

Abraham's Grandchildren

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Last year, on May 24, 2010, Berlin State Secretary of Culture André Schmitz dedicated a memorial plaque at Rosenthaler Strasse 40 in Berlin to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Abraham Geiger's birth. Rabbi Geiger worked in Wiesbaden, Breslau, Frankfurt/Main, and Berlin. Geiger's many years of effort to establish a Jewish theological faculty led to the founding of the College of Jewish Studies on May 6, 1872 in Berlin.

On August 17, 1999, the University of Potsdam celebrated the 12th anniversary of the Abraham Geiger College. This name honors the life and work of Dr. Abraham Geiger.

Geiger was a prominent supporter of the reform of Judaism. His work was based on three guiding principles. He deeply believed in freedom of conscience and religion, freedom of scientific research, and freedom of all people. Today, these principles serve as ethical standards for Abraham Geiger College.

Abraham Geiger died on October 23, 1874. He never lived to see Ludwig follow in his footsteps as a rabbi.

Born on June 5, 1848 in Breslau, Ludwig Geiger was 26 when his father died. Instead of following in his father's footsteps as a rabbi, Ludwig devoted himself to scientific research. He was also involved in the political issues of the day. Ludwig was strictly opposed to Zionism and firmly believed in the assimilation of Jews into their resident countries. Although he experienced anti-Semitism in the German Empire, he supported the country's emperor and demonstrated a strong commitment to patriotism in the articles he wrote during the First World War. He could have never imagined that, shortly after his death on February 19, 1919 in Berlin, his children would be persecuted and murdered by German fascists and their accomplices.

What happened to Abraham Geiger's grandchildren? Ludwig Geiger and his wife Martha (nee Stettiner) had a son, Artur, and four daughters: Edith, Emilie, Ilse, and Dora. While four of the children managed to escape from Germany, Dora (born May 18, 1890), her husband Fritz Kiefe, and daughter Therese (born 1915) were murdered in Auschwitz on March 12, 1943.

Artur (born March 8, 1882) was a chemist. In 1909, he married Kaete (born July 17, 1884). Gertrude, their only daughter, was born on November 11, 1911. Artur served in the German army from 1915 to 1918. The family moved to Austria in 1922, and eventually emigrated to Israel in 1938. Kaete died in March 1966 at the age of 82 and Artur died two years later in 1968. Their daughter Gertrude married in Israel and died in 1952. Unfortunately, nothing is known of her children.

Edith (born 3 April 1887), married Eugen Wallach (born March 17, 1887) in 1912 and moved with her family to Austria and later to Switzerland, where she died in Zurich in 1964. Edith left two sons, Elmer and Erd. Both of them died, and their widows now live in England.

Emilie (born 15 July 1889) never married. She survived World War II in Brazil, where she worked for many years as a medical nurse. She died on May 2, 1949 in Sao Paolo.

Ilse (born 17 September 1896) married Erwin Löwe, a Jewish book publisher in Berlin. Their daughter, Helga (born on June 25, 1926) was sent to England at the age of 12 (1938) and later emigrated to the United States. Ilse and Erwin finally escaped to Sweden in 1941 where Erwin found work as a journalist. His parents were murdered in concentration camps and his sister, faced with deportation, committed suicide. Ilse died on December 5, 1992.

Ilse's daughter Helga married architect Gelal Kent in New York. The couple remained childless. After struggling through the early years, she was appointed to vice president of a cosmetics company.

Helga's mother was part owner of an apartment building in Berlin that was confiscated by the Nazis and later destroyed during World War II. On behalf of the family, Helga's father tried to reclaim the property after the war ended. This turned out to be a futile attempt, because the land was located in what was then East Berlin. Helga Kent was unaware of her rights as an heir and did not file a claim for restitution after German reunification in 1990. In fact, she didn't learn about her inheritance until it was too late. The Jewish Claims Conference (JCC) submitted a restitution claim and received compensation for the property. When Helga filed a claim for payment from the JCC Goodwill Fund, she was informed that the deadlines had already expired.

Her hope was rekindled when the JCC announced an amendment to the Goodwill Fund guidelines. According to the amendment, the request for compensation must be submitted by an heir of the original owner who can prove, through medical documentation, that for health reasons, it was not possible to file an application in the period immediately before the March 31, 2004 deadline. This was clearly the case for Helga Kent. In late 2003 she was involved in a serious car accident. She spent several months in hospital and was confined to bed afterwards. A doctor's certificate verifying the fact that Helga was not physically or mentally capable of handling her personal affairs during the period in question, was ignored by the JCC.

Helga subsequently presented her case to the Petitions Committee of the German Bundestag (parliament). In a letter to her lawyer, she told him: "I must tell you that it gives me no pleasure to write such a letter. I should not have to defend or plead my position. It saddens me to think that I must petition the German for compensation that I am legally entitled to through inheritance. ... It further saddens me that this petition renews unpleasant memories. My youth was most seriously

compromised by what happened in Germany during the Second World War... I hope that morality and ethics will succeed that the JCC will reopen and settle any and all claims."

Appeals submitted to the JCC and requesting compensation for Helga Kent were rejected. The German Parliament's Petitions Committee has remained unresponsive to 30 petitions regarding this issue. Will the Abraham Geiger College intervene and stand up for the descendants of its namesake?

When will justice finally be served for Holocaust victims?