

# The Jewish Community of Laupheim and its Annihilation

Book Pages 83 - 89

## GIDEON, Emma,

21 Radstrasse

Translated by: Markus Ganser

*KARL NEIDLINGER*

Adolf Gideon, born February 17, 1869 in Rexingen, died September 12, 1909 in Frankfurt/Main (buried in Laupheim), OO **Emma Gideon, née Bergmann**, born September 17, 1877, died March 23, 1963.

– **Margarete**, called Gretel, born May 26, 1900 in Tübingen, died January 20, 1997 in Winterthur/Switzerland.

The family emigrated to Winterthur/ Switzerland in 1938. They found accommodation in the house of Emma's sister Frieda Biedermann, née Bergmann, and her husband Max.

John Bergmann may not have used many words in his family chronicle to describe his "Aunt Emma", the oldest daughter of Josef Bergmann, but they were all the more heartfelt. When Emma was born in 1877, her father's business was still in an early stage and whether it would become a success was yet to be seen at that time. After finishing at the Jewish elementary school, Emma did not continue with secondary school as there was no such possibility for girls in these times in Laupheim. There are no facts available from her seven or eight years of elementary school other than that she really enjoyed the way to school in the early morning "down the hill passing the dewy meadows"; and "hill" does not relate to the Judenberg (Jews' hill), but to the castle hill. In 1891, the family had moved to Großlaupheim castle where they rented an apartment from Kilian von Steiner. This happened around the time Emma's school days were coming to an end.

In these times, girls were still brought up very traditionally and after finishing school they were bound to prepare themselves for their role as housewife and mother. Accordingly, Emma stayed at home after finishing elementary school, being trained in housekeeping and the upbringing of children. With her many younger brothers and sisters, there was enough opportunity to practice on a continual basis. She got married already at the age of 22, being the first of the seven children to do so. Her husband was the elementary teacher Adolf Gideon, born in 1869 in Rexingen near Horb. He was a teacher at the Jewish elementary school in Laupheim in the 1890s. After their marriage in 1899 the couple moved to Tübingen where Adolf Gideon became a teacher of Religion and an administrator of the rabbinate of the Jewish communities in Tübingen, Reutlingen, and Nürtingen. In 1900, their only daughter Margarete was born in Tübingen.

After the untimely death of Adolf Gideon in 1909, Emma Gideon and her daughter returned to Laupheim, where they lived with her parents in the newly-built house at 21 Radstrasse. Due to their inherent affection and confident appearance, Emma and her parents became the center of the extended family, and after her parents' death Emma remained the primary contact when it came to settling family affairs: whenever there was any conflict between parents and children, or any other kind of dispute, she or her sister Klara Hofheimer, both accepted as mediators, were called to get things straight again.



*All female members of the extended Bergmann family in front of the building at 21 Radstrasse in ca. 1909.*

*From left: Elsa Wallersteiner née Bergmann, Selma Wallersteiner, Paula Bergmann, Klara Hofheimer née Bergmann, "Henny" Bergmann, Friedel Biedermann née Bergmann, Flora Stern née Bergmann, Emma Gideon née Bergmann, Gretel Gideon.*

Here is a short excerpt from the manifold memories of Emma's nephew John. H. Bergmann that refers to the house at 21 Radstrasse and his aunt Emma who lived there:

*"After the death of the Bergmann grandparents in 1924, my aunt Emma, who continued to live in the house of her grandparents, became the central point for the family and kept this role until her death many years later. She was by far the friendliest family member of her generation. She was on good terms with both family branches, and she equally shared her time between both lines. She was artistically inclined, a good photographer who developed the photos herself, and she was musically talented and had a very good voice. She taught us many of the songs that we still know how to sing. She was also very literate and thus had the role of the family poet. There were many family events that she put in verse or performed in little plays. And of course, she was an excellent cook. In many circumstances, she was the one to be addressed for advice. As she lost her husband very early and widowhood became her fate in the little town of Laupheim, she dedicated all her love and affection to her daughter*

*Gretel and the many nephews and nieces, which turned out to be a mutual loving relationship throughout her entire life.”*

John H. Bergmann was also rather brief about his cousin Gretel Gideon in his chronicle. This is all the more surprising given that he had a close relationship with her all his life. He just reports that after graduating from high school, the only daughter of Emma Gideon studied German language and literature and could not finish her dissertation at the Frankfurt University. In 1937/38 Gretel tried in vain to find work in Florence, Italy. In July 1938 she finally managed to emigrate to Switzerland, only after having obtained a work contract as a housemaid. Finally in September 1938, Emma Gideon also managed to escape Winterthur to Frieda and Max Biedermann's house and department store called "[Rothaus](#)", a place where other family members had already found a hiding place before. In the end, mother and daughter managed to find a new home in Switzerland. In Winterthur, Gretel soon started a training to become a seamstress.

*Gretel Gideon 1931.*



From their Swiss exile, Emma and Gretel Gideon kept up regular and intense mail contact with their former neighbors, the Wertheimer family from 17 Radstrasse, who remained in Laupheim and was forced to move to the ex-rabbinat in 1939/40. Some of these letters have been preserved, and were handed over to the museum collection by Ernst Schäll, who had received them from Gretel Gideon: they comprise twelve letters and postcards to the Gideons written between May 1940 and July 1942 by Lina and Selma Wertheimer from the Jewish old people's home, plus three postcards to Gretel Gideon by Selma Wertheimer from Theresienstadt, dated 1943/44. Although formulated very carefully – all documents carry a censorship stamp from the German authorities – they are an impressive source of information, as they are the last signs of life in the Jewish community in Laupheim that was annihilated for good soon after. An excerpt from one of the last letters:

*Letter from Lina Wertheimer to Emma and Gretel Gideon, July 15, 1942:*

*Dear Emma and Gretel,*

*This time it took me a bit longer to write than planned. [...] The two of us are fairly content if things are going to stay more or less the way they are, in general. My gall bladder hasn't hurt now for quite some time, and I'm quite happy about that. [...] Karl is quite far away since November and we haven't heard back from him, nor have we from our former school mate Selma E. (editor's note: refers to Karl Guggenheim and Selma Einstein. Both were deported to Riga in November 1941 and were murdered there). Liesel visits us quite often [...], she is working in the kitchen and we help her peel the potatoes, prepare the vegetables, etc. [...] What I like even more is visiting her at her small, but lovely home, and she is such an excellent host, so that our visits always take longer than planned. (Editor's note: refers to Elise Friedberger, who lived in the barracks at Wendelinsgrube, where she was forced to move after having to abandon her house at 25 Radstrasse.) Farewell greetings also from Mr and Mrs Grab and the Wallach family. [...] Now, Mr Stern is in charge of holding the divine ceremony at the old people's home, but only on Saturdays of course. (Editor's note: the Grab and Wallach family had been deported to Auschwitz shortly before). We celebrate the seasons this day, and we don't forget anybody, in particular we remember and pray for the ones who died in the world war. There are always many things going on in the home, just recently an 80 year old lady passed away and old Mrs Weglein from Ulm, who you should also know, has moved in. [...] Mundel Adler has taken on the administrative tasks in the community, and he also sends you his regards. There are no signs from our loved ones who went away, we could not get any news from the Red Cross. [...]*



*Emma and Gretel Gideon, 1937.*

Emma and Gretel Gideon started to feel at home in Switzerland and remained there after World War Two. Gretel found employment as a librarian in Winterthur and continued her profession until 1980. She always had a great affection for literature and books. When Ernst Schäll started his research work about Friedrich Adler at the end of the seventies last century, he also contacted Gretel Gideon who was very literate and interested in the history of arts. This evolved into a close friendship that lasted until her death in 1996. We obtained much information and numerous pictures shown in this book, including many letters thanks to this relationship. These excellent sources of information were a perfect basis for documenting the fate of the Gideon family.

## From letters by Gretel Gideon to Ernst Schäll

The following excerpts from Gretel Gideon's letters to Ernst Schäll tell a lot about her strong ties to nature and her home town, and her deep knowledge of the arts and culture in Upper Swabia, and make us feel a bit of the pain experienced by the Laupheim citizens who were faced with social exclusion, deprivation of rights and flight. These letters reveal a lot more about Gretel Gideon than any complete biographical information could have done, and to a certain extent, her statements reflect generally the feelings and perception of her generation.



**Home:  
Where is one's favorite place?**

*"I have now been almost 50 years in Switzerland, of which 30 years have been as a naturalized citizen, and I believe that I am a good Swiss citizen. However, in my reflections I can still see the landscape and scenery around Laupheim, which was where I had the finest experiences of nature and art." (Feb 3, 1987)*

**Youth experiences of nature:  
precise memories**

*"Of course I think a lot about Laupheim and its surroundings in the past. Does the "Schneckengrub" (snail hole) still exist at Achstetter Straße, which belonged to merchant Stumpp, where there were so many violets in early spring? Or the small birch forest at Buehler Straße which was the only place where you could find real cowslips. When passing the village of Bronnen in direction to Schnürpflingen there was the only beech forest around where you could*

*smell daphne flowers already from far. Similarly, there was a place at Bastel wood (translator's note: small forest on the eastern edge of Laupheim) where lupines grew, a flower that was largely unknown at that time, and later they grew it as forage crop. And are there still harriers to be seen in the air? I remember these pretty birds of prey silently flying over the equally silent woods. I could write a book about all these things. Today, nobody can imagine how Laupheim was like before World War One." (April 12, 1982)*

*It was on a day like February 15th, which is the date you were writing me, an extremely warm and windy day in 1921 when we went for a walk to the Stoffelberg (translator's note: hill near the town of Ehingen on the edge of the Swabian Alb mountains) crossing Ehingen and then back. The big pine wood on the hill could be seen from afar, and when we arrived on the top of the hill the meadows were covered with pasque flowers and we could see Laupheim stretched out in the sun and all the mountains on the horizon. The next morning, everything was covered with snow. These, dear Mr Schäll, are the things you'll never forget." (Feb 25, 1981)*

**A thankful reader of texts from Laupheim:**

*"You can hardly imagine how happy I am about the Watzenried guide (translator's note: natural reserve near Laupheim). I've not only used it once, but read it repeatedly, and learned many things I did not know in the past, although we went there every year, always around the longest day, in the early morning at 2 or 3 am for watching the birds. I can also remember the many crab claws that were lying along the*



*banks of the Dürnach stream. Back then, people said that it was the cats." (June 7, 1981)*

### **Memories of Mai 1st**

*"In my youth, we used to go on a May excursion every year, most of the times heading towards Brandenburg at the river of Iller, crossing Weihungszell, and of course, all by foot. We started at 4 am, in the Bastel wood we could hear the birds waking up, then on crossing the Rot valley and along the [Holzstöcke](#) (translator's note: densely forested mountain range North-east of Laupheim). I still have a little oil painting by Klara Kolb from Ulm that shows the little valley near the village of Weihungszell, and probably the river of Weihung where people fished a lot." (May 8, 1988)*

*"Another question: Is there still the habit of making trails of bark mulch on the eve of May 1<sup>st</sup> for the young men and women who'd become a couple if only they could? It happened to me once, and it was in 1920 and I strongly suspected the Volz family behind this (Oct. 28, 1980).*

Gretel Gideon's letters to Ernst Schäll also reveal that she also was a great lover of art with a special affection for the Upper Swabian Baroque style: being Jewish, she knew most of the famous Baroque churches, as well as the artists and builders from that period, some of these from her earliest days. The last of the following excerpts refers to a painting by Ivo Schaible, and it shows that she did not regard things from a purely artistic point of view, but also included the theological concepts conveyed by Christian art in Upper Swabia: for her, the Christian and Jewish religions were close.

### **Upper Swabian Baroque Road—without a car**

*"As I now have plenty of time, as I have not been used to for at least 45 years, I can easily afford to spend one week in Upper Swabia. There is still so much left to be seen*

*there, things that I just know from the past when things weren't renovated yet, or places that I haven't seen at all, such as the churches in Baidt and Wurzach. By the way, at the end of January I was in Tannheim, Rot an der Rot and Gutenzell with my friends from Ulm – it was a truly unforgettable day. The fact that I don't have a car bothers me more and more. It would be quite useful and would save me a lot of time and effort. But what can I do, it's too late for that now." (April 15, 1980)*

### **Affection for Baroque arts**

*"So I have to decide what you could show me in early June: the towns of Roggenburg, Witzighausen, Tannheim, Buxheim and Rot an der Rot I already know from recent trips with the Kneer family. In Ottobeuren, I was approximately six times before and after my emigration. But what I do not know yet is Siessen, which is a famous monastery, nor do I know Wurzach or Wolfegg, and east of the Iller, I don't know nothing, except the places I have mentioned." (May 13, 1987)*

### **Art unites religions**

*"Now let's touch a different topic: Father Ivo. I have your book about him still open in my room, so that I can look anytime at the illustration that shows the Madonna made of lime wood that originates from the Maximilian Kolbe church. The more and the longer I look at it, the more it makes me feel happy. When I look at this wonderful infant Jesus, how he offers himself to the world, being full of affection, and at the same time embracing it with the same love, I can feel comfort and am taken away by this kind of art that managed to express this so*

*subtly. There's no earlier period in arts that could reveal the essence of the nature of Jesus." (October 21, 1989)*

Sources:

John Bergmann, *The Bergmanns from Laupheim*, 1983. Archive Ernst Schäll (Texts and photos).