

From Neuhof to Emek Hefer and back

recorded by Amnon Rimon

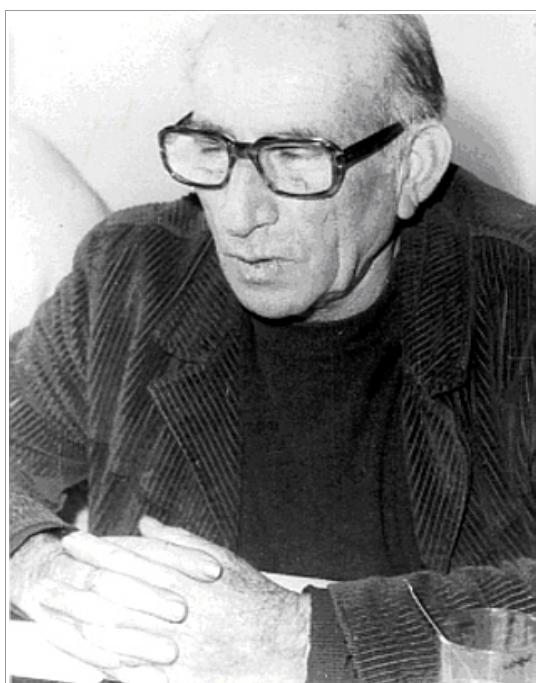
Sometime in mid-2006 I was forwarded from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology an E-mail sent by a certain Monica Kingreen who was looking for me. I did not have the faintest idea what it was all about and it took me some time to establish direct contact with Monica, just to discover that she is a staff member of the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt. This contact resulted in the following E-mail in August 2006:

"Hello dear Amnon Rimon, I found your name at the Jewishgen Archive concerning Neuhof. I hope it is the Neuhof near Fulda, you are interested in.

I am in the process of advising some people of the Neuhof historical society for the research about former Jewish life in Neuhof. It would be nice, if we can get in Contact...I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes yours Monica Kingreen

PS: I have sent you an email before, concerning a prayer book of David Sondheimer from Neuhof."



A few months earlier, my mother passed away, and in mid-2006 I was working on clearing my parent's house from their belongings, including their books, documents and photos. This coincidence, and the contact established with Hans-Dieter Larbig through Monica, has started my long and emotional (and virtual) journey, together with my late father Shlomo (Ewald) Sondheimer, from Neuhof to Emek Hefer and back.

My father passed away in 1996. He never really told me about his early days in Germany. I knew a little about his days in Holland at the "Hachshara", or training period, in The Netherlands between 1935 and 1939. I knew about his days in the Kibbutz he founded together with his "Hachshara" colleagues and I knew of course about our 52 years together, after he settled with

my mother in the settlement of Nira that later on merged with its bigger neighbor, Beit Yitzhak.

His family and life in Germany remained a "black hole" for me. He never volunteered to tell and I did not want to push him. This was totally different from my mother's story. In the late 1970ties a book was published about her family's history in Germany and this fascinating story preoccupied our family since then (Ascher Levys Sehnsucht nach Deutschland / Roman Frister, Berlin Siedler, 1999). My father kept his story in the shade of hers until his death.

Ewald Sondheimer was born in Neuhof near Fulda on 16 August 1919 to Nathan and Lina née Sommer and a brother to Elli and Liesel. His father Nathan was born in Utrichshausen in 30 December 1882 and Lina in Heinebach in 12 April 1885. Ewald's sisters were 7 and 5 years older: Elli was born in 9 February 1912 and Liesel in 12 October 1914. Very little documentation was left from his childhood and no witnesses are still alive to tell me his story. I had to rely on a few documents and photos that I found in my parents' belongings and nothing else.

In the past, I traveled a few times in the region of Neuhof and from my first tour in 1980 I remember the "Kali Berg" that was one of the few sites near his birthplace about which my father once told me. In 2001, while serving in Frankfurt I traveled with my wife again in the region and we discovered the village of Sondheim, possibly the place where the family originally came

from. While in Frankfurt (1999-2001) another discovery came to my attention: There was quite a prominent branch of the Sondheimers that lived in and around Frankfurt and one of them, Fritz Sondheimer from the company of Sondheimer &Co, I discovered coincidentally, was one of the founders of the Zionist movement in Frankfurt in the early 1900. He established, among others, Keren Hayesod, the organization I worked for in Frankfurt in the early 2000.

In 1929 the family moved to Huenfeld where they rented an apartment from Wilhelm Laufer in Hersfelder Str. 234 (or maybe No. 7?) and in March 1933 Elli moved to Neuwied. In the age of 19 (1932) Liesel opened a shop at the "Am-Anger" but a year later (1 April 1933) she had to close it due to the boycott of Jewish businesses. She moved to Kassel and the parents together with young Ewald followed in May 1933.

The Nazis were already in full power and I couldn't find out when exactly my father was expelled from school but, from written witnesses I know that in April 1934 he started to work as a "Lehrling" in Kassel. This too, lasted only a little more than a year.



Elli, Liesel und Ewald in Neuhof



The Laufer house in former times



The Laufer house nowadays

The Sondheimer family was shattered and scattered. Ewald moved to Holland to start his new life practicing agriculture with a Dutch farmer, Liesel too moved to Amsterdam and married there the Dutch Benedictus Wijnmann. The parents and Elli joined later. For a Ewald, the youngster of 16 years, life on the farm was a very tough and shaping experience. He developed a very strong conviction in Zionism, he became a lover of livestock and agriculture. Slowly became a social leader of the young people who have moved there from all over Germany, pushed by the Nazis, and prepared together to fulfill their Zionist vision: To participate in the establishment of a homeland for the Jews in a sovereign independent state.

Meanwhile, the Sondheimers were further on the move. The parents, Nathan and Lina, decided to join Liesel in Amsterdam where their first grandson, Wolfgang, was born in 1936. Ewald proceeded with his preparations to immigrate to Palestine. Nathan and Lina understood that there is no future for them in Europe and they decided to try their luck in South America, in Brazil.

I don't have any indications about the relations within the family but from scattered information I understand that they were quite tense, as all of the family members, grown ups now, had their own agenda and programs: Liesel wanted to stay with her family in Holland and Ewald insisted on his plans to go to Palestine. The parents, who were now in their fifties, expected that at least their youngest "kid" will come along with them and support them in building their new life in Brazil. Ewald had no intention to do that and in January 1939 Nathan and Lina boarded the ship *Kerguelen* headed for Rio-de-Janeiro.



Lina and Nathan Sondheimer before the ship Kerguelen started to Rio-de-Janeiro

The farewell was very emotional as Nathan described it in the diary he started to write after boarding the ship and which he kept filing for the almost one month trip to Rio.

"A huge silence fell upon us. One can see only wet eyes. Our greatest luck is to still have our beloved son Ewald amongst us ...and our grandson Wolfgang...but Ewald's wish to leave in January for the Holy Land only strengthened the silence..."

Ewald, who hoped already in January 1939 to get from the British Mandate authorities a certificate to immigrate to Palestine, was rejected and could make it as an illegal immigrant only many months later. He, together with many of his "Hachshara" colleagues, boarded the ship Dora that reached the coast of the Holy Land only a few days before the outbreak of WWII. Ewald joined the rest of his group in Kfar Saba and was preparing to settle in what later became Kibbutz Gvar-Am. He met here Eva Levy whom he knew already from Holland but here they became a couple, soon to enter the so called "Family.Tent", the institute in the Kibbutz that symbolized the establishment of a new family. But a family tent was not enough for Else Levy, his mother in law who lost her husband, Dr. Leo Levy, by an SA murderer in the "Kristal Night" and fled Germany in early 1939 with her youngest daughter, to settle in Tel-Aviv.

Else arranged a traditional Jewish wedding celebration and her apartment became very soon the Tel Aviv meeting point for Eva (who changed her name to the Hebrew version Hava) and Ewald (who changed to Shlomo) and their fellow "Kibbutzniks" who moved their settlement to its final location in the south of the country. Many of the Levy family made it to Palestine before the outbreak of WWII, including Eva's grandmother and two other sisters and also some of her cousins and nieces. Ewald, who was alone of all the Sondheimers was warmly accepted by the family and became Else's favorite.

In other parts of the world, things did not look so idyllic. Liesel stayed in Amsterdam trying to live a normal life together with Benedictus and young Wolfgang , but normal life did not last for too long. In May 1940 the Dutch government surrendered to the Germans and shortly afterwards the contact with them, between the Sondheimers in Palestine and in Brazil was cut, never to be resumed. For many years after the war, the only information about the fate of Liesel and her family was that they perished in Auschwitz. Only lately did I find in an official Dutch document the dates of death of the Wijnmanns

Meanwhile Eva and Shlomo decided to



leave the Kibbutz and to resettle in Nira, a new settlement in Emek Hefer where they now started their new private agricultural farm. In October 1944 Amnon was born and was also introduced into work with chicken on the farm. As a member of the Haganah, the pre-state Para-military organization, Shlomo was drafted and fought in the war of independence, defending the region of Emek Hefer from the invading Iraqi army. In Rio de Janeiro Elli got married to Peter Mottek and their daughter Vivian was born but Nathan was already very ill and in 1952 he died to be buried in Brazil. Lina decided to move to Israel to join Shlomo and his family.

Shlomo had now two children: Amnon, born in 1944 and Noemi who was born in 1948 while Shlomo was in the front, fighting for the independence of Israel.

Now, Shlomo became more and more involved in communal and public affairs.

The farm in Nira (that was swallowed in the 50ies by Beit Yitzhak, a neighboring village) grew rapidly and Avi, Shlomo's son in law, became his partner and this allowed Shlomo to dedicate more and more of his time to communal affairs. In Beit Yitzhak he served as co director of Israel's biggest agricultural cooperative while in the regional community he was elected as deputy chairman. In this capacity he started his slow way back to Germany and to Neuhof.

In 1960, after more than 18 years of hard work on the farm, Hava and Shlomo took their first vacation and went for a two months trip to Europe. I was 16 years old and they relied on me to run the farm during that period and with a small amount of money that they got as compensation from Germany they boarded a ship in Haifa that took them to the places where their childhood, their memories and part of their families were left. They did not intend to go to their places of birth: Hava in Bad Polzin\ Pomerania and Shlomo in Neuhof\ Hessen. They did not want to be confronted with their bitter memories of shattered family and childhood. They went to see some places they only dreamt of as children like Rome, Paris and Switzerland and they visited their relatives that were left in Europe and whom they did not see since the late 1930ies.

In London they met with Hava's sister Gretel who left Germany in 1938 and in Hamburg they met Elli, Shlomo's sister whom he did not see since he left Holland in 1939 and who came back from Brazil in the early 1950ies.

As they came back, Shlomo was quickly absorbed again by the work on the farm and by his communal responsibilities. I joined the army in 1962 to become a career officer and Noemi, who married Avi settled on the farm to become my father's partners.

In that period, the relations between Germany and Israel started to improve very slowly and carefully. The sentiments in Israel against Germany and Germans were very strong and very slowly, but constantly, a stream of Germans came to Israel to establish personal contacts and to try to work on rehabilitating relations on a personal basis.

Shlomo, in his capacity as Regional Council deputy chairman was a leading person in the establishment of relations between the regional councils of Siegen-Wittgenstein and Emek-Hefer. He hosted endless numbers of delegations and private people who came from Siegen and other places and showed them Israel's and his personal achievements in building the country and rebuilding his own family and life

Shlomo led also missions from Emek Hefer to Germany and slowly the relations were upgraded also to the federal level. One of his closest friends was the Bundestag delegate Waltraud Steinhauer.

One sunny Saturday, in the late 1980ies I went to see my parents (we live in Beit Yitzhak too, a few minutes walk from the farm) and met my father, doing some repair work on a water pipe. He looked ill and complained about pain in the stomach. Shortly afterwards he was diagnosed with Lung Cancer and the doctors at the hospital did not give him more than two months to live.

We did not accept this verdict and decided not to give up and to start a new war of survival. Sholomo went through surgery and all kind of chemotherapy and other sorts of treatment that gave him another 7 years with his wife Hava and his family. A few months before he died, in November 1996, I traveled with him and with my mother Hava in Germany, kind of farewell tour.

It was not an easy trip. My father's physical condition was not very good, my mother was also over 80 and emotionally they were both very loaded. I tried to do everything to ease their mood but success was limited

And then there was the question of German citizenship. My father was eligible to get back his German citizenship. We discussed it already in the early 1980ies. I thought that he deserves it and should materialize his rights and the benefits derived from it but, he refused. He said that now, that Israel has become his new homeland, he does not wish Germany "to do him a favor" and accept him as its citizen.

But slowly he softened his position also on this issue and after a long procedure the German citizenship was reissued to him in a modest ceremony at the German Embassy in Tel Aviv. The cycle was closed.

Ewald (now Shlomo) Sondheimer, born in Neuhof\Opperz in 16.8.1919 was a German citizen again. But now he was a different person.

Sixty years ago he was a German boy who hardly understood why his fellow Germans persecuted him and his family. It took him a long journey, a murdered sister, with husband and son and a shattered and scattered family, to understand that he did not belong there.

Now he was in his old-new homeland, where he could build a new home and a new family.

And yet, he was still ready to reconcile with those who did not want him amongst them.