

Among friends

Ruth Stern Gasten and Sam Stone in Germany

“Welcome to Nieder-Ohmen!” In front of the parish hall, Pfarrer Nils Schellhaas has set up a little US-Flag. Everything is set for the visit of Ruth Stern Gasten, the stars and the stripes, the flowers, the video projector, the coffee and the Bruuddägsmaddekuche as the traditional salty cake is called in Mücke. „Hessian pizza!“, exclaims Ruth when she tastes it. That’s what others call this hearty meal, too.

Ruth Stern Gasten is home again, far away from home. The woman from California has spent the first five years of her life in the Vogelsberg region (Bird’s mountain). Her parents have been orthodox Jews. And while her mother followed the religious rules quite strictly, her father allowed his daughter in Chicago to go to museums on Sabbath and liked to sing „Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht“, a German Christmas carol. Ruth Stern Gasten doesn’t have a kosher kitchen. „We eat anything“, she had let her hosts know. Anything, even the smoked bacon that belongs on the „Hessian pizza“ and that very unorthodox people even put into the Jewish potatoe dish called Schalet that has been well known in Hesse (see recipe in volume I of the Ober-Gleen books).

The daughter of cattle dealer Joseph Stern und his wife Hannah, nee Nussbaum, has entered the world on the 28th of August in 1933, in a catholic hospital in Fulda. „My mother has told me that the nuns had been very kind to her“, mentions Ruth Stern Gasten on our trip through the Vogelsberg. On the meadows cows, horses, deers and one of the rare black storks. In the gardens dahlia. Half-timbered villages and woods with different kinds of trees take their turns, and Ruth realises that she lacks the words for the trees and the old houses. For decades she is speaking English now, but when she switches into her mother tongue, she also uses, without realising, Hessian dialect expressions, „mir hawwe“ (we have) instead of „wir haben“ and „Kwedschekùche“ (plum cake) instead of Pflaumenkuchen. Like at home then.

As the first of her family, the granddaughter of Fannie Nussbaum sets her foot on the soil of Ulmbach that is a part of Steinau an der Straße today. Her partner Sam Stone, Justus Randt und me who has translated Ruth Stern Gasten’s childhood memoir „An Accidental American“ into German, accompany her on that trip. Horst Kunz of the Heimat- und Geschichtsverein Ulmbach is awaiting us. A journalist of the Kinzigtal-Nachrichten is writing about the visit. Other regional papers as the Alsfelder Allgemeine, the Gießener Anzeiger, the Oberhessische Zeitung and the bigger Weser-Kurier (Bremen) will report encounters with the timewitness. Ruth Stern Gasten has already snatched her own note pad and holds on to it. Her searching look meets modern, several times remodelled and old houses, the Backhaus in which the housewives used to bake their bread and Salzekuchen, the farmgardens and the highly frequented mainstreet. What is left? Where might be traces to be found? Her daughter and her grandchildren, the relatives in South Africa and Israel, they all are expecting an elaborated report.

Horst Kunz has no first hand informations to offer. When he was a child, his family had been thrown out of Sudetenland in 1945 and made Ulmbach its new home. He is a refugee child like Ruth Stern Gasten. All that he knows about the history of Ulmbach, and he knows a lot, is from timewitnesses or old documents.

A family has six sons, and each of the six brothers had a sister. How many children all in all? Mariechen Engel, the former postholder of Ober-Gleen, liked to challenge those who asked about her own ancestors. „That is like in the family of your mother“, Sam Stone says to his partner. Maier und Fannie Nussbaum, nee Adler, from Ulmbach also had six sons: Jacob, born in 1896, Salli, born in 1900, Siegfried, born in 1903, Benno, born in 1906, Hermann, born in 1910, and Leo, born in 1912. All of them had one and only one sister: Johanna, called Hannah, who had been born in 1898. When the 56 year old father of seven children died of Spanish influenza in 1918, only Jacob was adult. Fannie Nussbaum, eight years younger than her husband, took over the cattle and fur business and together with her daughter, she cared for the big household and the garden. Her

sons Jacob and Siegfried were cattle dealers. That was one of the few professions that the catholic and protestant farmers left almost exclusively to Jews. Fannie's second son had his shop in the left part of the long stretched studwork house. Salli sold fabrics. Like many others he went to the villages, too, and sold his goods from door to door.

To be alone on the road was not always safe for merchants. A Jacob Nussbaum from Ulmbach, possibly Ruth's uncle Jacob, had been attacked by robbers in spring 1931. There is a note in the „Jüdischen Wochenzeitung für Kassel, Hessen und Waldeck“ (24th of April 1931) to be found online on Alemannia Judaica, telling the readers that on the street from Steinau to Ulmbach where the postcar had been robbed recently, three young masked men had stopped the cattle dealer Jakob Nußbaum and demanded his money. As a motorbike was approaching, the robbers ran away, but shot several times at the cattle dealer. The bullets missed him. The police in Frankfurt tried to find the criminals. A few years later, German officials helped to plunder Jewish Germans.

During the „Aryanisation“ a lot of houses got new owners, also in Nieder-Ohmen and Ulmbach. The east Hessian village was strictly catholic and that showed also at the elections in 1933: About two third of the voters opted for the catholic Zentrum party, a quarter of the voters, much less than in many other villages of the region, for the NSDAP. Social Democrats and Communists were small minorities. When Jewish families from Ulmbach had to sell their homes to be able to leave the country, catholic neighbors are said to have had collected money to get the sum together. This is what Horst Kunz was told. Parents had made sure that their sons would not terrorise Jewish neighbors, but the Hitlerjugend from other villages came to Ulmbach to throw stones at Jewish houses. When an older Jew boarded his windows with wooden planks, the father of his wife did something about it. He visited the man one evening to chat with him and brought his shepherd dogs along. „When they came, he whistled, and the dogs were lose.“ He had to face the consequences: He was sent to the front, though he originally had not been obliged to go. He survived the war and came back.

Our little delegation stops at every former Jewish home or business or ground, also in front of the former house of the other family Maier Nussbaum und in front of the old Synagogue, a timbered, shingled house that will soon be torn down. Some other houses aren't there any more, like the Jewish warehouse. The Catholic church had bought the building in the Thirties. Nuns of one of the cloisters had lived and worked there for a while. Nowadays, children from the nearby refugee home play behind this garden fence, in the high gras, under gigantic sunflowers. Ruth Stern Gasten takes notes. She can't wait to see the home of her grandparents or what is left of it after the last tenants had destroyed a lot of the interiors and vanished.

„The owner has allowed us to walk on his ground“, Horst Kunz says. To enter the house would be to dangerous, so Fannie's granddaughter only looks through the half blind windows and poses in front of the entrance. The right part of the house had been owned by the village's midwife. She had helped the wife of Horst Kunz into this world and decades later assisted at the birth of the first two children of the couple. After that she retired, Ms. Kunz remembers.

Out of the blue, a man comes closer who seems to have watched the scene for a short while. His age is hard to guess, his face weather-beaten. His family lives in Salli's former little house, his eleven year old son has been born in Ulmbach. As the man realises whom he is talking to, he is smiling broadly. „So we have changed houses“, he says and reaches us his hand. There he is, a Palestinian, living in Ulmbach, with a son called Yussuf. „The midwife has asked me if we were Jews as this is a Jewish name. So what, I have answered. I don't have anything against Jews.“

In rural Hessen, Antisemitism was common in the Kaiserreich and in the Weimar Republic already. Leo Nussbaum left Germany almost right after Hitler had come to power, in the year when his niece was born in Nieder-Ohmen. He emigrated to South Africa in 1933 and founded a hardware company. Soon after, his mother Fannie Nußbaum, his brother Jakob and his sister-in-law followed, and then his brothers Benno und Salli. „In Johannesburg, South Africa, Uncle Saly continued to be a wandering sales person taking his goods to people's homes and to outlying villages“, Ruth Stern Gasten wrote to me in an email. „My Uncle Hermann had one arm that didn't work properly. It

was an injury that occurred at birth. Because of it, he was not allowed to immigrate to South Africa. He went to Rhodesia instead and had a branch office for my Uncle Leo's hardware company. He was never a cattle dealer after he left Germany. My Uncle Siegfried immigrated to Palestine and became a dairy farmer, selling milk to city dwellers in Tel Aviv."

Ruth's cousin Edith Karon, Benno's daughter, honors the memory of her grandmother. „Naturally I knew Oma Fanny well & I saw her nearly every day when I was growing up. She lived with Uncle Saly, Uncle Jakob & his family & used to go to her after school every day with Carol“, she wrote soon after the translation of Ruth's book had started. „My mother fetched me when she & Aunt Friedel came back from working in the butchery. Oma Fanny died when I was 16. She only spoke German & as a result my speech was good. Unfortunately I still understand, but my speech has really deteriorated.“ She admired her Oma Fannie. „She was a highly intelligent, hard working woman with lots of determination & energy. I remember her getting up at 5 a.m. She loved reading. Her sons were very devoted to her. My father used to go & visit her every day after work on his way home. On Shabbos mornings I remember visiting her with my father on the way to shul.“ On her 80th birthday, a photo was taken of Fannie and her six sons. The only one who was lacking was her daughter, Hannah. The family photo is in the book. Stan and Sonia, Edith's children, have many happy memories of their uncles. „Stan regrets my parents not speaking German & teaching him the language“, Edith Karon wrote.

In English and a little German, with gestures and thoughtful articulation, Ruth Stern Gasten tells her story in Nieder-Ohmen to a quite big audience. Sara Mills, a long time friend of her, and me translate from English into German and viceversa (the audio file of the 2d of September 2017 will be in the media library of this website in October). From Dortmund and Bremen they have come, from Frankfurt, Lauterbach, Alsfeld, Sellnrod, Butzbach, Ehringshausen, Ober-Gleen and other places, to hear the author speak. For some, as the former social worker Uwe Langohr or the president of the Protestant congregation, Regina Pfeiff, and Irmgard Gückel of the Catholic church, it is a reunion. The head of the primary school, Monika Baranowski-Garden, had met the two Californians the day before already at the station, with a present, and brought them to Ober-Gleen. „The children have made a book for me“, Ruth has said with a beaming smile and took care of this treasure. Gustl Theiss, the head of the highschool in Mücke, is in the hall, the Freundeskreis der Lagergemeinschaft Auschwitz is there, the Förderverein der Geschichte des Judentums im Vogelsbergkreis, the Alsfelder Geschichts- und Museumsverein und others. The youngest in the room is maybe ten, the oldest, Elfriede Roth from Lauterbach, over 90 (a portrait of the former Shabbesgirl is on my website).

Hannah had been the last of her immediate family who was able to rescue herself. Together with her husband Joseph and her five year old daughter Ruth, in January 1939, she went in Hamburg on board the „Deutschland“, with not much more than her luggage, clothes, 75 Marks and the life saving visas. Her widowed aunt Dinah, the sister of her father who lived in Chicago, had guaranteed for all three of them. When the postman had brought the papers, Joseph Stern was still in the concentration camp Buchenwald close to Weimar. After the „Kristallnacht“ thousands of Jewish men had been arrested. In Nieder-Ohmen, Ruth Stern Gasten talks about it. Pale and silent, her father had returned, after his wife had intervened in Stuttgart. He had never talked about what he had seen and suffered in the concentration camp. His brother Meier and his sister-in-law Hedwig had been murdered, also the handicaped sister Toni. Ruth's cousins Hilda and Karola survived the camps. A young woman in the audience would like to know if Ruth Stern Gasten is afraid of the white front in the U.S. and what she thinks about the new President. Ruth Stern Gasten pretends to be surprised: „We have a new President?“ Laughter fills the room. Wouldn't it be nice?

Since Donald Trump has been elected, Ruth Stern Gasten has done even more than before for human rights. In Livermore, she has helped to organise a rally for love in February 2017, for a peaceful live and tolerance. And since she, in reaction of the atmosphere in the U.S. after 9/11, had founded an interfaith group together with a young moslem, she is at least as often in Mosques

and Churches as in Synagogues. In the Protestant church of Ober-Gleen, Veronika Bloemers has played organ for Ruth Stern Gasten and Sam Stone, one day after the bookshow. For two decades, she has lived in Israel, has studied music, has played organ in Tel Aviv und Haifa, conducted choirs. Her father Ernst A. Bloemers who had managed big hotels in Germany, the U.S., France and other countries, had lived in the Vogelsberg region after he had retired. He had seen to it that the memory of the Jewish families of Ober-Gleen doesn't fade out. In the fieldstone wall of the cemetery, there are plates since 2010 with names on it. The Synagoge has been restored now. „Eli Eli“ was heard at the Heritage day. For Ruth and Sam, Veronika Bloemers played „Hevenu Shalom Alechem“ on the barock organ, the famous Hebrew song, the longing for freedom. In Nieder-Ohmen, they sang „Happy birthday“ together as Ruth Stern Gasten just had had her birthday, „Hopp, hopp, hopp, Pferdchen lauf Galopp“, the song that her mother had sung to her sometimes, and the favoured song of her father Joseph Stern and of her uncle Meier Stern who had been perished in the Holocaust: „Die Gedanken sind frei.“

Everywhere and at all times, there are good people. Ruth Stern Gasten doesn't get tired to repeat. Every single one makes a difference, especially in terrible times. People like Anna Reichel who went sliding with her in the moonlight, like Emil Ohnacker who had milked the cow of family stern, while Joseph was in the concentration camp. And people like the neighbors who secretly had left cake and cookies on their doorstep, to show them: You are not alone.

„I have known Emil Ohnacker very well“, a man from the audience says, the son of a former reverend. He had been straight, this first mayor of Nieder-Ohmen after the war, did not get along well with a lot of people, but was a good, reliable friend. When he had met Meier Stern in the NS-time in Frankfurt and walked towards him, Ruth's uncle had tried to avoid him: He would not have it that his friend took a risk because of him. Some of Emil Ohnacker's memories are documented in one of the books of Heinrich Reichel, Anna's nephew: „Ich habe viele von ihnen gekannt! Das Schicksal der Jüdischen Einwohner von Nieder-Ohmen. Bemerkenswerte Ereignisse in Nieder-Ohmen während der Kriegsjahre 1939-1945“. For ten euros, it is available at the Evangelischen Kirchengemeinde Nieder-Ohmen.

„Zufällig Amerikanerin“, the German edition of „An Accidental American“ with 60 photos of the family and friends, costs twelve euros and is available in bookshops in Germany, the U.S., Canada, Great Britain and Australia. Volunteers from our historical society Lastoria, Bremen, have helped with the publication. The historian Christine Kausch who is in contact with us because of the Amsterdam project „Deutschland auf der Flucht“ (Germany on the run) has accompanied Ruth and Sam in Berlin. And by chance, the first readers in Germany have been the two granddaughters of the Nazi-mayor of Ober-Gleen, the daughter of a Gestapo-man, and also a woman from Peru and a woman from Nepal who are living in Bremen. In Nieder-Ohmen, Ober-Gleen und Bremen, Ruth has won more readers. And some intend to read the English original after they have met her. Egon Brückner from the Egerland (now Tchech Republic) who lives in Ober-Gleen since the end of the war and has published his memories with the help of our historical society, has talked with Ruth about his experiences, about hard times and new beginnings. He made her cry and got her smiling again. „My friend Ruth“ he calls her and laughs heartily. „Take good care and stay healthy! Always lace up the backpack that contains your health, as we used to say! Don't let the health get out!“

On the farm of our old neighbor Karl Gemmer (Koads Kall), Ruth und Sam visit the former cow stable. The way Karl talks dialect and acts reminds Ruth a bit of her father. Both, Karl and Egon, are on cds of our series „So klingt Owenglie“.

Elayne und Isidor Dracocardos have taken care that it was cosy in the beautiful old house that is still called Braurods in the village. The Sunday after the bookshow was full of events: Ruth und Sam had been on the Ransberg, in the apple orchard, in the woods, at the 500 year old oak of the heaven's fountain (Himmelbornseiche), in the museum in Kirtorf and at the presentation of the five new cds of Lastoria. Most of all, Veronika's organ concert has made an impression and the visit to the cellar of Volker und Heidrun Schneider (Wähnesch), dating back as the church to the 18th

century. At this place, the former reverend of Ober-Gleen, social revolutioneer Friedrich Ludwig Weidig, the editor of the illegal protest flyer „Der Hessische Landbote“, might have sat with other dissidents from Germany, Poland and France and secretly wrote a chapter of the history of democracy. The people of Ober-Gleen have tried to help him when he was arrested. The petition of 1835 for his release from jail has been sign by the overwhelming majority of the heads of the families of Ober-Gleen.

In Northern Germany, the two travelers also did not only what tourists do, but also made new contacts and friendships. Erika Thies, one of the correctors of the German version, was her host. Ruth and Sam met my mother again, saw Wolfgang Rulfs, Harry Barth, Annelie Stöppler and Willfried Meier. Christoph Bongert from the Deutsche Auswandererhaus has given the two of them a guided tour in English, went together with them on board and to America. 20 pupils and her teacher from the Edith-Stein-Schule have been waiting for the author in Bremerhaven. Rolf Stindl from the Friedrich-Bödecker-Kreis had made it possible. The very next day it have been 120 pupils of the Wilhelm-Kaisen-Oberschule, a highschool in Bremen-Huckelriede, und the day after as many 16 up to 18 year old in the highschool in Rockwinkel in Bremen-Oberneuland. The teacher Petra Niehardt (Wilhelm Kaisen) and the teacher Joachim Becker-Bertau (Rockwinkel) had reacted spontaneously to a mail of Amnesty International Bremen. To Ruth Stern Gasten, discussions with young people are most important. „Democracy is no spectator sport“, she tells them, and this is what she also said in Nieder-Ohmen. Another US-citizen has heard something similar in her childhood: „Democracy is like brushing your teeth“, Gloria Steinem’s mother used to say. „You have to do it daily.“

In 2015, Ruth Stern Gasten has listened to a speech of the author, feminist and democrat who is her age. She has checked her notes right before her trip to Germany: „Benjamin Franklin invited three Iroquois elders to attend the conference for writing the constitution. They asked: ‚Where are the women?‘” And: „If you’re ever in a place where you’re forbidden to laugh, you’re in the wrong place.” And: „People ask me when I am passing my torch on to the next generation of women leaders. I’m keeping my torch and using it to light other torches.“

Though she has become an American by accident, Ruth Stern Gasten holds up the torch. Maybe also because of the very first impression that the then five year old had of the United States of America. It is one of her most precious memories: On board of the „Deutschland“, after the stormy passage, the passengers were lying in each others arms and were laughing, crying or just happy and touched. The statue of liberty welcomed them. But the feeling to be among friends did not last long. In the daycare, other kids called Ruthie „Nazi“ because she came from Germany. It’s a deja vu for her when young people from Syria or Afghanistan are called „terrorists“ though they had fled because of the terror. The story of the boy who had helped her, then, is told in schools in the U.S. today. Not as a modern fairy tale, but as a life experience: Something better than maliciousness you’ll find anywhere.