

Last address: Biesboschstraat

Betty, Karl Hermann and Alfred Josef Baer

(Based on a chapter of „*Schbille gieh un feiern*“ by Monika Felsing, BOD, Norderstedt 2016, volume 4 of the book series about Ober-Gleen)

Betty Baer (1892-1943), nee Sondheim from Ober-Gleen (Upper Hesse), has no grave of her own. No spot to lay down a pebble stone as visitors use to do on Jewish cemeteries. But there is a potential place to remember her, her husband and her eldest son by Stolpersteine: Their last refuge has been an address in Rivierbuurt in Amsterdam Zuid, a then newly built quarter in the South of Amsterdam. The next stop should have been New York, Washington Heights maybe, where close relatives already were in safety. But for Betty Baer and her son Alfred it becomes Westerbork, then Sobibór respectively Auschwitz, and for her husband Karl Hermann Baer, in December 1940, Zeeburg, the largest Jewish cemetery of the Netherlands.

Many neighbours of the Baers in Biesboschstraat are Jews who went into exile just like them, coming from Hesse, Lower Saxony, Hamburg, Cologne, Magdeburg, Vienna, Breslau or Berlin. The architecture of the Rivierenbuurt, a quarter constructed in the late twenties, according to the Amsterdam School, has such a modern appearance that it doesn't seem to be a possible scenery of the film that starts in one's mind at the thought of the German occupation of the Netherlands.

Since 2005, a sculpture of a refugee child from Frankfurt in Hesse who has died in Bergen Belsen in 1945 stands on the lawn, turning its back to Amsterdam's very first Skyscraper. Anne Frank has lived at Merwedeplein 37 till her family went into hiding in the rear house at Prinsengracht, now Anne Frank House, a museum with projects all over the world. Her statue reminds us to the more than 13 000 (of about 17 000) Jews who had been registered in the Rivierenbuurt in the thirties and perished in the Holocaust. Some thousand refugees from German speaking countries have been among them. Since 2005, the former flat of the Franks is reserved for writers who were forced to flee from their home countries. Gunter Demnig has laid four Stolpersteine in front of Merwedeplein 37 in remembrance of family Frank, one for Edith, one for Margot and one for Anne who had perished in the Shoah. And also one for Otto who had survived the camps and published his younger daughter's diary. With the help of Mirjam Pressler, Gerti Elias, the wife of Anne's and Margot's cousin Buddy Elias (1925-2015), has turned the family's correspondence into a wonderful book: „Grüße und Küsse an alle. Die Geschichte der Familie von Anne Frank.“ Some of the letters and cards went from the Herbstgasse in Basel to Merwedeplein in Amsterdam.

In an amateur movie of 1941, Anne is looking out of one of the windows on second floor. Down there, wedding guests are about to climb into their cars. The square, the neighbouring streets and shops are in sight. In the grocery shop of Salomon Cardozo the Baers might have been customers, as in the late thirties Betty and Alfred live just round the corner. Betty's 15 year old son Herbert has escaped with a children's transport to England in 1939 and hopes for US-visa as they do. Her husband, the bank clerk Karl Hermann Baer, born in 1890 in Frankfurt/Main, has died in Amsterdam in December 1940 of a heart attack. In January 2017, his Australian grandson has searched his grave on the 300 year old cemetery Zeeburg.

After Karl's death, Betty and Alfred try to escape to the U.S. on their own. It has not been easy to come to the Netherlands in the first place, as the immigration of Jews from "The German Reich" has been restricted in 1934. In Westerbork, close to the German border, the Jewish com-

munity runs a camp for Jewish refugees from Germany that will become a starting point for deportations. Who is paying for you, what can we get out of you and how do we get rid of you as soon as possible? This is how Jan Stoutenbeek und Paul Vigeveno sum up the Dutch policy of this time in their cityguide "Jüdisches Amsterdam" (S. 33). The refugees are in danger since the German Wehrmacht has occupied the Netherlands in May 1940. The first raids take place in February, June and September 1941. On the 5th of December 1941, Jews who have no valid Dutch papers, are told to register and to leave the country voluntarily. The „Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung“, at this time also the headquarter of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) and a collecting point for the unfortunate who have been arrested during one of the raids, organises the deportation of Jews from the Netherlands to the ghettos and concentration camps in Eastern Europe, all in all about 110 000 people.

Policemen from Bremen have accompanied many of these transports. Their part has been thoroughly documented in an exhibition in Bremen and in the book "Auswärts eingesetzt. Bremer Polizeibataillone und der Holocaust", published by Karl Schneider in 2011. The historian Frank van Riet has written the book „De bewakers van Westerbork“. An exhibition based on it has been shown in the Memorial Center and Museum Camp Westerbork in 2016/17. Half a century ago, the historian Jacob Presser (1899-1970) has described the preparations for the murder of the Jews who lived in the Netherlands in his book „Ashes in the Wind. The Destruction of Dutch Jewry“ (original title: "Ondergang") in many details. The professor from Amsterdam, author of the KZ novel "Breaking point" (original title: „De Nacht der Girondijnen“), has published "Ashes in the Wind" after 15 years of research.

Betty Baer leaves it to her son to send airmail letters to the relatives in order to organise the affidavits of their warrantors. Alfred writes from Biesboschstraat 31, Amsterdam-Zuid. In February and March 1941, he sends once so often letters to the Sondheims in New York who have got affidavits for them from a certain Mr. Kane and who are in contact with the younger son, Herbert. Betty's brother Siegmund Sondheim, his wife Jettchen and the children Addi, Herbert and Rita have left Ober-Gleen and emigrated in 1939, together with the unmarried sister Bertha. Brother Hermann and his wife Fanny Grete still live in Melemstraße 6 in the Western part of Frankfurt/Main. They are in touch with Alfred und Betty as well.

In March 1941, there is a letter from the US Consulate in Rotterdam. Obviously, the US bureaucrats demand more "proofs" and securities, among them form 575 and a photocopy of the income papers of Mr. Kane that is notarized by the Treasury Department. Alfred pleads his uncle and aunt to send the papers not to the Consulate, but „quickest possible“ to him and his mother. As everyone else who wishes to get out of the danger zone, they hope that the US Consulate in Rotterdam will give them the permits and the visa. And that there will be trains from Amsterdam to Lissabon. For his brother Herbert, Alfred has already ordered a copy of the birth certificate in Cologne that he sends to the relatives in America. On the 30th of March 1941, the papers Alfred and Betty wait for still haven't arrived.

Herbert Baer doesn't get his visa for the U.S. Together with other "Enemy Aliens", he is shipped in July 1940 aboard the „Dunera“ from England to the other end of the world and is imprisoned there in a camp. Erica Fischer has written about it in her biographical novel „Over the Ocean“. On the long list of internees stands the name of her deported father Erich Fischer and the name of Herbert Baer (pages 124-147). After WWII, Herbert Baer who had lost his parents and brother, his uncle and aunt and other relatives did not return to Europe. In Australia, he founded a family and started a career. "Mr. Herbert Baer, who arrived in Australia as a refugee during the war, has been elected a member of the Melbourne Stock Exchange. This is the first time for many

years that a Jew has held this position and it is seen as a victory for the Jewish community, which has campaigned against the Stock Exchange's alleged discriminatory practices”, reported the Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) in Great Britain in January 1961. Herbert Baer who attended meetings of the „Dunera boys“ all his life has died in 2015.

„Die Mauer aus Papier“ (The wall made of paper) Eva Schweitzer has called the chapter about unwanted refugees from Europe in her book „Amerika und der Holocaust“ (America and the Holocaust). The German journalist refers to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 that set quota for certain countries. Noone was accepted only because he or she was persecuted. It was all about the classical principles of job market, she points out: Who wanted to come into the country had to proof that he or she was healthy and able to take a job, and had relatives or friends who guaranteed for him or her (page 49 f.). There had been anti-Semitism in the Ministry of Exterior and among the conservativ-protestant voters, not to forget Henry Ford who was admired by Adolf Hitler. After the start of WWII in September 1939, German and Austrian Jews who also had to pay „Fluchtsteuer“ (refuge tax) and needed a permission to leave the country, signed by NS-authorities, to get visa for the U.S. It had been “ein Stück Bürokratie aus dem Tollhaus“ (a piece of bureaucracy out of the madhouse), Eva Schweitzer states (page 63). Frances Hull, the Minister of Exterior, objected to take Jewish refugees. His vice Breckinridge Long is said to have send order to all embassies to ask for more and more proofs and to slow down the process of immigration (page 62). US-President Theodor Roosevelt was hesitating. With his permission, special visa were given to nuclear scientists and writers in 1940, but he did not intend to let masses in need into the country, no matter what was written on the Statue of Liberty. It has been Eleanor Roosevelt who supported an Emergency Rescue Committee. The American journalist Varian Fry (“Surrender on Demand”) helped refugees in Marseille, like Ruth Gruber of the War Refugee Board, like the Swede Raoul Wallenberg in Hungary, like Geertruida Wijsmuller-Meijer better known as Tante Truus who has rescued many Jewish children. Not to forget the Viennese Miep (Hermine) Gies and the other helpers of the families Frank and van Pels: Johannes Kleiman, Victor Kugler, Jan Gies and Bep Voskuilj.

Back to the Rivierenbuurt. A five minutes slide show on Youtube shows the quarter in its early years. “The apartment buildings were built by social housing corporations and the municipality”, Tamara Becker and her mother An Huitzing (Wolff Stichting) write in their booklet “War Children of the Rivierenbuurt” (pages 6 f.). “The members of the Social Democrat, general, Catholic, and Protestant social housing corporations were very pleased to live in what were at that time considered to be spacious, modern and affordable houses; each had private bathrooms and showers and central heating.” In the early thirties Otto Frank and other business men from Germany settled in the Rivierenbuurt, and their families followed. Some of the next were communists and socialdemocrats who were in danger to be imprisoned in one of the first concentration camps and Jewish artists who weren't allowed any more to go on stage in Germany. Katja Zaich, now living in Amsterdam, teaching Dutch, has written a book about the fate of German-Jewish artists (“Ich bitte dringend um ein Happy-End.’ Deutsche Bühnenkünstler im niederländischen Exil 1933-1945, Frankfurt am Main 2001). One of them was the singer, actor and composer Günter Witewski from Kassel who lived in Biesboschstraat 19 III.

Life became harder. “Although the arrival of the refugees led to much solidarity and help, it also caused friction among the Jewish residents. In general, German Jews were better off, better educated and more modern than their Dutch counterparts”, Becker and Huitzing write (page 6). The later the refugees came, the less they could take with them. It became crowded in the wartime in the Rivierenbuurt. Refugees had to share flats and even rented rooms. Doctoral student Christine Kausch from the University of Münster (“Zuflucht auf Zeit – Jüdische Flüchtlinge aus Deutschland in den Niederlanden 1933-1945”) works on her PhD project (learn more about it on

the website of European Holocaust Research Infrastructure, ehri) while the Dutch pianist Miriam Mijatovich-Keesing, granddaughter of Isaak Keesing, has made it her heartfelt mission to tell the story of young refugees of that time. She has started her research (see www.dokin.nl) in 2008 and writes a book about young Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria who have been all alone in the Netherlands. They were waiting for their parents or hoped to get to the U.S., England or to Palestine, like the 14 year old Martin Bialystock from Bremen who had crossed the green boarder together with his eight year old sister Miriam. Many young refugees lived in foster families, some in hiding (see archive of www.monikafelsing.de, Bremer Kinder fliehen über die grüne Grenze). While Greatbritain had taken about ten thousand Jewish children, the Netherlands also had accepted two thousand – a fact that is widely unknown as Miriam Keesing points out. Unattended juvenile refugees they would be called today.

In 2016, our historical society Lastoria, Bremen, has initiated an international project concerning German speaking Jews in WWII in the Rivierenbuurt and about, trying to bring professional and amateur researchers in different countries, ancestors of Holocaust survivors and relatives of Shoah victims, students and others in contact, in order to exchange informations and to encourage discussions: “Deutschland auf der Flucht” (Germany on the run). Stolperstein groups and other researchers have joint in, providing informations about refugees. First contacts are made in Amsterdam, in the U.S., England and Germany.

The twin houses along the Biesboschstraat share a staircase that is open to the street. To the right and to the left, there are corridors. The addresses end with Latin figures that indicate the floor. The flat of the Baers is in number 3I, from the staircase to the right, on the second floor. From March/April 1942 on, Jews who rented one of the flats had to adjust a piece of paper on which a Star of David had been printed. And they had to sew a yellow star with the inscripion “Jood” on their clothes. It was sold for four cents. The Germans who occupied the country kept on making new antisemitic orders. 1941 for example, Jews have to quit their jobs, aren't allowed to leave their homes between eight in the evening and six in the morning. They are neither permitted any more to have a car or bike nor to use public transport, with rare exceptions. And they aren't even allowed to use a telephone. To organise their emigration, all they can do is write letters and send telegrams.

To learn more about the situation of the Jews in Amsterdam after the German invasion, there are three quite newly released books that are available in Gert-Jan Jimmink's bookshop – the best place to start historical research in the Rivierenbuurt – in Rooseveltlaan 62, but also in the museum's shops of the Jewish and the Holocaust Museum and the Hollandse Schouwburg. “Op de foto in oorlogstijd. Studio Wolff, 1943” of Tamara Becker and An Huitzing is highly recommended and outstanding (soon there will be more about it on the website). “Stad in Oorlog. Amsterdam 1940-1945 in foto's” of René Kok and Erik Somers is another impressing work that illustrates especially the all day life in Amsterdam under German occupation. There is even a color photo showing that a Jewish home is emptied. The logistics company Kühne + Nagel, based in Bremen, was making profit in WWII with the belongings of the deported and killed Jews – and up to this day did not really take responsibility for that part of the company's history. A controversy about a memorial installation in Bremen is in full progress. The title of the third book is a pacification, a hope, a wish, unfulfilled: “Ze doen ons niets” (after a passage of Marga Minco's book “Het bittere kruid”). Vervolging en deportatie van de joden in Nederland 1940-1945”. On the cover, there is a newly wed couple, wearing Stars of David. The story of the Franks and their helpers is told, but also the story of the resistance, of the collaborators, and the deported. Consequently, chapters about the camps in the Netherlands and in the East and about memorials are part of the documentation. For Germans who aren't able to read Dutch, but wish

to learn more about how it must have felt to be in the occupied neighbour country in WWII, all three books are a find.

As the list for the 14th transport from Westerbork to Sobibór is read aloud after a cabaret evening, Betty's name is to be heard in the end of May 1943. Jules Schelvis, a 21 year old apprentice of print from Amsterdam, and his wife Rachel are also told to go. And about 3000 more people. On the first of June 1943, the train leaves Westerbork station. The trip to Sobibór, 80 kilometers from Lublin, takes three days. This camp is built after the example of Belzec, a "death factory" (Presser, Ashes, pages 490 ff.). Usually, prisoners had to get off their clothes after arrival and were, together with 700 or 800 others, forced into gas chambers. The sign on the door says „Seuchen-Bekämpfungsstelle“ or „Bade- und Inhalationsräume“, indicating rooms to bath or to inhale in or to be disinfected, in order to prevent illnesses. A prisoner started a motor, then the light in the chamber went off, and the gas was streaming in. SS-men had a look through a peeping hole in the wall to make sure if everything went routinely so they could fill the next mass grave with corpses. Later on, the murderers burnt the dead.

Jules Schelvis (1921-2016) has been the only survivor of transport number 14. He has done research in archives in Eastern and in Western Europe for his book about Sobibór (the German edition is called „Vernichtungslager Sobibór“), has attended the trial of John Demjanjuk und founded the Stichting Sobibór, a foundation that helps to remember the crimes of the nazis and their complices. In Belzec, Sobibór and Treblinka alone, about 1,7 million Jewish women, men and children have been murdered in the „Aktion Reinhardt“. Among them Deborah Appel, Jacob Presser's wife. Uli Herzberg (1927-1943) from Hannover, the German boy who had lived with Miriam Keesing's grandparents till they left for Cuba. Betty Baer, nee Sondheim, from Ober Gleen. And Toni Stern from Nieder-Ohmen.

In case that Alfred has still written to his uncle and aunt in Frankfurt in late autumn of 1941, his letters will not have reached them any more. Betty's brother Hermann, born in Ober-Gleen in 1883, and her sister-in-law Fanny Grethe have been deported from Frankfurt to Lodz on the 20th of October 1941. Both perished there. Their son Kurt had joined a Kindertransport to England. He has survived and has later changed his familyname. Betty's brother has died soon after his emigration to the U.S. as his health had been ruined in his time in the concentration camp Buchenwald, where he had brought to after the "Kristallnacht" in November 1938. His wife and his three children mourned for him and for all the relatives and friends after learning one by one that they had been murdered.

Alfred Josef Baer has been killed in Auschwitz in 1943, at the age of 22.

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