

Pogrom Night 1938

Four years on the run - in vain

After Pogrom Night, the Jewish Epstein family from Freiburg manages to escape. But France hands the family over to the Nazis.

By Sabine Herrle and Fanny Dupuy

This is the story of Marianne Epstein, born in Freiburg in 1925, murdered in Auschwitz in 1942.

Marianne grows up at Bismarckstraße 20, which is now Stefan-Meier-Straße 4-6. Her mother Lina née Weil comes from Lörrach, while her father Siegfried Epstein comes from Eichstetten, where, together with his brother Heinrich, he runs the paper factory founded by their father. He also runs the branch in Freiburg, Im Grün 3. The girl has a sheltered childhood with close contact to relatives, the Mayer and Weil-Lion families. The latter's younger daughter, Lilo, quite enjoys playing with her little cousin Marianne. Like Lilo, after primary school, Marianne enrolls in the Hindenburgschule, a secondary school for girls, which is now called the Goethe-Gymnasium.

The Nazi call for a boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1st, 1933 is an abrupt turning point - Siegfried Epstein's company figures on the list. The disenfranchisement of Jewish Germans intensifies: the "Nuremberg Laws" of 1935 turn them into second-class citizens. In 1937/38, the paper factory in Eichstetten is "aryanised" and the Freiburg branch closed. The Epsteins are forced to prepare their emigration - to France, where they have relatives. Temporarily, the family moves to Colombstraße 11 - the house belongs to an uncle of Lina, Moritz Weil-Lion.

During Pogrom Night, 13-year-old Marianne witnesses the SS taking her father and her cousin Erna's husband out of the house. The two men are deported to Dachau along with some 100 other Jewish men from Freiburg.

Pogrom Night has shown that it is now a matter of saving one's bare life - Lina Epstein desperately tries to bring her daughter Marianne to safety. With cousin Marieluise Mayer and two cousins from Frankfurt, the 13-year-old is sent to the Netherlands via a "Kindertransport" privately organised by the Epstein family. After Pogrom Night, the Dutch government had agreed to temporarily take in 1,800 Jewish children. The 13-year-old has to illegally cross the border into a country completely unknown to her, the language of which she does not speak. She has to spend months in various children's homes until by March 1939, Marieluise and she are finally allowed to move in with their aunt Josephine Zwartz née Epstein in Oldenzaal.

Siegfried Epstein is released from Dachau concentration camp on December 22nd, 1938, on the condition to leave Germany immediately. On January 10th, 1939, Lina and Siegfried Epstein cross the Rhine to supposedly safe France. Via Mulhouse (where furniture and household goods are stored) and Épinal they travel to Angers, where - in April 1940 - they rent a one-room flat at 8 Rue des deux haies and get

Marianne to join them. Finally, Marianne is able to go back to school. At the "Lycée Joachim du Bellay" she meets girls her age, experiences a bit of normalcy. The Epsteins become friends with neighbours, the Lévêque family. They help Marianne with her homework and with learning French. Marianne learns quickly and well. Refugees are not allowed to work; the Epstein family is supported financially by relatives in Switzerland and France.

However, the family is not together all the time. When war breaks out, Siegfried Epstein wants to volunteer for the French armed forces, but is interned as an "undesirable foreigner". In December 1939 he is released. In January 1940, he once again enlists as a volunteer ("prestataire") – only to be interned again – among other camps in the largest French internment camp in Gurs. In March 1941, Lina finally obtains his release.

In April 1940, the "Reichsanzeiger" publishes the expatriation of the Epsteins and the confiscation of their assets. On May 10th, 1940, the Wehrmacht invades France and the Benelux countries. Epstein's furniture and household effects in Mulhouse are immediately auctioned off publicly. When the armistice is signed on June 22nd, 1940, the family has to flee again, as Angers becomes the seat of a garrison headquarters of the Wehrmacht ("Kommandantur"). Their escape destination is Limoges, a regional capital in the unoccupied zone ("zone libre"), the nearest major city behind the demarcation line.

The "République Française" becomes the "État français", with an authoritarian and anti-Semitic regime headed by Maréchal Pétain. From October 1940 on, he issues anti-Semitic decrees and generally banks on collaboration.

In Limoges, the Epsteins rent a one-room flat on Boulevard Carnot. Registered as "israélites étrangers" (foreign Israelites), they declare they want to emigrate to Cuba or the USA. Marianne now attends the ORT school in Limoges. At these schools, Jewish refugees learn trades; the girls are trained as dressmakers.

On November 1st, 1941, the Epsteins – along with other Jewish refugees - are expelled from Limoges and distributed to small communities, initially to Isle-les-Pâquerettes. There, on February 17th, 1942, they are registered - to be expelled again shortly afterwards, along with other Jewish families, to Saint Léonard-de-Noblat where they rent a room in the Hôtel du Midi. This measure is intended to better control the refugees, but is also populist: the official justification is that the housing and labour market in Limoges are not big enough for everyone. For Marianne, this means that she has to abandon her training. On April 2nd, 1942, her father therefore implores the prefect of the Département Haute-Vienne to revoke the expulsion - in vain.

As a result of the Wannsee Conference, Germany demands that France extradite 40,000 Jewish refugees by September 15th, 1942. 30,000 are to come from the occupied zone and 10,000 from the non-occupied zone; the entire implementation will be the sole responsibility of the French authorities, the French gendarmerie ("Ober-Bousquet Agreement"). On August 5th, 1942, the Vichy government informs the prefects of this in circular N 2765 Pol. 9. In the "zone libre", this concerns non-French Jews who had fled to France since 1936. Their deportation to the occupied zone, and thus to the country from which they had fled, is being planned meticulously. At the

request of their parents, children under 18 are originally supposed to be allowed to remain in the "zone libre" - but on August 22nd, this option is deleted.

August 26th, 1942, is "jour J". At 5 a.m., Marianne and her parents are taken from their beds and arrested. In the Nexon camp, "conveniently" located at a railway junction, a final selection takes place. Lina desperately points out that her brother Marcel Paul Weil, a French citizen since 1935, has been held a prisoner of war in Stalag IIIa in Luckenwalde since 1940. In vain; it is recorded: "à diriger sur la zone occupée avec son mari et sa fille" ("to be transferred to the occupied zone with her husband and daughter"). This will turn out to be their death sentence.

At the demarcation line, German military police ("Feldjäger") take over the guarding of the train. On August 27th, the train reaches Drancy, on August 29th, transport No. 26 departs for Auschwitz, arriving on September 2nd. Survivor Henri Wolff, 15 at the time, describes the "journey to hell": ten stiflingly hot cattle wagons, each completely overcrowded with 100 people. One bucket of drinking water next to one serving as toilet. Despair and fear of death. In Kozle/Cosel, 80 kilometres south of Auschwitz, young men deemed "fit for work" are sorted out, in Birkenau proper twelve more plus 27 young women. All the others are probably immediately murdered in the gas chambers.

On November 17th, 1945, Marianne's cousin Ernest D. Mayer, Master Sergeant in the US Army and born in Freiburg in 1922, submits a search request for the Epstein family to the French military government in Freiburg. After his release from the German POW camp, Marianne's uncle Marcel Paul Weil tries to find out the whereabouts of his sister, brother-in-law and niece. In vain. The Epsteins are lost without a trace in the Auschwitz death factory. Marianne Epstein lived to be 17. She spent the last four years of her life trying to escape.

Sabine Herrle, 67, has been living in Freiburg since 1974. Till 2019 she worked as a teacher at the Richard-Fehrenbach-Schule.

Fanny Dupuy, 42, teacher, living and working in Limoges. For years she has been researching the fate of the people deported from her Département: www.refugiesjuifs87.fr

Translation: Sabine Herrle



Marianne Epstein (right) and mother Lina née Weil (left) with neighbour Anna Lévêque, Angers 1939

Photo: Yvette Ferrand

TSP

270V



Numéro de la carte:

HOAK 19184

Valable pour les années

17.12.40

ou jusqu'au

16.10.41

(1)

100

Délivrée par M. le Préfet de

Haute Vienne

le

8.1.41

en remplacement de la Carte No

1ère Carte

délivrée le

Pièces d'identité fournies:

Joseph

Je certifie exactes les déclarations ci-contre.

(Signature de l'étranger.)

Marianne Epstein

Date de la demande de carte

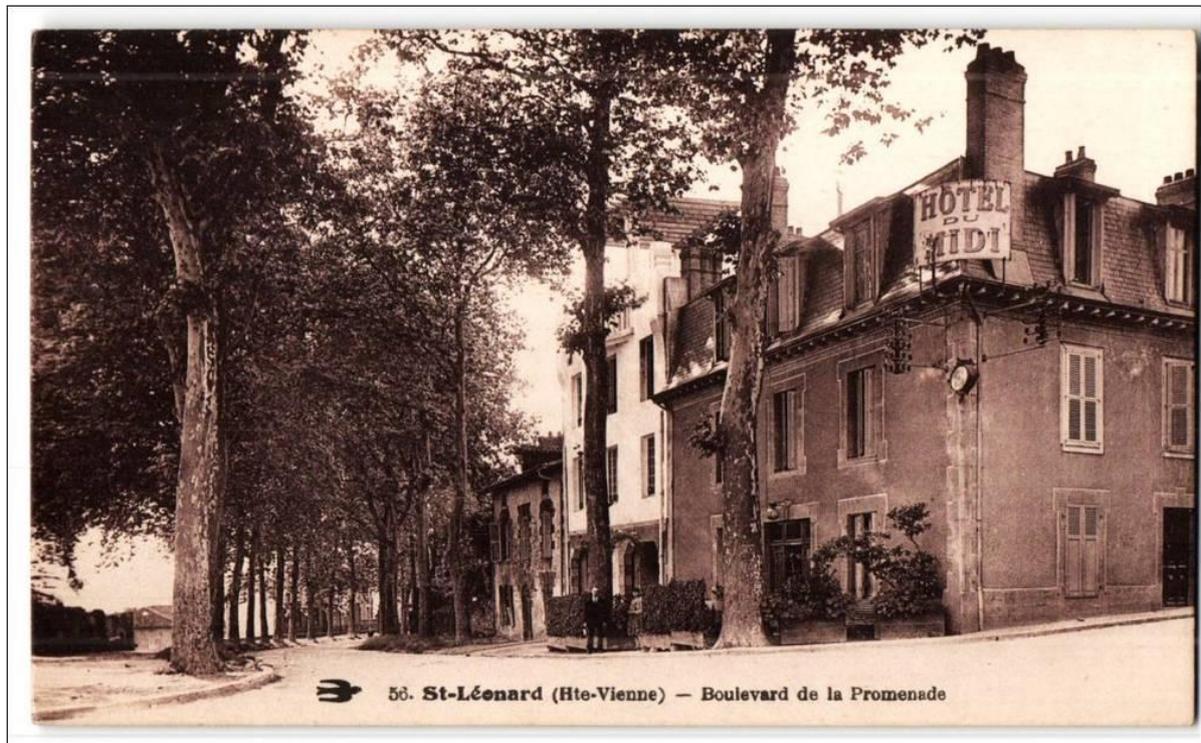
17 DEC 1940

Case réservée au Service central.

(1) Date d'expiration de la validité du visa pour les étrangers titulaires du visa à durée limitée.

Marianne Epstein, application for an alien identity card

Photo: 985 W 2607, ADHV (Archives Départementales de la Haute-Vienne)



Cartmen2

www.delcampe.net

Hôtel du Midi, refuge of the Epsteins in Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat

Photo: Editions L'Hirondelle