

Erna Rosa Freudenthal née Dewitz

Erna Freudenthal was born Erna Rosa Dewitz on 10th September 1881 in Berlin. She was the youngest of three surviving children of Sigismund Dewitz, originally from Frankfurt an der Oder and Marianne née Meyer-Israel from Labes, Pomerania (now Łobez in Poland). Erna, her sister Gertrud (b. 1873) and brother Erich (b. 1879) grew up in Berlin, in the district today named Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg.

Erna's father, Sigismund Dewitz, a banker and Jewish philanthropist, died in 1896 when Erna was 14 years old. Her mother died in 1907. Both parents are buried in the Jüdischer Friedhof at Weissensee.

On 8th January 1908 Erna married Josef Freudenthal in Berlin. They made their home in Köln-Bayenthal (Cologne) where Josef had business connections. He was born in Memel, East Prussia (now Klaipeda, Lithuania) on 5th October 1866. His mother, Charlotte, née Cohn, died when he was 12 years old. His father, Markus Meyer Freudenthal was born in 1829 in Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland). He died on 5th April 1885 when Josef was 18. Josef passed away on 8th June 1922, and is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Köln-Bocklemünd.

Erna and Josef had three children: Fritz (b. 1908), Heinz (b. 1916), and Marianne Charlotte (b. 1919). In 1926, the family moved from Cologne to Katharinenstrasse in Berlin-Halensee so as to be closer to Erna's elder sister, Gertrud Dewitz Grossmann, who also had three children.

As the Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany intensified in 1938, particularly after the November Pogrom, also known as "Kristallnacht", the need to escape from Germany became more and more urgent. That year, the Nazi authorities evicted Gertrud from her home on Fasanenstrasse (in a process known as "Aryanization"). She then moved into the apartment in Halensee to live with Erna, her son Fritz and his wife Friedel. When deportations began in Autumn 1941, Erna and Gertrud made the decision that they would go into hiding rather than turn themselves over to the Gestapo for deportation and an unknown fate.

The sisters carefully prepared by selling and giving away almost all of their remaining possessions. They obtained forged documents and identification cards from Fritz Mynarek and his wife Charlotte, who were helping Jews avoid detection and arrest. The false documents identified them as Aryan spinsters with the surname Grothe. In May 1942, having failed to get visas for Cuba (their final option), they left the apartment on Katharinenstrasse. To show that they had left, they locked their apartment and asked Valeria Wirth (the Grossmann's housekeeper) to leave the keys for the building caretaker in an envelope labelled "*die putzfrau*" (cleaning lady), which avoided identifying her. They then stayed with the Mynareks in Winterfeldtstrasse in Schöneberg for a few months until they were able to move to the town of Lychen 100 km north of Berlin and

begin their underground lives posing as non-Jews, whose house had been bombed out in the war.

On 24th June 1942, the inevitable Gestapo deportation order to report for "*Abwanderung*" (emigration) arrived. With remarkable courage Erna and Gertrud defied the antisemitic Nazi authorities and refused to surrender as ordered. Instead, they fled to the house in Lychen, Mecklenberg.

They maintained contact with Gertrud's non-Jewish daughter-in-law, Maria (Maya) Grossmann, who visited them at the Mynarek's apartment in Berlin in March 1943. Maya was the last family member to see the sisters while they were still in hiding.

The two elderly women avoided detection for almost a year until the Mynareks were denounced, possibly by a neighbour. The Gestapo arrested the Mynareks, as well as Valeria on 22nd April 1943. Tragically, when the apartment in the Winterfeldtstrasse in Schöneberg was searched by the Gestapo they discovered thank you notes and ration cards, which revealed the whereabouts of the sisters and their false identities. Consequently, they too were arrested in Lychen by the Gestapo and taken directly to Grosse Hamburger Strasse 26 in Berlin the "collection point" for deportation.

Fritz Mynarek, the rescuer, was sent to Buchenwald, where he was killed. His wife Charlotte and Valeria were both arrested and charged with knowingly aiding Jews and other economic crimes. Both women were forced to confess and were sent to Ravensbrück. Both survived into the post-war period.

Erna Freudenthal was taken to Auschwitz on 17th May 1943 on a train designated "Osttransport 38" with 406 other Jewish Berliners most of whom were murdered upon arrival on 19 May. She was 61 years of age.

On 28th June 1943 Gertrud Grossmann was deported on Osttransport 39 with 346 Jewish Berliners to Auschwitz, where she too was murdered upon arrival. She was 70 years old.

Fritz Freudenthal and his wife, Friedel (née Finkelstein) obtained visas for Northern Rhodesia and left Germany in 1939. They had two children.

Heinz left Germany for the Netherlands in 1935. He married Karola Elly (née Spinner) in 1939. On 9th October 1942 Heinz, Karola and their daughter Miriam Alice were deported from the Westerbork transit camp to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Karola and Miriam were murdered upon arrival on 12th October 1942. Heinz died on 31st January 1943, the day after his 27th birthday. The fate of their second daughter is unknown.

Erna's daughter, Marianne, left Berlin for England in 1937. During the War she lived in London where qualified as a midwife and worked at various hospitals. She married Edmund Davidson on 24th April 1943. Marianne and Edmund had six children.

From Frau Freudenthal's letter dated 14th November 1941 to her daughter in England.

*Tag und Nacht denke ich an Euch ...
Gebe Gott daß bald bessere Zeiten kommen ...
Trotz Allem lassen wir den Mut nicht sinken ...*

Erna Freudenthal lived at Katharinenstrasse 2 from 1926 until she was forced to flee for her life in June 1942. As of the laying of the Stolperstein in April 2024, she has more than 50 living direct descendants on four continents.

זכרונה לברכה

May her memory be an enduring blessing.

Biographical Compilation:

W.J. Davidson (wjd@mindspring.com) with research assistance from Dr. Atina Grossmann.

Sources:

W.J. Davidson Archive
Atina Grossmann Archive

References:

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Fritz Mynarek Stolperstein

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Paul and Sophie Berliner (*The Cost Of Courage* by Uri Berliner)

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