

Heinz Meyerstein (1920-2008)

by Peter Kriedte

At this place, we are laying two Stolpersteine, namely for Heinz Meyerstein and Karoline Piterson. Heinz Meyerstein, born in Göttingen in 1920, came from a family of Bremke livestock dealers on his father's side. On his mother's side, he was born into locksmithing – so his mother who was native of Rotenburg in the Fulda region. The Meyersteins lived here together with their two sons on the first floor of the house in Rote Straße 16. Heinz first attended the Albani School and subsequently the Voigt School, a secondary school for boys. In the light of the aggressive hostility towards Jews having existed there since 1933, his parents saw themselves forced *to withdraw him prematurely from school* in 1934. A classmate, Kurt Rosenbaum who lived in Rosdorf, stayed six months longer but had to leave as well *because*, according to Heinz Meyerstein in 1955, *he was almost killed*. After his school years, Meyerstein began a 4-year apprenticeship as a precision mechanic at Sartorius. Under pressure from the German Labor Front, he had to break off this apprenticeship after 2 ½ years as well. He then moved to Munich in the spring of 1938 where he continued his education in a Jewish training workshop. Here he was arrested during the November pogrom and taken to the Dachau concentration camp. He was released not until 3 January 1939. In his memoirs put on paper in 1944, he wrote:

It was here in this environment that [Heinz] acquired maturity. 18 years old, inexperienced and with childlike naivety he came here; in two months he had changed, had become more serious and mature. He had seen too much, more than is good for an eighteen-year-old.

He returned to Göttingen. In the meantime, the Palestine Office had provided him with the papers required for a hachshara abroad in the Netherlands. (Hachshara means the preparation of Jews for the colonization of Palestine). Heinz left his home town on 25 January 1939. When he arrived in the Netherlands, the relevant hachshara organization initially assigned him a job on a farm near Zutphen. This was followed by other jobs, partly at blacksmiths and locksmiths, sometimes at close quarters to the Jewish labor village (*werkdorps*) Wieringermeer in the far north of the North Holland Province. It was probably here that he made the contacts that would enable him to flee from the German sphere of control.

Meanwhile, the Netherlands had been occupied by Germany and the first anti-Jewish actions had been announced. On 15 July 1942, the deportations to the East eventually began. Heinz Meyerstein's younger brother Herbert was among the first victims. Heinz had brought him to the Netherlands in mid-1939 via his Hachshara organization. Unlike Herbert, he was able – initially protected by an exemption stamp – to elude deportation. Thanks to the contact to the Westerweel Group, an organization for aiding escape named after the Dutch resistance fighter Joop Westerweel (1899-1944), with forged papers he joined a group of four people who set off in May 1943 to work as Dutch civilian workers in the Ruhr district. Here he worked as a lathe operator in a Dortmund bullet factory that belonged to the Dortmund-Hoerder Hüttenverein. When the Gestapo was about to be on the track of the group, the five of them fled head over heels to the Netherlands at the beginning of September and, after a short stay,

from there via Belgium to France. In Amsterdam, Heinz had made the acquaintance of Joop Westerweel. It was he who brought Heinz and a second man across the Dutch-Belgian border which was considered particularly dangerous. In France, the group which had meanwhile swollen to several people moved about with forged papers that identified them as being employed by the Wehrmacht. They went via Paris – where Heinz met Kurt Reilinger (cover name: Nanno; 1917-1945), the central figure of the Westerweel-Group in France in 1943/44 – to Bordeaux. An interlude followed as a forestry worker at a company working on behalf of the Organization Todt. At the end of October 1943, a first attempt to cross the Pyrenees with the help of the Toulouse section of the Armée Juive, a Jewish-Zionist underground organization, failed due to bad weather conditions. The Westerweel-Group now sent the refugees to the Maquis in the Massif Central for two months so as to protect them from being caught by the Gestapo.

After their return, a second attempt was made from there but had to be abandoned prematurely. Instead, they went back to Paris. It was here that Reilinger delivered the crucial message: *back to Toulouse*. After their arrival there, the big adventure soon began, organized by the Armée Juive: first by bus, then on foot. The meeting place was a small farm on the edge of the Pyrenees. On 28 February 1944, the group which had meanwhile increased to 32 people, set off. After tremendous pains, they arrived in a Spanish border village at the foot of Mont Valier on 5 March. Meyerstein concluded his report with the following words:

He was one of the very few lucky ones who had escaped the murdering Gestapo. Five days of cold, snow, hunger, pains and privation in the highlands lay behind him. Behind him lay all the horror and all the crimes he had experienced in recent years. And ahead of him lay freedom and the road to Erez Israel.

Meyerstein was initially interned in Spain. During the long wait for a ship to take him to Palestine, he occupied himself with the transcription of the memories of his escape. At the end of October 1944, the time had finally come. He left – still under a false name – Cádiz for Haifa on the ship of a Portuguese shipping company. He owed the fact that he survived primarily to the Westerweel-Group and the Toulouse section of the Armée Juive.

The beginnings in Palestine were troublesome. He first worked as an orange picker and then as a locksmith and precision mechanic. Temporarily, he was a member of the Hagana, the Jewish-Zionist underground army, and afterwards of the Israeli army until 1949. In 1953, together with a younger partner, he founded a workshop for micromechanics which he ran until his retirement in the year 1985.

Despite the murder of his parents, his brother and many relatives, he never forgot his old home country. He visited Göttingen on a number of occasions, finally again in 2003. As early as 1960, he had approached the city council with the urgent request for a memorial plaque to be erected at the place where the synagogue had once stood. The city council fulfilled this request. Unfortunately, the plaque has disappeared since the sale of the DGB building where it had been installed at its northern side. Meyerstein spoke up once again at the end of 2002. At that time, he opposed those who wanted to prevent the laying of Stolpersteine in Göttingen. *All forms of commemoration are welcome*, he wrote. *I will not forget my family and*

will commemorate them for as long as I live no matter in what way. He died in 2008, just before his memoirs were published by a Constance publishing house.

Two remarks at the end. Joop Westerweel was executed in the concentration camp Vught on 11 August 1944. Kurt Reilinger survived the concentration camps Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora and the concentration camp on rails in Osnabrück. In September 1945, he died in an accident in Sweden.