmas and she wanted to go to Tegernsee with him, where she was born, to visit with extended family. And yet, somehow, he found the time to put finishing touches on his book for Laura and rushed it off to the bookbinder. This is his dedication: "To my dear Laura! This book is for you. Only for you. I hope you will like it and I hope it will help you with your studies." They both know, he writes, that she still has a way to go in her studies. "But never mind," he writes, "we have time. And our friendship too has time."

On the eve of his departure for Israel, Harry writes a summary of their brief history together. He writes it in Hebrew. "Both of us knew that we had something," Harry writes. "It does not matter what to call it, something like love." He recounts how and why they met. He wishes he were the recipient of a letter like the one she wrote to Dr. Falk. "From the time I met her until this very day I wrote Laura often," he concludes wistfully, "I thought about her a lot. Maybe too much. I still do."

"Harry, it is easy to love you." Laura writes in reply. "If you knew how much I love all the things, which remind me of you, then my happiness would be your happiness and you would gladly return to Israel, to the land at the center of my private spiritual world, in deep friendship your Laura."

## *THE 1952 CORRESPONDENCE*

Most of the letters I found in Laura's basement after her death were written in Israel in 1952. My father wrote daily, sometimes twice a day. The letters are typed or handwritten on pre-stamped thin foldable and gummed light blue aerograms in which letter and envelope are one and the same commonly used at the time. Often my mother adds a friendly sentence or two.

Barely a week after my father returns to Tel Aviv he is pursuing Laura's quest for her visa with accelerated fervor. He manages to find out that Dr. Eliyahu Livne, Israel's first consul in Germany, is currently in Israel and imagining Dr. Falk, whom he knew only through Laura's stories, to be a more respectable and authoritative interlocutor, sends the following telegram in Hebrew on January 24 1952.

"Dr. Falk, Haifa, West Carmel, Ilanot Street  
Contact Dr. Livne currently in Kibbutz Givat Chaim immediately oblige him to speak personally in Jerusalem about Laura stop Obermayer."

Harry then uses the telegram form and sends it to Laura as a Hebrew lesson. He explains the vocabulary used by making a list in the margin next to the Hebrew: le-hitkasher: to contact or to get in touch; miyad: immediately; ve-techayev oto: oblige him; ishit: personally.

The very next day Harry follows up with a letter to Falk on the off chance his telegram had not arrived. "The fact that Consul Livne happens to be here is a godsend and must be exploited energetically or else Laura's file will languish on someone's desk." Harry then adds that if necessary, one can give assurances that her visit will be kept under the radar. "What is of utmost importance however is Livne's personal intervention in the matter," my father concludes.

I have not found a record of Falk's response amid Laura's papers, but I can easily imagine he did not take kindly to this passionate barrage of urgent requests. How different these two men were. Harry boyish, ebullient, unconventional and informal, and Falk staid, decorous, reserved and very formal.

In his letters to Laura, Harry writes of his continued efforts to help obtain her visa. He keeps up the pressure. He writes government agencies. "Go out to meet people," he counsels. According to an entry in her agenda for March 5, 1952, she attended a lecture given by Prelate Hermann Maas in Nuremberg. Laura thanks Hans Lamm, my father's childhood friend, for having arranged for her to meet the Prelate. Subsequently Laura and Prelate Maas exchange letters and postcards. To Laura's great joy and pride, Prelate Maas decides to call her "Ruth the Moabite," a name adopted immediately by Dr. Falk. "I cannot get used to call you 'Laura'", Falk writes, "not even in its abbreviated form of 'Lore' and I have therefore decided to call you 'Ruth' just like Prelate Maas." Laura hopes the Prelate can help her obtain a visa and there is talk about whether she may be permitted to travel on a pilgrim's visa.

Throughout 1952 Harry sends Hebrew language newspapers. He continues to encourage her. "Sooner or later, you will receive your visa," he assures her and counsels patience. He had a meeting with an official in the immigration department in Jerusalem on her behalf, he writes in October, and is very hopeful. He also continues to send Laura books. He scours second hand bookshops for suitable material for her. Here is a "Max and Moritz" by Wilhelm Busch in Hebrew published in Israel. How excited he would have been on discovering this Ur-German tale of boyish pranks written in verse, since 1865 the most popular children's book. And here yet another Hebrew learning method re-published in 1951 with Harry's inscription that he himself learned Hebrew this way many years ago.

In her daily agenda, a little red book filled with ads for pharmaceutical companies, Laura notes the letters and packages she sent and received. Gillette razor blades to Falk, shaving cream and soap to Falk, Vanilla pudding powder to Falk, letter to Falk, letter from Falk in Hebrew. She sent books to Falk's sons. She also writes Harry and sends him coffee. In one week of April, for example, she notes Easter eggs for my brother and me, packages of powdered mushroom soups and one letter to Harry, books from Harry, three letters from Harry. He has forgotten to bring mothballs for Gila, he writes, could she please send some?

Falk also kept up an active correspondence. He sent a scarf; he sent a necklace; he sent a crate of grapefruit and American journalist Ruth Gruber's book "Israel without Tears". And, Falk's most precious gift of all, the Tanach.

Laura kept carbon copies of the typed letters to Falk. It is striking to note that while they continued to address each other with the formal "Sie" the tone of their correspondence is familiar. She takes part in the Falks' daily life. They discuss the weather and inquire about everyone's health.

Theo, Falk's youngest son, is distancing himself from his parents. He was in a boarding school and will soon be discharged from military service. He is considering a career in ELAL, Israel's airline. Ruben left school. He wants to study agriculture, but in the meantime, he works as a mechanic in a garage in a Kibbutz. The eldest son, Raphael, wants to continue his studies of genetics in Stockholm. He and Ruma, a student of psychology, philosophy and education, plan to marry. (Laura sends Ruma nylon stockings, a luxurious novelty at the time.) Laura gives advice, and she voices her opinions. ("It seems to me that Theo is somewhat neglected by you," she writes.)

Laura seems intent on ingratiating herself with Dr. Falk. She sends elaborate thoughtful gifts, including to Falk's mother. Records of classical music. Bruno Walter conducts Brahms, Rosenkavalier by Richard Strauss and lots of echt-German Sarotti chocolate. She remembers birthdays and holidays. It's as though Falk's family became hers. All three sons of Falk write letters to Laura in Hebrew. They thank her for the gifts she sent. They praise her knowledge of Hebrew and are looking forward to seeing her and touring the country with her.

1952 was a difficult year in Israel. Unemployment was high. Inflation was high. The country was in the midst of “Tzena,” a severe austerity program imposed by the government. There were food shortages for basic commodities. And while Laura romanticized Israel, we stood in long bread lines. Staple foods like meat and eggs, flour, oil, sugar and margarine were rationed. Chicory was available as a coffee substitute. Harry hated it and my mother bought expensive “real” coffee for him when available on the thriving black market.

Throughout the year my parents were deeply immersed in the tortuous question of whether to remain in Israel or to leave. My father had grown increasingly frustrated with his dead-end job as a social worker and his meager pay. He did not see a chance for advancement. The career in academia he craved seemed out of the question for him in Israel. Our living arrangement in a sublet was precarious, our landlord pushed us to move out. But what could we afford if we stayed in Tel Aviv? And where else in Israel could we live? My father simply did not know how long he could sustain the present circumstances. My parents were under increasing pressure to make drastic, life-altering decisions. There were endless agonizing deliberations. And if they left Israel, where should they hope to go? Where could they go? In the letters I have there are references to emigration to Canada and England, for example. The United States imposed impossible quotas. And most importantly, how would my father earn a living?

Finally, toward end of the year, when I turned ten, my parents had made their choice. We were going to leave Israel and move to Germany. “Are you sitting down?” Harry writes Laura on November 4, 1952. During his visit to Israel Karl Marx offered an acceptable salary and work conditions at the Allgemeine Juedische Wochenzeitung in Dusseldorf and my father agreed. This seemed by far the best solution to my parents, as “we’ve got to leave Israel for a few years,” Harry adds. “We shook hands on the deal,” Harry writes although no specific date had yet been set. Laura does not respond. From then on she writes less often. Sometimes Harry waits three or four weeks for her letter.

Suddenly our name, Obermayer, sounded too German to my parents and the idea to Hebraicize our last name took shape. In the spirit of the new and young State of Israel, the “melting pot,” it was common practice to give one’s last name an updated Hebrew sound. By taking an Israeli name my father wanted to preempt unnecessary or uncomfortable questions we might encounter in Germany. I can still see us sitting on our Tel Aviv apartment’s balcony as Harry called out his various suggestions. We settled on Maor. It was easy and short and sounded a little like the old name. And most of all it was Hebrew.

And then, on November 20, 1952, Harry receives an official letter from the Government of Israel, Department of Permits for Immigration. “In response to your letter of October 8, 1952,” it says, “We are granting Dr. Laura Schaefer a tourist visa for one month.” My father sends Laura a telegram. “Visa granted congratulations Harry.”

It is not entirely clear what happened after that. Harry suggested she come right away. She hesitated. She was exhausted, she had no vacation, no foreign

currency. She preferred sailing by ship. She wanted to wait till spring and spend Passover with Dr. Falk and his family.

Harry must have been bitterly disappointed. But he needed her, and he needed her help. There had been a handshake with Karl Marx but no signed contract. And as the months toward the end of the lease of our apartment approached Karl Marx's replies became scarce and vague. Was Harry's job really still there? As the weeks passed my father became increasingly frustrated but Laura remained quiet. His letters imploring her to call Marx on his behalf met with stony silence.

My father doubled his efforts to elicit a response from her. The tone of his letters must have sounded demanding and accusatory to her. "By the way, should Herr Obermayer contact you to inquire about my arrival," Laura writes Walter Falk, "please do not give him any information. I would very much like to avoid whatever his reproaches towards me may be." It seems his letters, his problems, perhaps his very existence, became burdensome to her. Why did she not support Harry's efforts? They must have discussed Harry's "situation" during their long evenings together in Lobberich. He would have shared his urgent desire to study, to get ahead professionally. He would have told her about his mother's poor health. Surely, she would have understood that he felt stuck and without prospects.

Did she not want to hear that Israel can be a Jew's harsh exile? That Harry was not a Zionist pioneer, that he did not fit in? Harry's criticism about Israeli politics must have interfered with her romantic ideas about the Jewish people's return to their homeland. Harry's steps towards leaving Israel and returning to Germany met with criticism and utmost lack of compassion by Laura. It tested their friendship to the breaking point.

A few weeks prior to her trip, Dr. Falk sends a travel guide she should study before her arrival and bring back with her. And, he asks for a favor. Would she bring a bottle of ink for his Parker fountain pen? "Royal blue," he specifies.

### *ISRAEL 1953*

On Sunday March 22, 1953 Laura took a sleeping-car overnight train ride from Cologne to Basel, Switzerland. She then changed trains and rode for some eight hours to Genoa, Italy. She spent the night at the elegant "Londra & Continentale" hotel close to the train station. After a short exploration of this lovely port town she boarded the "Adriatica," where she shared a cabin with three other women. She had difficult conversations over dinner, Laura writes in her travel journal. "Mrs. M. admits openly, but not without diplomatic skill, that she is not happy to be reminded of the recent past through my presence. Mrs. P. is also initially ill at ease because I am German. 'I have cold chills,' is how she put it."

Three days later "clear blue skies, a green-blue calm sea and blinding sunlight," greeted the boat in Naples. Laura took a quick tour to admire the ancient ruins of Pompeii and finally boarded the passenger liner "SS Negba" sailing the Mediterranean Sea under the Israeli flag on March 26. To her surprise there was



no negative reaction when she told her fellow passengers she is German, “quite the contrary, people are double friendly to me,” she notes in her journal. “All of us have the same goal towards which we sail in joyful, excited anticipation.” The ship makes stops in Athens and Cyprus. “On the morning of Monday, March 30, the steward calls out ‘Monte Carmelo’ and I am completely enthralled and must hold back so as not to hug everybody,” Laura writes. “I feel every nerve. Haifa, Stella Maris, the Bahai Gardens and then, very soon, Dr. Falk.”

How different her voyage was from the one Harry had suggested. “You have waited for so long for your visa,” he wrote repeatedly, “why don’t you just hop on a plane now that you have the possibility of realizing your dream?” he asks, “Have you lost interest?”

Laura’s trip took eight days. Was she testing the waters? Easing herself into her new identity: a Hebrew speaking German of “Late Birth,” as people too young to be Nazis were called? A legitimate visitor to the land of the Jews? Absolved of her Fatherland’s sins by the revered Israeli patriot Dr. Falk?

Dr. Falk had obtained special permission to board the ship. He helps her through passport control. “The officials are particularly nice to me contrary to my fears,” she writes, “they welcome me and wish me a pleasant stay.”

Ruben and Theo, Dr. Falk’s children, waited at the port and Laura is given a breathtaking tour of Mount Carmel where the panoramic view of the sea and the mountains impress her beyond her expectations. On to meet Mrs. Falk where the reception was “cordial.” Visitors including the 89 year-old Oma, Walter Falk’s mother, arrive to greet her. Laura is overwhelmed by the spirit of hospitality, she writes “and because of that atmosphere I do not feel lonely or as a stranger.”

Passover begins with the “Seder” that very evening. “I am allowed to say the ‘Ma Nishtana’ as the youngest ‘child’ and newest arrival in the country, and get the seat of honor next to the head of the family,” she writes, “I feel part of the family and am called ‘Ruth.’”

Laura stayed in Israel for four weeks. Each day she is taken on different sightseeing trip. To Acre to visit a crusaders’ fortress and to Nahariya, founded by immigrant German Jews, one day and to the Sea of Galilee the next. She visits Nazareth. Her journal is filled with detailed descriptions and observations. Frau Luise, as she calls Dr. Falk’s wife, is a perfect hostess and Laura is introduced as their “non-Jewish German” visitor to friends and friends of friends. Everywhere she goes Laura dazzles with her knowledge of Hebrew. Whoever she meets is impressed by her knowledge of Israel’s history and accomplishments. “My love and enthusiasm for this country are not disappointed,” she writes. “In the evening we sit with Abba and Ruben and look at photos. Some from Germany are so old they are beginning to fade.”

On Good Friday she is taken to Stella Maris, the Monastery of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the next day on her first Shabbat, to Meggido, site of the “Battle of Armageddon” at the End of Times before the Second Coming of Jesus in Christian

apocalyptic literature. For many decades “Har Megiddo,” the Hebrew word for the “Mount of Megiddo,” has attracted German and American teams of archeologists whose important discoveries bear witness to cities inhabited there between 7000 BCE to 300 BCE. “There are as many as 26 layers of ancient cities built on top of each other which must be excavated and sorted.” Laura writes. “This part of the country is majestic and breathtaking,” she adds and continues to describe “the steep impressive rocks and flowers in bright colors.”

Dr. Falk’s son, Ruben, accompanies Laura to Jerusalem. “It is good that I will be there by myself for the next couple of days,” she writes. “I am in high spirits and enthralled by the uniqueness of this town,” she adds.

The next pages of her report are missing. Laura returned to Lobberich on May 13 presumably by ship and rail via a similar route.

Harry could never have provided Laura with anything like the thoughtful tour Dr. Falk organized for her. While Laura was honored hosted and entertained, graciously and lavishly, we were preparing our departure from Israel. Many people left Israel during this time, but it was not considered an honorable thing to do, one was considered a traitor, one who abandons ship.

What could Harry have done for her? We did not have the means, or the patience and we were quite simply not in the mood. To be sure, Harry loved the exciting and cosmopolitan atmosphere of Tel Aviv, its cafes and crammed second-hand bookshops. He was proud of the “Flying Camel” sculpture, symbol of the first Levant International Fair in 1934. He would have taken Laura to Jaffa for hummus at Abu-Hassan and sesame bagels and rosewater flavored Malabi at Abulafia. My father loved the wild and exotic Arab souk near the Haifa port where he had begun his lifelong study of Arabic. He delighted in its vivid colors, its sounds and smells and tastes. He would have taken Laura to the Weizmann Institute of Science, in Rehovot, where advanced research is conducted in chemistry and biology. He would have taken her to nearby Kibbutz Givat Brenner where so many German Jews, including Gila’s cousins, were founding members. She would have met Gila’s brother Yaacov and his echt-Sabra wife Chana a graduate of the Youth Village Ben Shemen, an agricultural boarding school founded in 1927.

But Harry would not have shied away from showing Laura poverty and dirt and neglect. And while she accompanied Dr. Falk on his rounds in clean and modern impressive medical facilities, being greeted by nurses in their impeccably ironed and starched white uniforms, Harry would have shown her “Ma’abarot,” vast areas of corrugated metal shacks serving as immigrant absorption centers, and the ugly hastily built cement building in Ramleh where he was a social worker. There she would have seen Israel’s War of Independence invalids languishing in crowded corridors waiting for a bed. Laura was enchanted by the view of the glistening sea in Haifa Bay, she writes in her journal, “and Haifa under a cloudless sky by night is incomparable. The twinkling lights in the streets and on the hills seem alive.” What would she have said about the bands of barefoot unkempt Arab children loitering on dusty dirt roads begging for spare change, “baksheesh” or a cigarette?

But none of this happened. Laura did not contact Harry. Falk in Haifa is her focus and destination.

On her return to Lobberich, Laura typed up a glowing report of her trip. She called it "My Impressions of Israel," and sent it off to newspapers, magazines and editors of professional medical and educational publications. She contacted churches and synagogues and soon made the rounds lecturing at Jewish-Christian organizations.

Here is an invitation to attend the traveling exhibit "Old-New-Land Israel" where Laura is featured as a guest lecturer in May in Dusseldorf and in June in Berlin, at the Maison de France exhibit halls. The First German Doctor to Visit Israel, it says on the poster, will talk on "My Impressions of Israel." Entrance was free to schools and youth organizations.

### *INVITATION TO BONN*

In September 1953 Laura's boss at the District Health Office in Kempen, Herr Oberkreisdirektor Dr. Feinendegen, walked into her office to show her a letter he received. The letter was from a certain Herr Gerhard Schmidt of the Federal Ministry of Finance in Bonn, then the seat of the government. Herr Schmidt writes that it has come to his attention that the physician Dr. Schaefer of the District Health Office has recently spent several weeks in Israel. Schmidt explains that he has to evaluate the requests for compensation for the victims of Nazi medical experiments. He would like to talk to Dr. Schaefer personally, he writes, as several requests have arrived directly from Israel. "Can Dr. Schaefer come to Bonn and meet with me?" Schmidt asks, and would Herr Oberkreisdirektor give Fraulein Dr. Schaefer the necessary permission to come to Bonn. And thus began the next chapter of Laura's life.

Laura kept the letters she exchanged with the "Suits in Bonn," as she called her superiors, in a file marked "Correspondence with German and Israeli Government Offices." Laura answers Mr. Gerhard Schmidt and asks if Tuesday October 6 would work. The meeting is scheduled for 11 a.m., Mr. Schmidt replies, in his office on the third floor in the main building, room 344.

Laura knew how to present herself. She kept her hair short, she was tall and trim and dressed appropriately. She was a professional. She looked intelligent and trustworthy and made a good impression. Mr. Schmidt explained the cabinet decision by the Ministry of Finance of July 26, 1951 to give financial compensation to persons on whom medical experiments had been performed during the Third Reich. However, Mr. Schmidt continued, following lengthy negotiations with the Government of Israel it was agreed that the examinations be conducted by both an Israeli medical doctor as well as by a German physician. "We are confronted with the question of sending a physician to Israel to examine 84 persons who are possibly victims," Mr. Schmidt explains. He estimates it will

take about two months. Would this be of interest to her, he asks? And Laura agrees on the spot.

The task had been offered to a prominent Jewish physician, Dr. Fritz Spanier of Dusseldorf, a close friend of Karl Marx. But Dr. Spanier, a passenger on the ill-fated St. Louis ship in 1939 and later the Chief Medical Officer of the hospital in Camp Westerbork concentration camp in the Netherlands, declined. Mr. Schmidt knew there are no other people who qualify to fulfill the job. "I would very much like it if we could let you conduct the examinations," Mr. Gerhard Schmidt writes Laura following the meeting. Her full salary plus a per diem will be paid, Mr. Schmidt assures her. "I am at your service anytime," Laura replies on October 29 1953.

Laura spent the next months in feverish excitement. There were more meetings in Bonn, including with Mr. Rohde of the Ministry of Labor who added 19 invalids from the First World War living in Israel to her caseload. She received a list of the persons she will examine and instructions as to how to conduct the interviews. "Keep a journal and record the name and personal information of each person," she was told, "write your report in German in two copies." One copy was to be mailed back to the office in Bonn for further evaluation and one copy was for her to keep. She was told the patients from the Nazi era are victims of Dr. Josef Mengele and Dr. Carl Clauberg. The experiments were conducted to determine the fastest and cheapest way for castration and mass sterilization.

Laura fulfills all the necessary bureaucratic requirements in a timely fashion. She sends her passport, three additional passport photos and proof of inoculation to the office in Bonn. She suggests a Swissair flight from Dusseldorf to Zurich, where she would change planes and arrive at the Lydda airport in Israel twelve hours later, at 4 a.m. on January 5, 1954.

Laura schedules a meeting with Dr. Chaim Yahil, the Israeli diplomat formerly responsible for the Jewish Agency office in Munich, and now the head of the Israel Mission in Cologne. "Dr. Schaefer made an excellent impression on me," Dr. Yahil writes the legal counsel of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem following their meeting. "She is a young woman," he writes, too young to be a Nazi. "It was because of her opposition to the anti-Semitism she was learning in school that she decided on her own to learn the truth about the Jewish people." Dr. Yahil enthuses, impressed with Laura's knowledge of Hebrew, "she loves the country and its citizens and is approaching her mission with full desire to help as much as possible," he adds.

On December 30, 1953, Laura receives a certificate signed by Dr. Chaim Yahil: "This is to certify that Dr. Laura Schaefer is traveling to Israel in an official capacity to clarify claims for restitution of victims of Nazi persecution, in particular victims of medical experiments and invalids of the First World War. Dr. Schaefer is a guest of the Government of Israel." She is exempt from the limits of foreign currency imposed by the Bonn government at the time and furthermore, should Dr. Schaefer require additional funds while in Israel, the

Treasury in Jerusalem is kindly requested to come to her aid. The German Government will then reimburse the funds to the Israel Mission in Cologne.

On Christmas Eve she picks up her passport, ticket and foreign exchange in Bonn. There are newspaper clippings among the papers I inherited announcing the imminent arrival in Israel of the young German Doctor sent by the German government. "Fraulein Dr. Schaefer will be in charge of examining victims of Nazi medical experimentation," it says in the local press in Hebrew, English and Yiddish.

Laura and the Falk family are thrilled at the unexpected prospect of meeting again. Her official address in Israel is care of Dr. Falk in Haifa. Laura knew that Menachem Begin, who was in the Knesset as the head of the right wing "Herut" party at that time, gave inflammatory speeches against the Adenauer and Ben Gurion negotiations concerning payments of restitution. "Begin said 'as long as I live, no German will ever stand on Israeli soil. And if he does, he won't leave Israel alive,'" Laura told me, and indeed according to a headline in an Israeli newspaper, a few weeks after her arrival three youth were held in custody by police on suspicion of planning an attack on her life. But Laura was given a bodyguard and a driver and was taken to and from the Sarafand Government Hospital, once a military hospital of the British army, where the examinations took place.

#### *HARRY BREAKS THE SILENCE*

My father is bothered by the year long period of silence between them, he writes Laura in December 1953, at precisely the time her head is spinning with the excitement of embarking on her historic mission to Israel. "We have been here since August," my father writes, "and fate has dealt us painful blows. We find ourselves in difficult circumstances."

The position at the Allgemeine newspaper Harry had reason to count on has long been filled, Karl Marx told him, and the budget does not allow for additional hires. But Marx arranged a position for my father at the Israel Mission, Habsburgerring 2-12, in Cologne, headed by Dr. Haim Yahil. (The same Yahil who praised Laura for her Hebrew!)

The Israel Mission was a commercial body, founded in June 1953 before diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel had been established. Its purpose was to implement the Reparations Agreement Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer signed in September 1952. In other words, the Mission was set up to purchase hundreds of millions of dollars worth of raw materials from Germany for Israel's development. The staff consisted of diplomats, economists, businessmen and engineers. They purchased fuel, equipment for industrial plants and factories, machinery to develop the water supply, electrical systems, freight and passenger ships, trains, cranes, turbines, tractors and trucks.

It was a most exciting undertaking. Over its twelve-year existence, it provided for the creation of 45,000 jobs and jump-started Israel's struggling economy. But my father was completely ill suited for any aspect of such an endeavor. He was miscast and out of place.

"I stayed barely three months," Harry writes Laura. "Our status changed when my mother suddenly died at the end of November 1953," Harry explains. "We were now no longer in Germany for the noble reason of caring for a member of the family, forgivable in the eyes of Israel's stance towards Germany, but simply as immigrants. And immigrants to Germany, "Yordim," persons, who have left Israel, have no place at an office of the Government of Israel." Harry writes, "I was let go."

My parents' mood was grim. It took determination, iron resolve and help from strangers to see us through. Eventually a position for my father was created at Marx's "Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland" and in January 1954 we moved to Dusseldorf.

#### *ISRAEL 1954*

Long before the morning of January 14, 1954, when Laura showed up for work at the Sarafand Government Hospital, 15 km southeast of Tel Aviv, the victims of Nazi medical experiments had been well known to their physicians at the Kupat Cholim, Israel's state-mandated health insurance and medical services organization "Sick Fund" Professor Dr. Levinger, head of the Government's Ministry of Health, writes Laura. He asks to be informed should she receive additional names of persons from abroad. She was told that Professor Dr. Herman Hirsch, a gynecologist, formerly from Hamburg, who was assigned to work with her as the Israeli doctor, had pre-screened the patients to be examined by her.

The arrival of the "German Doctor" was well prepared in advance. Laura's mission to examine concentration camp prisoners used for sterilization and castration experiments and invalids of the First World War made headlines. In her first meeting with Drs. Levinger and Hirsch she was given a list of 94 victims. All these persons had been contacted by mail with instructions of where and when to appear.

"January 17, 1954. From Ministry of Health Government of Israel to Mr. L. 'We have received notice that you are a physically impaired WWI veteran and that the status of your disability has not been clarified sufficiently. Dr. Schaefer has been asked by the German Government to determine the extent of the damages you are suffering in cooperation with our own physicians. Can you please appear on Jan 20, 1954 at 10 a.m.?"

The simple Hebrew phrases Laura had mastered in preparation helped her patients to trust her. She was sufficiently fluent to offer a brief and friendly welcome. In the event, many of the victims she examined, did not speak Hebrew themselves. At times a translator was required. In particular Laura mentions a

man speaking only Greek. But as much as all these people had spent many years waiting for such an examination with the hope for financial compensation, they would have approached the revisiting of the horrific crimes committed on their person with renewed anxiety.

Laura examined patients daily with the exception of Wednesday, the day Dr. Hirsch had surgeries scheduled, and Shabbat, a day of rest in Israel, she writes in one of her regular reports to Gerhard Schmidt in Bonn. However, the patients did not always appear at the appointed hour. Some applicants did not appear at all. Three examinations were scheduled per day. Each one lasted between one and two hours depending on whether there were difficulties in communication. Once a week she met with Dr. Levinger to review the files. All examinations took place in her office, she writes Schmidt, with the exception of those persons unable to travel and therefore require home visits in various parts of the country. These patients she scheduled for Wednesdays. In addition, Laura writes Gerhard Schmidt, she herself must type up the reports, as she "still has no secretary."

The German press covered Laura's trip to Israel extensively, Gerhard Schmidt informs her, and she has therefore become a "person of interest." There were also articles in the Israeli press. For example "Ma'ariv," Israel's most widely read daily newspaper, published an interview with an attorney who represents 86 cases of victims of medical experiments. His angry words and hostility as written up in the article were aimed at Israel's Ministry of Health, he explained to Laura in a letter requesting to meet her, because they have declined certain claimants off hand without even examining them. And, in the way of editors-in-chief, numerous articles suddenly appeared about Nazi medicine and Nazi doctors while Laura was in Israel.

Over the course of her stay Laura received letters and telegrams adding new names. For example, a letter by an attorney who represents 63 clients, all former camp inmates, on whom experiments had been performed. A colleague in Germany had written him that Laura is in Israel and he would like to meet with her. Or Gerhard Schmidt's letter addressed to her care of Dr. Falk in Haifa, giving her additional names of persons to be examined, some of who had contacted the United Nations with their claim. And here is Herr Schmidt's registered mail addressed to her at the Sarafand Hospital. He is enclosing a letter from an attorney in Berlin whose clients live in Israel. "Please add these claims," Schmidt writes Laura.

In one of her reports to Gerhard Schmidt Laura describes the strict standard, which had been applied by the Israeli Health Authority towards patients. "31 cases had been pre-screened and their claims were rejected," Laura writes Schmidt, but she in fact asked to see them anyway. "The physicians are morally impeccable," she writes and adds that she had occasion to meet with many doctors, socially and professionally, as she has gone on rounds with them. "The doctors' desire for objectivity and their ability to separate conflicts of interest is beyond the shadow of a doubt," she assures Schmidt. "Also the Ministry of Health would never hire physicians about whom it could be said that their motives were

in question.” She knows Dr. Levinger and can vouch for him absolutely, she concludes.

In the papers I inherited I found a clearly legible memo handwritten in Hebrew on Government of Israel, Ministry of Health, stationery on which it says: “To cancel from Dr. Schaefer’s list: Number: 4, 10, 19, 21.”

The paperclips fastened to the notes Laura took in longhand so many years ago are rusty now. Laura kept the carbon paper she used to produce the two required copies of the reports. You can see the imprint of the letters on the shiny black surface. Here and there this or the other typewriter key perforated the paper. The reports I have are on thin lightweight paper. On the top right hand corner Laura wrote “Mengele” on some and “Clauberg” on others. After the patients left Laura sat in her office for long lonely hours typing up the notes.

Even before she left for Israel, Laura received instructions from the Ministry of Finances in Bonn as to what a proper “Gutachten” report should look like and what information it must include about each patient.

All of the reports begin the same way: “On behalf of the Federal Ministry of Finances this exam will be conducted to determine whether this person is a surviving victim of medical experiments in concentration camps according to cabinet resolution of July 26, 1951.” All of the reports are portraits of sadistic brutal crimes. All of the reports summarize the exam this way: “Patient is severely disabled and must be recognized as a victim of medical experiments perpetrated on humans in concentration camps according to cabinet resolution of July 26. 1951.”

“Mrs. A, born 1925 in Salonika, Greece, currently residing in Tel Aviv, Israel, was examined. Concentration camp. Number 81681 tattooed on left forearm with triangle.

Family history: parents and siblings healthy. All murdered in Auschwitz upon arrival. One sister died in Auschwitz following illness.

Medical history: was a healthy child. Got her period at the age of 11. In 1943, 17 years old, she arrived in Birkenau. After two months there she came to Auschwitz, Block 10. Was x-rayed in the following manner: one metal plate was put on her stomach and another one on her back for the duration of 15 minutes. Following the x-ray “treatment” she vomited over a period of 24 hours. After approximately two weeks large blisters appeared, which were treated with a salve. After one month she was sent back to Birkenau. She never menstruated again. After two months in Birkenau she was sent back to Auschwitz where she was operated on in December 1943. Anesthesia by injection in the lumbar region. Following the surgery she lay in “bed” in Auschwitz for two months. Wound opened and filled with pus. Later redness appeared on her stomach accompanied by high fever.

1946 arrived in Israel. Married. Since 1952 patient of Dr. H. Hirsch. Hormone treatment without results. Amenorrhea. 28 year-old woman with reduced strength. Looks substantially older than she is. Pale. Large deep scar between



naval and pubic symphysis. Otherwise physically OK. Psyche: emotional paralysis. Talks slowly and answers monosyllabically.”

“Mr. X’s sister was beaten to death on street in Hungary. Auschwitz. Parents murdered. Wife, eight months pregnant, murdered. Six-year-old son murdered. Brother and his entire family murdered. Lost all teeth. Injections into testicles. Heavy swelling. Worked in German Armament Works. Childless.”

Mr. Y. born in Mlawa, Poland in 1924. No profession. Lives in Jaffa, Israel. Parents and six siblings murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. Mr. Y. was deported to Berlin in 1939. Worked as stonemason repairing cobblestoned streets. Injured his left thumb. Festering infection. Unable to work. Sent back to ghetto in Mlawa. Transported to Birkenau in 1942 where he was experimented on. Repeated radiation on his genitals resulted in nausea, insomnia and chills. Transferred to Auschwitz. Injection into testicles, surgical removal of right testicle. Wound infected with pus. Regular testing of his semen. Second surgery to remove the left testicle. Wound did not heal. 1945 evacuated to Birkenau. Nine-day death march to Flossengurg. Exhausted, sick and famished. Liberated by the Americans. Hospitalized in Hohenfels for six months. 1948 emigration to Israel. Mr. Y is a 29-year-old obese man. Adiposity. Complete lack of facial and body hair. Bloated face. No libido. Desolate. Cries during exam. Diagnosis: castration by radiation and surgery. Deformed left thumb.

“Mrs. B. Parents, two sisters and one brother murdered in Auschwitz. Injections. Vomit. Diarrhea. Fever. Surgery. Open wound with pus. Married after Auschwitz. No children. Embedded Fistula scar. Gynecologic exam shows signs typical of castration or removal of ovaries. Psychic evaluation: Genital Arousal Disorder.”

Mrs. C. Auschwitz. Parents, three brothers, one sister murdered on arrival. Patient’s infant murdered in Auschwitz. Injections, x-ray, surgery, infection, fever. Now sterile. Etc. Etc. Horror and pure evil. Ninety-nine reports.

Telegram dated February 24, 1954, to Laura care of Professor Dr. H. Hirsch, Sarafand Government Hospital, Israel, from Gerhard Schmidt. “Please let me know by airmail how many cases you will have examined by the end of February and how many more you need to examine.” She will shortly begin the examination of the handicapped veterans of World War I, Laura writes Schmidt, who was getting ready for his retirement but wanted to do all in his power to see to it that the monies will be paid out in a timely fashion given the age of the persons involved. The oldest, Mr. A., 76 years old, born in 1878, was 36 years old at the time of his injury during the First World War, and the youngest, Mr. B, 59 years old, was 19 when the war broke out in 1914. Also, what with Mardi Gras on Tuesday March 2, Schmidt writes, and the week of the famous Cologne carnival, he will be able to respond by mail only the following week.

She needs more time, Laura answers. They agree on her departure from Israel on March 16. “I can report back to work in Kempen on April 1,” she says, and asks Schmidt to let her office in Kempen know.

Laura wishes to draw Gerhard Schmidt's attention to a certain Dr. Arthur Kessler. "Dr. Kessler was a physician who was himself a prisoner in a concentration camp in the Ukraine," she writes. "There he treated 1200 patients who had contracted Lathyrism, a certain kind of paralysis similar to that of polio because of severe malnutrition as part of a nutrition-experiment."

She encloses the memo she received from Dr. Kessler. He is in charge of some 40 to 60 surviving former inmates of the Vapniarka concentration camp who are living in Israel, he writes. 10 to 15 are seriously affected and unable to earn a living. His clients were fed a toxic diet of animal fodder and bread made with barley and straw, which caused spastic paralysis. Dr. Kessler wants to know whether these patients have a legitimate claim as part of the cabinet resolution of July 1951.

"We are not talking about restitution," Gerhard Schmidt reminded Laura, "but rather about fast, temporary emergency relief." As far as the question of Dr. Kessler is concerned, Gerhard Schmidt continues, no, the work at hand now concerns only medical experiments therefore nutritional experiments are not a part of this. "Obviously inmates had terrible food and questionable nutrition but that cannot be seen as medical experiments," Schmidt writes. "Those claims have to be handled through the Federal Supplementary Law."

From Schmidt to Laura care of Professor Hirsch: "It must be hard to write up the reports without a secretary. I have requested a secretary for you through the Israel Mission in Cologne." Professor Levinger knows that Laura is committed to complete typing up the reports while she is still in Israel in spite of difficulties. He offers to help with translations, for example.

At the completion of her work, Laura sends Gerhard Schmidt a three-page document signed by herself and Professor Hirsch. "Final results of the examinations of surviving victims of medical experiments in concentration camps according to cabinet resolution of July 26, 1951." It lists one hundred names. One column has the heading "Diagnosis": sterilization, total castration, castration by x-rays, semi-castration, loss of sexual strength, bilateral orchietomy. Another column, with the heading "Entitled to Compensation," indicates eighty-five persons with a "yes" check and fifteen with "no." Of these, six persons were not entitled to compensation because 'experiment cannot be proven.'"

Days before her departure from Israel, on March 11, 1954, Dr. Levinger writes to Laura. He thanks her profusely for her work and ends his letter with a quote from the Book of Ruth 2:12: "May the Lord reward your efforts. May your acts of kindness be repaid fully by the Lord G'd of Israel."

### *NAZI DOCTORS*

Laura and Anne were still working in the hospital in Traunstein, in December 1946, when the "United States of America v. Karl Brandt et al" trial began in Nuremberg. Karl Brandt, a physician trained in surgery, officer in the SS, was

Hitler's personal physician. He was in charge of administering "Aktion T4," the euthanasia program of systematic killing of mentally retarded and mentally ill men, women and children in institutions.

It was the first of twelve criminal proceedings commonly referred to as "Doctors' Trials" the American military tribunal conducted against twenty-three Nazi doctors and high-ranking administrators. The indicted physicians committed crimes against humanity, cruel and gruesome medical experiments on prisoners in concentration camps and war crimes during the Third Reich. The trials lasted 140 days. In August 1947, sixteen of the accused were found guilty. In June 1948 seven were executed. Karl Brandt, proud to have served his Fatherland even as he was standing on the gallows, was among those who were hanged. He was 44 years old.

We do not know what Laura or Anne or their colleagues in Traunstein knew or thought or said about the Doctors' Trials and the fate of these Nazi physicians. Certainly, Laura could never have imagined that she herself would come into close contact with some of the surviving victims of their crimes.

Neither Dr. Josef Mengele nor Dr. Carl Clauberg, the two names Laura wrote by hand on the top right-hand side of the reports she had typed, were among those tried and convicted in Nuremberg.

Dr. Josef Mengele, known as the "Angel of Death" for his demonic omnipresence at the arrival ramp in Auschwitz, escaped. It is there he "selected" children, women with babies, the elderly and infirm, for immediate death in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Dr. Mengele known also for deadly genetic experiments on twins, for tortuous injections of poisonous chemicals into thousands of women's uteri, was not captured and not tried. Assisted by Catholic clergy in Rome, Mengele fled first to Argentine, then Paraguay and finally Brazil. He drowned in the ocean following a stroke while swimming off the coastal resort town of Bertioga at the age of 67, in 1979.

Dr. Carl Clauberg, a short, ugly man, arrogant and given to erratic outbursts of violence, was a professor of gynecology and fanatical Nazi with the rank of SS-Lieutenant General. He approached Heinrich Himmler in 1942 with his plan for cheap and easy mass sterilization of women to prevent reproduction and ensure "racial hygiene". He was assigned to Auschwitz where he set up his laboratory on the ground floor in Block 10. The women selected for his experiments were kept on the second floor, where they languished with serious infections and high fever, on straw mattresses on top of wooden planks in three tier structures. His method was to experiment with various poisonous substances, for example acid and formaldehyde, injected without anesthesia, into the uterus thereby causing permanent damage. It is estimated that he subjected 700 women to his torture.

At the end of the war, Dr. Carl Clauberg was taken prisoner by the Soviets. He was sentenced to twenty-five years. In a massive prisoner exchange agreement Chancellor Adenauer negotiated in Moscow with Nikita Khrushchev in 1955, Dr.

Clauberg was released after ten years. Like all returnees he was entitled to "Heimkehrer" financial aid for returnees. Clauberg received Deutsche Mark 5000 (the equivalent of \$12,000.00 in 1955) He was reinstated at a clinic in Kiehl where he boasted to his colleagues and the press of his exploits in Auschwitz. He was subsequently arrested and died in prison in 1957 before his trial. He was 59 years old.

### *LAURA AFTER ISRAEL*

The months of January and February 1954 were particularly cold in Germany, with temperatures close to zero degrees Fahrenheit. We had just settled into the apartment on Arndt Street 9, near the Rochus church in Dusseldorf, Laura remembered so well when I visited her in Lobberich in June 1998. The apartment was not heated. One windowpane was broken when we moved in. "Cover it up with cardboard," a neighbor advised my mother, "that's what we had to do during the war." My brother and I shared the bedroom in back and my parents slept on a trundle bed in the front room. My mother cooked on the coal burning stove around which we huddled. Harry was working at Karl Marx's weekly paper, the "Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland," we went to school and my mother said she stayed by the stove all day, close to the bench and table Frau Dreifuss, wife of the chairman of the association of Jewish communities, garnered for us.

Laura kept a letter I wrote her at the end of March 1954 in my child's hand, in Hebrew, on little yellow and blue lined notepaper decorated with tigers, elephants and bears. "You have been in Israel, and I want to know how you liked it," I write. "We have been here three months already and have not yet met you." But she had sent us chocolate and I add a thank you also to Frau Lustig overleaf.

Laura completed the arduous task of typing up the notes she had taken during the medical exams and sent the reports off to Bonn on March 31. "As I only had a suitable secretary between March 7 to 14," she wrote to Schmidt, "I was forced to type the "Gutachten" reports myself." She presented her invoice for the additional expenses she incurred. She tallied up her many trips to Bonn to meet with Gerhard Schmidt. She kept a receipt for her over-weight luggage on the round-trip flight to Israel. And added her expenses during an all day meeting and press conference upon her return. She resumed her work at the ministry of health in Kempen on April 1. On May 7, she was reimbursed the sum of DM 1251.28, which was transferred directly into her bank account.

In June Dr. Levinger writes Laura to inquire about the patients' claims. She hopes the claims will soon be processed to completion, Laura responds, "but she has no influence on that." Somewhere within the files and boxes of papers, I see a list of names and the amounts these persons were given: the highest amount is DM 18,000 and the lowest DM 2,000. There is also a list of those whose claims were declined.

Laura had long wanted to write Dr. Levinger, she adds, but her activities such as invitations and lectures, all in connection to her trip, have kept her very busy.

From Laura's notebooks I learn, for example, that on April 30, 1954, she was invited to lecture in Frankfurt, at the "Gesellschaft fuer Christlich-Juedische Zusammenarbeit," the Society for Christian Jewish Cooperation, and in July the Israel Mission issued airline tickets Dusseldorf-Berlin-Dusseldorf as Laura flew there to deliver her lecture on radio "Freies Berlin". (Anne wished to come along and Laura was asked to transfer 144.90 Marks to the Mission for Anne's ticket.) It was a short program of only thirty minutes entitled "German Women in Israel" and Laura shared the time allotted her with Orna Porath, the German-born non-Jewish grande dame of Israel's theater.

She titled her lectures "My Impressions of Israel." Right at the start Laura tells her audience that her mission was to examine the victims of Nazi medical experiments on humans. "This task was an obligation and a sacred duty," she says. "We Germans should keep begging for forgiveness of the Jews with contrition in our hearts. We must strive to make amends to the best of our ability." Only then does she launch into the subjects she had covered before, describing the geography, the culture, religion, the revived Hebrew language, the extraordinary efforts to absorb new immigrants.

I do not know how often Laura and Anne visited us. On May 14 Anne notes this in her agenda: "With Maor to Marx, Grim Street 18, and back to Maor. Home at midnight." And ten days later "Old New Land exhibit in Dusseldorf with Maor. Home at midnight." But when they came, their arrival was exciting. They seemed to make our apartment feel less shabby. My brother remembers her car, a Citroen DS 19, its hydropneumatic suspension and how fast it drove. I remember a silk shirtdress and fantastic mink coat. My father was in splendid spirits. There was loud and lively conversation, heated discussions about politics and Laura in her no-nonsense manner and Rhineland accent holding her own. She was strong and knew her stuff, I thought.

Harry obtained tickets for a remarkable event, he writes, and invited Laura and Anne to attend. On Wednesday, July 7, 1954, the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great medieval philosopher and Torah scholar Maimonides who died in 1204 will take place, he explains. "It promises to be an extraordinary event attended by all your friends from the clergy as well as President Theodor Heuss. The "Other" great rabbi," Harry writes, "Leo Baeck, will arrive from London for the occasion." Would Laura and Anne care to join the festivities, he wonders. "It will be an event as rare as a rare stamp," he assures her.

Not a week later, Karl Marx thanks Laura for attending, for suddenly she has become the celebrated darling of the elite Jewish circuit. Marx explains his plan to publish a pamphlet with the dignitaries' speeches. There will be a section for guests to respond, he writes, would she care to comment? "Rabbi Leo Baeck's speech touched me deeply," Laura writes. "It was as though Maimonides himself emerged out of the inexhaustible depths of Baeck's knowledge."

I have a photo taken in December 1954 in the social hall of the Jewish Community Center on Arnold Street 6. My mother, looking very happy, is standing at the head of the table with a pot of coffee in her hand ready to serve the assembled adult guests. Laura and Anne were there, sitting on either side of the festively decorated table, among my friends' parents. They all had come for my birthday. I turned twelve that day and mine was the first post-war Bat-Mitzvah celebrated in the Jewish Community Center in Dusseldorf.

In the spring of 1955 my brother underwent what should have been a routine tonsillitis surgery at the Red Cross hospital in Cologne. But complications ensued and he developed tachycardia. Maimon remained weak as a result of the frequent and prolonged episodes of rapid heartbeat he experienced. He was often sick and ran high fevers. He missed school and was sent to a sanatorium for recuperation for many weeks. Obviously my parents were terribly worried.

When Laura and Anne visited, my parents sought their medical opinion although Dr. Fritz Spanier was our doctor. Prior to leaving Germany on the St. Louis ship in 1939, Dr. Spanier was a physician at the Jewish Hospital in Berlin. Surely Anne would have heard of him. My father would have said that Dr. Spanier had no clear and convincing course of treatment for Maimon, that there were no medications. What did Laura and Anne think my parents should do? And then my father would have talked to Anne about her husband, Dr. Walter Lustig. What might Dr. Fritz Spanier have told my parents about the controversial reputation and disappearance of Dr. Walter Lustig? "Your father knew something," Laura had said to me when I asked her about Lustig's fate during my visit in Lobberich.

Long after Laura returned from her mission in Israel a few stragglers contacted her. A certain Mr. Max K. read about Laura in the paper, he writes. He requests to be examined by her. He had spent 57 months in various concentration camps and has been experimented on. "I am ashamed to be examined by anyone else," he writes, but he has confidence in her. A copy of her response is attached to Mr. K's letter. No, she writes. She can do nothing for him. He must go to the state office for restitution. "They will refer you to a physician."

Or this letter: Two disabled former prisoners of the forced labor camp Vapniarka came from Israel to Germany to see if they can get restitution as victims of Nazi medical experiments. They were diagnosed with Lathyrism, a paralyzing neurotoxic disease, as a consequence of a diet consisting of grass pea cooked in saltwater.

Laura refers to Dr. Kessler's work. "Dr. Kessler is a highly regarded scientist," she writes and suggests he should be consulted. "The question is whether these poisonings and their consequences fall under this particular law."

And finally, this one. It concerns the claim of a certain Mrs. Hilda S. Several letters are held together with a paperclip. "It is particularly important to establish exactly whether Mrs. Hilda S. did nor did not receive the so-called Professor Clauberg injections," Laura writes the attorney for Mrs. S, "or whether

she merely received injections.” Laura explains the process whereby persons were pre-screened and examined if they qualified.

On the last page of this correspondence, I immediately recognize my father’s typing. He used his index fingers only and hit the keys hard. The letter “a” is a glob of black and almost illegible. Here and there capital letters seem to jump upwards to escape the blow. The letter is not dated. Harry wrote Hebrew words in Latin letters: “You are ordered to appear; you will be ordered to appear; please remove from the list.” But he adds “you probably know all this by now.” Unmistakably his last “Hebrew lesson.”

### *THE WRAP UP*

#### ANNE

Anne kept up her habit of making notes in her little red daily agendas until she died at the age of 61 on Saturday, May 17, 1958. I have these calendars. She uses an ink pen. Her handwriting is neat and legible. She notes appointments with her hairdresser for her perm and the names of the movies she sees once a week. She and Laura’s sister Gerti saw a film with ice skating legend Sonja Henie, and “The Return of Don Camillo” with the French comedian Fernandel. She notes trips to Café Schaab in Dusseldorf and particularly cold rainy or stormy weather. She notes late nights of heavy drinking and next day’s hangover.

On the eve of the Jewish New Year, September 27, 1954, Dr. Walter Falk visits Lobberich, Anne writes. Laura, Anne, and Walter Falk drive some three hours north to visit Sulingen, a lovely town in Lower Saxony, where Walter Falk was born. Presumably this is the first time he is in Germany since he left in 1933. “Laura and Falk slept in,” Anne writes in her agenda.

What we also learn from Anne’s entries is that she was in Berlin from August 5 to 9, 1952 in order to continue to pursue the financial claims she began in 1950 for the losses she and her husband, Dr. Walter Lustig, suffered during the Third Reich. “Spent the night digging through boxes of old papers,” she notes. Would there be compensation for the Lustigs’ lost capital? (She claims 36,500 Reichsmark) and prewar investments in the stocks she and Walter made? (She lists Siemens & Halske and I.G. Farben). And what about Walter Lustig’s valuables confiscated by the Gestapo? (She lists his mink coat, gold watch and gold watch chain, two pairs of gold cufflinks, a pearl tie clip and a Stassfurt Imperial radio) What about payments of Walter’s pension? After all, she was the widow of a high government official. (I found no record of the outcome of Anne’s claims.)

Anne’s cancer had metastasized, and she spent the last year of her life in the “Maria Hilf” clinic in Moenchengladbach, close to Lobberich.

Laura kept a picture postcard of the clinic and drew an “X” on the window on the second floor where Anne’s room was.

Her obituary describes Anne as active in the “SPD,” the Social Democratic Party of Germany. It praises her tireless commitment to health care and social services for youth; she was active in the parliamentary group and district council, it says. It mentions her marriage to the senior government official Oberregierungsrat Dr. Med et Phil Walter Lustig who lost his position in 1933 because he was a Jew.

#### FALK

Luise Lisa Falk died in June 1967 and Walter Falk followed her six years later, on September 12, 1973. They are buried side by side in the Kibbutz Horeshim cemetery (literally Ploughmen) located in the central district of Israel. In 1955 their son Ruwen was one of the founding members of that Kibbutz.

I found no reference to talk of the Third Reich and Nazi Germany in any of Harry’s many letters to Laura. There was no judgement, no talk of guilt or atonement. All this simply had no place in their friendship.

But Laura craved absolution. And she received it from Falk. “You yourself told me ‘Everybody knew what the Nazis did.’” Falk writes one short month prior to her arrival. “I can only forgive a young girl like you have been.”

Walter Falk forced Laura to confront the history of Germany as well as her own rigorously, honestly and without mercy. The encounter with him determined the course her life would take. She may have thought of herself as an innocent bystander as a young student, but at the end of her life she became accountable, responsible and feeling guilty.

Is this why Laura never went back to Israel?

#### HARRY

Harry stayed in touch with Laura. She knew my parents had returned to Israel in 1963 just as they said they would. She also knew they stayed for a few short years and left for Germany yet again. I found a copy of my father’s Ph.D. dissertation on her bookshelf after her death. My father had finally accomplished his lifelong dream and his Ph.D. thesis “On the Rebuilding of the Jewish Communities in Germany after 1945” is still considered a seminal treatise on the subject. My parents returned to Israel for the third and last time in 1979 when Harry retired from his professorship in sociology at the Gesamthochschule in Kassel.

Ever since my father’s first trip back to Germany in 1951, he led the services for the High Holidays, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, for the Jewish community of Wuppertal. He had studied at the Jewish Teachers Seminary in Hoechberg in his youth and the congregation, made up primarily of Holocaust survivors, welcomed him with open arms. He was invited back every year and the last year of his life, 1982, was no exception.

On Rosh Hashana my mother watched as he led the congregation in prayer and song. Ten days later, just as the sun was setting on Yom Kippur, he died. His lung



cancer had recurred. We found the sermon he had prepared for the Day of Atonement in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Laura must have gotten used to letters my father wrote her regularly all these years although none from these years were among the boxes and papers I have. "Your father never forgot my birthday," she told me. But when the September day of her birthday passed and no word from him came she called my parents' apartment in Tel Aviv. "We are just this minute coming home from the funeral," I heard my mother say. "He was a true friend to me," Laura answered.

### *EPILOG*

Laura married Joachim Leopold in 1962. My brother remembers a festive intimate lunch in an elegant hotel dining room along the Rhine River. There were photos dated October 1962 of the couple by a lake, snowcapped mountains in the background, amid the cardboard boxes in my possession. Laura is wearing a blue dress with a corsage pinned to it. She has a white hat on and is holding a floral bouquet. Joachim Leopold, a sound engineer, her senior by 17 years, was someone Laura had known for years. His name shows up on his birthday, December 25, in each of her annual agendas.

In 1964 their baby was born. I vaguely recall overhearing a conversation about the proper way to spell the name Laura wanted to give her daughter. "Raya." My father, excited and talking loudly into the telephone, would have launched into a disquisition about orthography and transliteration between Hebrew and Latin characters. They would have discussed adding an "h" at the end or not. Raya means friend in Hebrew. It was the name I gave my favorite doll, which is why I recall the conversation.

But now, on studying Laura's papers, I see that Raya is named for Raphael and Ruma Falk's daughter, Walter Falk's granddaughter.

There is a box full of photos of Laura with Raya in one of the cardboard boxes. Laura looks happy as she is smiling at the baby swaddled in a blanket in her arms. Raya has Down's Syndrome.

A photo of Laura's mother with Raya shows the child, 7 years old in 1971, standing close to her grandmother. They are outdoors, on a terrace. Perhaps it was a summer afternoon. Some visitors came. They are lounging on chairs nearby. Raya seems curious about the contents of the bag on her grandmother's lap.

I saw Raya, aged 34, at Laura's funeral. She was there, sitting in the pew of the Saint-Sebastian parish church of Lobberich, gesticulating erratically, inviting the other special-need adults to sit next to her.

Laura had gifted a house on Goerres Street and a lot on Eremiten Street to "Lebenshilfe," an organization whose mission is to provide people with mental disabilities a sheltered community environment for safe living, learning trades

and working. Raya was one of the first eight young adults to move in in May 1985.

Perhaps her generous donation for a modern version for the infamous “Heil und Pflegeanstalt” institutions filled Laura with a sense of victory over evil. Perhaps she felt at peace, secure in the knowledge that her daughter would be protected and safe, that none of the inhabitants of the “Lebenshilfe” houses would be victims of Hitler’s “Aktion T4.” Perhaps it freed her from guilt.