

„Ecken-Levis Ludi“ and his way to freedom

On the survival of Louis Goldwein (1922-2003) from Meimbressen

by Michael Dorhs

In the end, there were just two of them left, 22-year-old Louis and his 35-year-old sister Flory. When the murder of millions of European Jews ended on May 8, 1945, five of the members of the Goldwein family from Meimbressen, who had formerly been seven members, became victims of the Shoah: the parents Levi and Ida Goldwein, née Hammerschlag, and their daughter Erna at Riga ghetto, their son Arthur at Mauthausen concentration camp and their daughter Marianne at Auschwitz extermination camp, not including the uncles, aunts and cousins who also were violently killed. Meimbressen, their home village, where Christians and Jews had lived next door to one another since the 14th century, had been „judenrein“ (free of Jews) in Nazi jargon since the early 1940s. But he himself, „Ecken Levis Ludi“, as he got called in the village – in northern Hesse way of speaking – named after his parents house, which was situated in a corner („Ecke“) and after the first name of his father, and his sister Flory, they had survived, *„only by lucky coincidences (one can also say miracles) and with the help of friends, helpers and employees, Jews and non-Jews, some of whom sacrificed their lives,“* as Ludi recalled in retrospect.

He was born on October 14, 1922 in house No. 110 in Meimbressen. There, he attended the Jewish school until it was abolished in 1934 and then elementary school until Easter 1937. *„During my school days, I vaguely remember (rare) anti-Semitic events, perhaps by outsiders, like smashing windows or insults like 'Jew to Jerusalem, Palestine'. At school, teachers and classmates behaved fairly, and I personally did not suffer, as far as I can remember. I explain that by saying that in such a small place, where everyone knew one another, people were simply ashamed of behaving indecently, rude, cruelly anti-Semitic and being active. Maybe some had anti-Semitic thoughts.“* In 1937 Ludi left his home village and went to Frankfurt / Main, where he attended a technical college with a boarding school.

It had long been clear that there was no future for Jews in Germany. Ludi's brother Arthur, who was nine years older than him, had therefore relied on a new life in rural collective settlements in Erez-Israel, the former British mandate of Palestine, and was involved in the „Zionist Association for Germany“ and in Münster at the local group of the „Hechaluz“ (hebr. „The Pioneer“). Ludi took his brother's behavior as an example when in 1937/38 he became a member of the Jewish-Zionist youth association „Makkabi Hazair“ and began to be excited about emigrating to Erez-Israel as well. When in November 1938 synagogues burned down at Frankfurt and Jewish shops were looted and destroyed, Ludi had the unexpected opportunity to quickly leave Germany: Belgium, with its very liberal refugee policy, agreed to take in around 1,000 Jewish children from Germany. On December 20, 1938, a so-called „Kindertransport“, organized by the *Comité d'Assistance aux Enfants Juifs réfugiés* (CAEJR) in Brussels, left the train station with 81 children and



drove to the Belgian capital via Aachen. Also on that train: Ludi Goldwein, 16 years old at that time, and his only 12-year-old sister Marianne. At first, both of them stayed with their uncle Sally Goldwein, who had emigrated from Kassel to Belgium in 1933, and his wife Sophie and their son Hans-Ludwig. But six months later, on May 30, 1939, Ludi left his relatives to prepare for the the long-awaited departure to Erez-Israel at a house belonging to the Zionist movement „Makkabi Hazair Hechaluz“ in the Dutch capital Amsterdam.

Marianne and Louis „Ludi“ Goldwein approx. 1938 (Detailed enlargement from a picture wall in the exhibition „Saved – on time – Kindertransporte to Belgium 1938/39“. Cologne 23. 11. 2019-2. 2. 2020)

drove to the Belgian capital via Aachen. Also on that train: Ludi Goldwein, 16 years old at that time, and his only 12-year-old sister Marianne. At first, both of them stayed with their uncle Sally Goldwein, who had emigrated from Kassel to Belgium in 1933, and his wife Sophie and their son Hans-Ludwig. But six months later, on May 30, 1939, Ludi left his relatives to prepare for the the long-awaited departure to Erez-Israel at a house belonging to the Zionist movement „Makkabi Hazair Hechaluz“ in the Dutch capital Amsterdam.

Ludi was fully absorbed in this movement, lived in one of their houses („Beth Hechaluz“), first in Oosterparkstraat 90, then in Tolstraat 128. The spirit in this community was further on the left, people called each other „Chawer“ (hebr. for „comrade“) and dreamed of a new life in Israel. The „Werkdorp“ Nieuwesluis in Wieringermeer (province of North Holland), founded in 1934 mainly by German and Austrian refugees, played an important role in preparing for emigration. In this facility, young men and women in particular were able to develop practical skills and abilities and acquire job-specific knowledge that should help them later to work in agriculture business in Erez-Israel. The boys training in the fields of handicrafts or agriculture lasted two years, while the girls' training was significantly shorter and more about the rural lifestyle, but also included knowledge of household chores. Ludi's brother Arthur also worked there as a trainer for carpenters.

When on September 1, 1939 the Second World War began with the German invasion of Poland, disaster loomed. Life in Amsterdam's „Beth Hechaluz“, „Werkdorp“ and other training facilities for Jewish refugees in the Netherlands continued „normally“ for around six months, accompanied every day by tormenting questions about how the parents and siblings in Germany were doing: Do they still live in their houses? Are they given enough to live on? Are they healthy?

When the war broke out, „8 Jews were still resident“ in Meimbressen. Levi and Ida Goldwein were probably among them. Ludi's sisters Erna and Flory were now living with their husbands in Hanover - but under what circumstances? How was their little sister Marianne? Did she still live at Saint-Gilles, 44 rue J. Claes in Brussels with their uncle and aunt?

This „intermediate state“ ended on May 10, 1940: the German „Wehrmacht“ marched into the neutral Netherlands, and the Dutch troops surrendered after just 5 days.

Even if the German occupiers took anti-Jewish measures very quickly, initially not much changed for Ludi in his everyday life. He still lived in the „Beth Hechaluz“ and continued to work in a furniture factory - in Erez-Israel, he wanted to be a fully trained carpenter! But even he could not overlook the fact that in the course of 1941 more and more discriminatory regulations were issued against the Jews in the occupied Netherlands. From January 10, 1941, the registration of all Jewish men, women and children began. The systematic raids carried out by the Germans on February 22, 1941 to track down Jews who had gone into hiding had even more consequences for the refugees. During this time, the Werkdorp in Wieringen was evacuated on March 20, 1941. Except for about 60 residents who were initially allowed to stay to look after the cattle and agriculture, the remaining 231 young Jews were taken away and initially distributed in Amsterdam among Jewish families, including Ludi's brother Arthur. However, only a little later Arthur was taken to Mauthausen concentration camp together with other former Werkdorp residents in retaliation for an explosion in a German officers' club in the summer of 1941. Arthur was violently killed the same year in Mauthausen.



Arthur Goldwein approx. 1939/40;
<https://www.ioodsmonument.nl/paape/204816>

In the winter of 1941/42 Ludi changed his job. He was now working as a metal smelter in the „Wemeta Kompagnie“ of Justus Nussbaum and

Alfred Gossles, a scrap store that collected and melted scrap metal for the Germans. The company only employed Jews and was managed by a German trustee, Michael Sommer from Hamburg. Ludi received a special ID and was able to move around freely. Like all Jews in the Netherlands, he had to officially wear the yellow „Star of David“ since April 29, 1942, but sometimes he went out without wearing it. He worked in the iron foundry, but still lived and ate in the „Beth Hechaluz“ in the Tolstraat, where he always met comrades („Chawerim“) who were about to descend into illegality. Under the direction of Kurt Hannemann (1919-1944) all the strings, considering the illegal work of the „Hechaluz“, were pulled here. Ludi also came into contact with members of the Dutch resistance group around the staunch pacifist and teacher Joop Westerweel (1899-1944), who procured identity papers, hiding places and escape routes, especially for Jewish children and young people who had fled from Germany. *„Hannemann also entrusted me with various assignments. For example, I had to pick up grocery cards at the distribution points every month, which sometimes was exciting, as it was mostly cards from illegally living or deported Chawerim, whose cards were actually supposed to be handed in. To be on the safe side, we had the numbers on the cards checked by illegal employees. I also handed out food stamps to Chawerim who went into hiding.“*

What might have felt like a great adventure for the now 19-years-old-man, was in reality a desperate fight against the permanent threat of deportation to the German extermination camps „in the East“. Ludi received a call for the first transport on July 15, 1942. Some of his companions followed him voluntarily because they believed that they were only coming to do a „work assignment“. Ludi, who relied on the promise of the German trustee Hans Sommer to save him from this fate, remained distrustful: *„He (= Hans Sommer) was able to protect us until August 1943, when he was at the end of his capabilities. This first transport, (...) consisted only of young people, and none of them survived and came back. A scene like in a movie: midnight, the darkened city, the main train station cordoned off by the German police, hundreds of young Jews entering the platform packed with their luggage. The German takes us aside, negotiates with some SS officers and after a short period of time brings us home in his Lincoln Continental.“* Hans Sommer succeeded three times to remove Ludi from the transport list on the grounds that he needed him for work at the factory „for the benefit of the German armed forces“. When the German security police began to investigate suspected embezzlement towards Hans Sommer, this protection for Ludi ended. From now on he lived in an intermediate state between legality and illegality. To go completely underground did not

fit in with his self-image as a member of the „Hechaluz“, to participate as long as possible in the rescue of the Jews threatened by deportation. Ludi changed apartments several times and repeatedly escaped being arrested. If he did not wear the „yellow star“, he always carried a forged identity card with him.

In October 1943, the management of the „Hechaluz“ finally decided to smuggle Ludi and other members via Belgium to France, which was also occupied by the Germans. He and his escape helper Menahem Pinkhof (1920-1969) managed to illegally cross the border on October 22, 1943 near Breda. The other two comrades who came after them lost sight of them; they were arrested by the Germans. Another supporter, Ernst Hirsch (1916-1945), made sure that the next day at dawn they crossed the „green border“ near Tournai to France.

With so-called falsified „marching orders“ from the German military authorities in Amsterdam, they managed to get the support of the German armed forces at the train station in Lille, which entitled them to the free use of all rail connections and free travel provisions and accommodation. Hans (Chanan) Flörsheim from Rotenburg an der Fulda, a Zionist colleague of Ludi, remembers: *„We went to the train station, and now a process began to which we had to get used to very quickly, namely to live at the expense of the German ‚Wehrmacht‘ (= German military forces). Thanks to our valuable marching orders, we went to the ‚Wehrmacht‘ canteen and ate a good thick soup in the midst of many German soldiers and drank coffee with them, all for free, of course. Then Willy and Zippi went to town to ensure that we could get food for the march. (. . .) When we later went to the train station, everyone carried about two commissary loaves in his hands, sausages and butter stowed in our pockets. Willy went straight to the platoon leader and showed him a marching order that said we had to get to Paris. According to this order, we were allowed to get into an almost empty ‚Wehrmacht‘ wagon and made ourselves comfortable. Our mood was excellent, of course.“*

No, this was not a variant of the „cops and robbers“ game, which they had often enjoyed playing at home in peacetime, but *„a battle between 'brain work' and force of arms“* (Ludi Goldwein), in which it was never clear who would win in the end. Their discovery as German Jews would have meant deportation and murder for Ludi and his companions.

After a few days in Paris, Ludi went to Auffay in Normandy, where there already were some of his comrades, those with forged papers as Dutch - non-Jewish! - Volunteers for the

Nazi organization Todt building a bunker for the German Air Force. He now worked with them as a carpenter.

During this time, at the end of 1943, Ludi first learned the truth about the fate of the deported Jews. A German who had been transferred to France from Russia had boasted in front of him and others that he had participated in the extermination of the Jews as a commissioner of a village or a town in occupied Poland or in the Soviet Union. Is it conceivable that Ludi didn't think of his parents and siblings, of his Jewish friends and neighbors from Meimbressen? He must have known about the death of his brother Arthur in Mauthausen concentration camp. This was discussed among the Jews in Amsterdam. But did he also know about the deportation of his parents from Kassel in 1941, of his sisters Erna and Flory from Hanover? And did he know about the death of his beloved little sister Marianne? He had escaped with her in 1938 to Belgium which at that time seemed like a safe place...

While in Normandy, Ludi always had to live with the fear of being exposed as a Jew by the Germans, the headquarters of the „Hechaluz“ in Paris looked for ways for their comrades to escape to neutral and safe Spain with the help of french people. But that turned out to be extremely difficult.

One of Ludi's surreal living conditions was that he actually got officially „vacation“ from his german employers at Christmas 1943 and was able to travel to Holland on the Paris-Cologne express train „with a change in Brussels to Amsterdam“ to visit friends there. On the trip he only sat between German soldiers who were going home on Christmas vacation „and talking a lot about retaliation“. When he fell ill in Holland, since he was officially a Dutch „front-line worker“ in the service of the Germans, he was treated by a German ‚Wehrmacht‘ doctor – and again went undetected.

As soon as he returned to Auffay, Ludi learned from a comrade from Paris that he belonged to a group that would be smuggled into Spain via the Pyrenees. In January 1944 the time had come. About 8-10 young Jews first drove to Toulouse, then on to Pau. Then they took the small train into the mountains, where a mountain guide was waiting for them. They walked with him along the railroad tracks at night. The ascent got steeper and steeper until they got over the snow line. The next evening they finally came to a hut where a second mountain guide was supposed to take over the group. But he did not come, so everyone had to walk back the dangerous way. The first attempt failed!

Back in Normandy, Ludi was sent to a new job in Labouheyre, south of Bordeaux by Kurt Reilinger († 1945). About ten of his companions from the „Hechaluz“ worked there as lumberjacks. Ludi was now working in a french sawmill. Here, he received the news of the arrest of the leading comrades of „Hechaluz“ in Paris. Ludi then quickly left the place with his companions and went to Bordeaux, where he found work in the German Navy. The irony of the story: Ludi could have met another men from Meimbressen there, Eberhard Wolff von Gudenberg, two years younger than he, the son of the baron and temporary mayor Arnold Wolff von Gudenberg, who was also in Bordeaux as an officer candidate for the Navy at the time, where the damage to its ship should be repaired. But this did not happen. Looking back, Eberhard Wolff von Gudenberg wrote after 62 years: *„Later, after the war, when people spoke about it openly in Israel and the question arose as to how the two Meimbressers would have behaved if they had collided there, Ludi said: 'Oh, you know, we were young men then. It was war and we were on different sides. Today we are friends ' . This dry and fair remark by Ludi Goldwein made me feel very moved and ashamed considering of the terrible fate that Germans had prepared for european Jews.“*

In May 1944 Ludi made a second attempt to reach Spain via the Pyrenees. This time it was the French underground movement that helped organizing the large refugee group. But even this attempt failed in the foothills: the guide, who had returned to the valley to fetch another group, had been shot by Germans on the way. The group that waited for him in vain made their way to Toulouse with good luck - and they all got there safely! The members of the „Hechaluz“, officially still considered to be Dutch civilian workers for the ‚Wehrmacht‘, were immediately sent on to Lyon, where they had to report to various German offices again. Ludi worked again for the German Air Force and outwardly lived *„under brilliant conditions“*. He and others had a complete villa at their disposal! However, here, too, they feared a possible exposure. In the meantime, after the successful allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944, the front was slowly drawing closer, so that Ludi and the other Jews worried about becoming involved in the expected fighting between the Allied troops and the Germans. They stayed in Lyon until about June 15, 1944, where little was heard of the war at that time. Then they finally got a message that everything had been settled for a transport to Spain again. Ludi and his colleagues from the „Hechaluz“ joined a group of around 30 people who wanted to try to get to Spain via Andorra. This time it worked: under the leadership of „Red Spaniards“, the group crossed the border to Andorra on the night of June 17-18, 1944 after a march through the

mountains which lasted several days. There, they were expected by the Jewish-American Relief Committee „Joint“ and housed in a hotel. After a week they went to Lerida in Spain, but this time „officially“!

Before his immigration to Erez-Israel („Alija“), Ludi spent his months in Lerida, then in Barcelona and Cadiz, before joining the *S.S. Guinée* to leave Europe for freedom. Almost six years earlier, he had left Cologne on a „Kindertransport“. On November 5, 1944, he had finally arrived in Haifa.

Translation: Marike Dorhs

Further reading: Helmut Burmeister / Michael Dorhs (Hrsg.), *Das achte Licht. Beiträge zur Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte der Juden in Nordhessen*. Hofgeismar 2002;-- Chanan Hans Flörsheim, *Über die Pyrenäen in die Freiheit: Von Rotenburg an der Fulda über Leipzig nach Amsterdam und durch Frankreich und Spanien nach Israel 1923-1944*. Hrsg. v. Heinrich Nuhn u. Erhard Roy Wiehn. Konstanz 2008;-- *Gerettet – auf Zeit. Kindertransporte nach Belgien 1938/1939. Katalog zur gleichnamigen Ausstellung des Lern- und Gedenkortes Jawne*. Redaktion: Adrian Stellmacher u. Anneke Winckel. Köln 2019;-- Auguste Moses-Nussbaum, *Reise mit zwei Koffern. Lebenserinnerungen*. Hrsg. v. Jürgen Kaumkötter u. Christoph Rass, kommentiert i. Zs.arb. m. Jannis Panagiotidis u. Frank Wolff. Göttingen 2017;-- Eberhard Wolff von Gudenberg, *Meimbressen, die Wölffe von Gudenberg und die Juden (Von den Anfängen bis 1945)*. In: *Dorfchronik Meimbressen. Festschrift zur 1100-Jahrfeier 2006*. Mit Beiträgen von Eberhard Wolff von Gudenberg, Norbert Rumpf, Heinrich Neutze u.v.a.m.. Meimbressen / Hofgeismar 2006, S. 1-101.



Ludi (Elieser) Goldwein at the Jewish Cemetery in Meimbressen at familv araves (1998)