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From Berleburg to South Africa (AM 215)

“I left my sister’s house on a Thursday morning.”

This is the start of the tale of Berleburg citizen Ludwig Gonsenhäuser, of which – at least part – of a tape recording has been preserved.

“I left my sister’s house on a Thursday morning.” Slowly, haltingly and with difficulty, the report advances. It is the 16th April 1936. The “Nuremberg Laws”, with which the systematic persecution of the Jews begins, have been in force for precisely seven months. Previously, in mid-1935, Ludwig's father Moritz Gonsenhäuser had had to sell their home and land in Berleburg. The Nazi boycotts against Jewish business people had driven Moritz Gonsenhäuser into debt. That which many, even many German Jews, could not have believed before 1933, occurred: The National Socialists really intensified the announced persecution of the Jews.

Now, in April 1936, Ludwig Gonsenhäuser is determined to emigrate to South Africa from Germany.

Three years before, in 1933, Ludwig may have already attempted it. This is what is suggested by details from his passport that have been preserved. **[1]**

Even the first page of this official document is astonishing, as it is “Passport No. 8”, which the mayor of Berleburg issued on 26th July 1933, just six months after Hitler’s seizure of power. Can it really be

that only 7 other citizens of Berleburg were in possession of a passport at this time?

[2]With the “visa” on page 6 of the passport, the Berleburg district administer grants Ludwig Gonsenhäuser a “one-off exit from the territory of the German Reich”. As the travel purpose, he has entered: “Visit to relatives in Strasbourg in Alsace”. On the opposite page 7, the visa from the French Consulate General in Mainz dated 2nd August 1933 can be found, with which Ludwig is accorded the right to enter the territory of the French Republic up to and including 2nd October 1933.

Nothing in the travel document indicates that Ludwig Gonsenhäuser had already left German soil and entered French territory in the year of the Nazis’ seizure of power. All the exit and entry stamps needed from the German and French sides are missing for this.

But just three years later, Ludwig is determined.

[**3**]He is 24 years and 8 months young, when he leaves his hometown of Berleburg in April 1936 and travels to Mainz to his sister, Käthe. **[4.1]** He is known and – what’s more – respected both in Wittgensteiner Land and in the villages of Schmallenberger Sauerland. **[4]** In his young adult life up to now, he has travelled through the villages by bicycle as a travelling salesman and sold textiles, among other things. In Schmallenberg’s “Stoffels” guesthouse, he indulges in the culinary skill of Stoffels’ Aunt Tres’chen and then enjoys the conversations and crude jokes with Merten Jupp, which was the nickname of the master butcher Josef Willmes.

This all ends abruptly in spring 1936.

Ludwig Gonsenhäuser knows he must get away. Members of the Berleburger Treude family, with whom his parents are friends, have warned, “You all must disappear from here. Otherwise, something is going to happen to you!”

He leaves. In his little suitcase, an old suit, two pullovers, underwear, a pair of socks, shoes and two towels. In his wallet, about 100 British pounds. And so he sets off on his great journey.

[**5.1**]It takes him from Mainz to Trier, where he arrives on the evening of 16th April. He alights from the train. He wants to spend the night in Trier and then continue on the next day to Bollendorf on the German-Luxemburg border, where he will try to swim across the river – the Sauer – and illegally enter Luxembourg.

Ludwig Gonsenhäuser steps onto the station forecourt in Trier. It is raining a little. On the hunt for a hotel, he walks back and forth along Bahnhofstraße. The longer he walks, the more desperate he becomes. Because at every hotel he comes across, there is a sign hanging resplendent, menacingly, and a message to him, which is unmistakable in its clarity: "No access to Jews!"

He does not know what to do and, in his helplessness, he continues to walk slowly up and down the street. Perhaps there is just one hotel that does not have such a placard?

Suddenly, he is called by his forename by someone walking behind him, "Ludwig!"

He is startled. But quick-witted as the desperate young man is, he does not turn around, but continues walking.

It only takes a short while and he is addressed again, "Ludwig!"

This time, he stops and turns around. He sees a soldier, a young man in uniform. The soldier comes closer and asks, "Don't you know me?" And the young soldier continues, "I am Roths Gustav, a classmate of your brother Helmut."

The agitation and fear gradually subside: On the flight from Germany, shortly before the salvation of the border to Luxemburg, a familiar face from Berleburg. Ludwig Gonsenhäuser is “happy”, as he later recalls.

After a couple of steps, the two are standing in front of a hotel, “You’re looking for a room, aren’t you? I’ll tell you what: I’ll take you into this hotel.” Together, they enter it. At the reception, the young soldier is given the ledger, requests a hotel room, is handed the room key and accompanies his acquaintance upstairs. Shortly thereafter, the two say goodbye. Thanks to the firm intervention by “Roths Gustav”, Ludwig Gonsenhäuser spends a peaceful night – of all things, in a hotel, into which there is generally “No Access!” for Jews anymore!

[5]The next day, he travels by taxi to Bollendorf, a border town to the North-West of Trier, crosses the River Sauer and arrives on Luxembourg territory. [**6**]

On 20th April 1936, he obtains a transit visa for France from the French vice-consul in Luxembourg. What a small-scale triumph: On the day on which the devil (Adolf Hitler) celebrates his birthday and is being congratulated in all the media, Ludwig Gonsenhäuser finally finds the path to freedom!

[**7**]On the morrow, he travels by train via Metz, Strasbourg, Basel and Chiasso to Genoa, which he leaves by ship on 28th April 1936. The passport stamp of the “Immigration Officer” documents that a new life could begin for the Berleburg-born Jew in South Africa on 14th May 1936.[**8**]

>>[G. Feidman, Mamme Loshn, AM 215]

Lucy Weinstein: Growing up German-Jewish in Berleburg around 1935(AM 216)

Ludwig Gonsenhäuser, who had left Germany early enough, must have been an alert contemporary, who carefully registered the increasing contamination of social life in Germany and drew his own conclusions from this. What do we know about the life of the small Jewish community in the Berleburg of this time? What changes did Jewish people notice in Berleburg after the Nazis seized power in 1933? [**9**] Lucie Weinstein can tell us a little about it.

Lucie Weinstein, née Krebs, was a member of this Jewish community in Berleburg which consisted of just 11 families. Ludwig and Helmut Gonsenhäuser will have known Lucie in any case. She was born in 1924 and attended the local secondary school at the time when Ludwig Gonsenhäuser left Germany, i.e. 1936. After the Pogrom Night in November 1938, they were all expelled from the school, as were all other Jewish students. In 1941, her family managed to escape to the USA. Lucie Weinstein later became a Professor of Oriental Art at the Southern Connecticut State University. In the late 1990s, she dedicated herself to investigating the fate of the Jews that had been expelled from Berleburg.

Let’s listen to what Lucie Weinstein tells us about the life of the Berleburg Jews in around 1935:

"I was nine years old when Hitler won the elections in 1933. Photos in a family album show me in Kindergarten and in elementary school as a happy child. My life was uneventful and my playmates were children from the neighborhood, none of them Jewish. At that time there were about eleven Jewish families spread throughout the city of about 3500 inhabitants. Jews were not newcomers to Berleburg. (...) Together with five or six Jewish children living in Berleburg at that time, I went to Hebrew school two afternoons a week. In a classroom on the second floor of our small synagogue, Teacher Stern taught us

biblical history, Hebrew prayers and praises for the holidays. Like most Berleburger Jews my family was of secular persuasion. That is to say, we welcomed the Sabbath on Friday nights with a good dinner which ended with the Hebrew prayer of thanks. Friday night provided a platform for my sister Hilde, brother Paul, and myself to show off in song and prayer what Teacher Stern had taught us. On the whole, we kept a superficially kosher home, primarily to please our grandfather, Levi Krebs. We children forgot about being kosher whenever we were sent to buy meat at Goldschmidt's butcher store. Julius Goldschmidt, the sole Berleburger survivor of Theresienstadt, never failed to reward us with a thick slice of pork sausage which we devoured with great delight on the way home. When the saddler Balds, living in the house next to ours, slaughtered a pig every year, we joined the neighborhood children in tasting the sausage we were offered. My parents didn't even object when my playmates, who lived next door to us, invited me on Sunday afternoons to their Christian education programs.

At home we celebrated Jewish holidays with visits to the synagogue, good food, and presents on the appropriate occasions.
Around Christmas time, Hilde, Paul, and I considered ourselves lucky to be Jewish for a number of reasons; not least of which was our receiving presents twice: on Chanukkah at home and on Christmas at the houses of friends and neighbors. We were usually invited to sing "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht..." (Silent Night, Holy Night) and other Christmas songs at Clara and Willie Wahl's apartment upstairs in our house. I loved the fragrance of the freshly cut Christmas tree, colorfully decorated and lit with candles. Christmas day, we sang some more at the Wahl's house and returned home loaded with presents.

My father worked hard to make a living and we did not spend much time with him except on Saturdays or Sundays. Whenever we persuaded him to play with us, he would tell us heroic stories about the German army. We loved playing soldier with him and he enjoyed demonstrating how well German soldiers were trained. I remember standing in a row with Hilde and Paul, each of us holding a stick, and

my father commanding: (“Das Gewehr über, das Gewehr ab! Arschbacken zusammengespitzt!”) //I will not translate these two sentences!// While my mother shook her head with displeasure, we would roll over with laughter because father had used a vulgar word.

Like most Berleburger I remember the Schützenfest (marksmen's fair), a big yearly event in which the Krebs family participated to the fullest. There was the parade with King and Queen riding in a carriage. I still have group photos showing my parents, aunts and uncles in a crowd of people from Berleburg with lots of beer and sausages. Once I asked my father, who was a fine marksman, why he could never hit the wooden bird and become King. He simply answered, I always made sure to shoot just a little bit next to the Bird because they would never allow a Jew to become King. Somehow I accepted this answer.

It seems that in spite of our Germanness, there always was a rarely mentioned difference between (Protestant) Christian and Jewish Germans that went beyond religion. It was only much later that I realized the strength Hitler drew from such anti-Jewish attitudes that would raise their ugly head ever more frequently. Everyone knew their place in neat, little Berleburg. If a Jew could not become King, a Gypsy did not even appear in my photos of the marksmen's fair. They lived in a ghetto near the hill. One afternoon, it must have been 1935-36, Hilde, Paul and I were watching a Shirley Temple film in the small Berleburg movie theatre that was filled to capacity. Suddenly the manager rushed in, followed by an SA man with two children. Glancing at us briefly, he passed by and ordered three Gypsy children to leave in order to make room for his s.c. “Aryan” late-comers. Gypsies were ranked even lower than the Jews.

A few years later, the ovens of Auschwitz knew no such discrimination."**[10]**

>>[G. Feidman, Nigun Gedalia, AM 216]

Berleburg holiday idyll in 1936 (Berleburg DVD)

As luck would have it, a few years ago, a film about Berleburg was found in an archive in Münster in Westphalia. The film had been recorded in the year, during which the last Berleburger Gonsenhäuser, Ludwig, left his place of birth and hometown. The black-and-white film shows the idyll of a small Westphalian town in the middle of the 1930s, which Lucie Weinstein, who we have just heard from, knew well.

In summer 1936, when Ludwig had already – thank God – been in South Africa for two months, a family from Münster took their holiday in Berleburg and in Wittgensteiner Land.

In doing so, they followed the trend for a "summer retreat" into the rural surroundings, which had arisen towards the end of the 19th century in Germany and which had enjoyed growing popularity among the middle classes after the First World War.

It was the Wasowicz family from Münster, who took their holiday in Berleburg in the summer of 1936. Philipp Wasowicz was a cellist by profession and a member of the symphony orchestra of the city of Münster. He was married to Maria Huick, who came from an affluent Dortmund family. With them travelled their only child, a daughter called Sonja who was born in 1926. She gave the rolls of film about the holiday in Berleburg to the archive in Münster ten years ago.

The film shows places that were naturally very familiar to all the Berleburger Gonsenhäusers. This includes, especially, the striking Berleburg Castle, which is situated high above the town.

Then the imposing Protestant parish church on Schloßstraße on the way from the lower town up towards the castle.

And we see cows in the little River Odeborn. The former home of Moritz Gonsenhäuser, which he had been forced to sell a year previously, was just a stone's throw, perhaps 150 metres, away. The house of Uncle Levy was even closer to the bridge that we can see in the film. This house remained in the possession of Levy's son Max until the end of 1938. But more on that later.

What we can see is pure idyll. Except suddenly the contemporary history takes its toll for a brief moment in the holiday film. On the lower part of Schloßstraße, we can see the Nazi flags with the swastika symbol. And a little bit later we see a SA man coming along the street.

Back in August 1931, there had already been a public demonstration of the NSDAP with, believe it or not, 1,000 participants in Berleburg. During the Reichstag election in November 1932 and more than ever at the last half-way free election on 5th March 1933, the Nazis had won a clear absolute majority of votes in Protestant Berleburg and Wittgensteiner Land.

On 1st April 1933, this was followed by boycotts and smear campaigns against Jewish businesses in Berleburg and Wittgensteiner Land, which ultimately meant the economic end for Moritz Gonsenhäuser's family. In the summer of 1933, the residential area of the "gypsies" was placed under a state of exception. This meant curfews, confinements, armed patrols, raids, arbitrary detentions and mistreatment of the "gypsies". And in April 1936, when Ludwig left Berleburg, there was a travelling exhibition about "Racial Biology" and "Eugenics" in his hometown, in which the Jews and "gypsies" were discriminated against and insulted perfidiously. 6,000 visitors in Berleburg alone saw this exhibition. Unbelievable and unimaginable.

Of course, the holiday film of the Wasowicz family shows nothing of all this. Instead, idyllic postcard scenes and an ideal rural world.

Films can also lie – be it consciously or unconsciously.

At the end, we even see the Nazi flag in the wind on the castle of the Berleburg Princes. The aristocratic "leadership" had declared its solidarity with the mob. At the end came the final banishment of all Jews from this homely, beautiful Berleburg, which we see in this film.

Roy Gonsenhäuser on the German-Jewish community at the beginning of the early 20th century (AM 224)

[**11.1**]During the laying of the "Stolperstein" memorials, which are intended to keep alive the memory of the exiled Berleburg Jews, Roy Gonsenhäuser, the son of Ludwig, delivered a speech in Berleburg on 2nd September 2008, which left a lasting impression on the audience. The following passage can be seen as an addition to the information from Lucie Weinstein. Among other things, Roy said the following in front of a large group of descendants of former Berleburg Jews, who had travelled from all over Europe, and before many Berleburg citizens:

"At the beginning of the 20th century, the German-Jewish community was virtually fully integrated into German society on all levels – with the exception of the aristocracy –, and the majority of German Jews had developed a national identity, which set them apart like no other from the Polish, Hungarian and French Jews. It was a German identity, of which the Jews were proud!

The way the Germans approached things and overcame their challenges, their reasoning and their enthusiasm for logic, classification and order were even reflected in the Jewish religion.

At the start of the 20th century the Jews played an important role in German society. There was an unusually large amount of outstanding

accomplishments of Jewish men and women, for example, in the field of sciences and the arts. This was inversely proportional to their small proportion of the German population. It would be easy to present a long list of German-Jewish doctors, scientists, poets, painters, composers and musicians.

The extermination of German Jews as a part of German culture was and is a loss, which leaves behind a gaping wound. A loss, which can never be replaced by anything. This loss – irreversibly – affects all Germans.

The exiled and often murdered Jewish people were German citizens, first and foremost. They were German citizens in the same way as someone could be a Catholic or Protestant German citizen." [**11.2**]

>>[G. Feidman, Amigos, AM 224]

Max Gonsenhäuser loses his job, house and life* (AM 220)

When the 7 children of Moritz Gonsenhäuser - by age: Käthe, Max, Ludwig, Kurt, Helmut, Hans and Werner - went or travelled from Berleburg over the mountain to Schmallenberg at the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s, they met two very trusted people there: cousins Erna and Max Gonsenhäuser. These were two of a total of eight children by Moritz's oldest brother Levy (1866-1920) and his wife Johanna née Stern (1869-1926) from Schmallenberg.

Today, I want to tell you the sad story of Max Gonsenhäuser and his family.

Max was born in Berleburg on 4th December 1896. Here, he married Betty Mayer in 1924, who came from Wetzlar in the state of Hessen and with whom he had three children: [**11.3**]Ernst (*+1924), Edith (1925) and Hannelore (1929). After a number of moves within the

state of Hessen, the young family moved to Schmallenberg at the end of the 1920s. Max established himself as a cattle trader here.[**11.4**]

Max practised this profession until at least the start of 1936, as a list by the Schmallenberg city administration listed him as one of a total of 7 independent cattle traders in February 1936. But a short while later, on 6th July 1938, the professional situation of Max changed dramatically. With the “Gesetz zur Änderung der Gewerbeordnung” (the Law on the Change of the Industrial Code), Jews were forbidden from this profession. [**12**] Henceforth, Max was forced to earn his money as a day labourer and casual worker, for example building roads.

This was not the final measure of repression, under which Max and his family had to suffer.

On the morning of the synagogue fire in Schmallenberg, on 10th November 1938, and on the following day, all the Jewish men in Schmallenberg and two male youths, a total of 11 people, were taken into s.c. "Protective Custody". [**13**]Four of them were locked in the police cell in Schmallenberg’s guild hall. The “admission report” records that Max Gonsenhäuser was arrested on 11th November 1938 at 6:00 in the evening by order of the Geheime Staatspolizei Dortmund (Gestapo) and brought to the local police prison. 7 days later, Max and two other detainees were released. [**14**] Before this, they were forced under duress to accept and sign the following declaration:

“We (Max Gonsenhäuser, Emil Stern and Max Stern) are willing to sell our house and land in the first days (after release from the police prison). We are explicitly advised that we

1. must inform the local police authorities within 8 days about to whom and under which conditions a sale is to take place,
2. that a sale of the house and land must only take place with the agreement of the NSDAP.”

Max, who at this point had already been living in rented accommodation with his family in Schmallenberg for approximately 10 years, owned his own house in Berleburg (Hochstrasse 6). It was his parental home. He very probably inherited it after the death of his father and mother.

[**15**]Just 4 days after the release of Max Gonsenhäuser from the Schmallenberg police prison, the following "sales contract", not even four full lines long, was drawn up on the writing paper of Berleburg-based company "Gustav Hoch. Bau- und Möbel-Werkstätte":

"Between Mr. Max Gonsenhäuser & the master carpenter Richard Hoch, the following has been decided today, Max Gonsenhäuser shall sell to Richard Hoch his house at Hochstr. No. 6 in Berleburg for the price of 4,300.00 Reichsmark".

But the absurdly low sum of 4,300 Reichsmark was not at Max Gonsenhäuser's free disposal. Max had to literally beg the Nazi authorities to receive small sums every now and then over the coming years. The financial situation of the family was so precarious that Betty, Max's wife, took Jewish children from Dortmund as holidaymakers into the small Schmallenberg apartment and was paid 2.50 Reichsmark per day for this.

The forced sale of the parental home marks the end of the family of Levy Gonsenhäuser, his children and grandchildren in Berleburg. Within just 11 days, between the 11th and 22nd November 1938, the Nazis succeeded in destroying the economic basis of a Jewish family and establishing a s.c. "Volksgenosse" and member of the NSDAP as the beneficiary of this operation.

After the forced abandonment of profession and the forced sale of their house in Berleburg, Max and Betty Gonsenhäuser lived with their daughters Edith and Hannelore in Schmallenberg for another three-and-a-half years – until in May 1942, when the entire family had

to present themselves in the city of Dortmund, 120 km away, at the command of the GESTAPO Dortmund. [**16.1**] Here, they were bundled into a train, which reached the Theresienstadt Ghetto in today's Czech Republic on 19th May 1942

Since the Anti-Jewish Pogrom in November 1938, the Nazis had not only triggered the 2nd World War, but had also begun with the final extermination of the Jews in Europe in 1941.

In Jewish circles, it had quickly got around that the s.c. "Transportation to the East" led to concentration and extermination camps, some of which were very remote, in Central and Eastern Europe and meant death for the Jews.

For this reason, many Jews felt a certain relief that the s.c. "Theresienstadt Old-Age Ghetto" was established near Prague at the end of 1941. Because, for reasons of deception and propaganda and – above all – to rob the Jews a further time, the approximately 42,000 Jews who were transported to Theresienstadt in the years that followed were led to believe that the state had committed "to provide accommodation and food for life, to wash their laundry, provide medical treatment and pharmaceuticals as needed and provide necessary hospital stays". In order to "benefit" from these supposed "advantages" in the Theresienstadt Ghetto, all Jews who were transported there had to conclude s.c. "home purchase agreements".

And in that way they finally were robbed of their last money.

Max, Betty, Edith and Hannelore Gonsenhäuser stayed almost 17 months in Theresienstadt before they were deported to Auschwitz in what is today Poland on 9th October 1944.

[**16**]After they were robbed of their profession in 1936 and their assets in 1938, the Germans robbed them here – three months before the liberation of the extermination camp by the Red Army in January 1945 – of their lives.[**17.1**]

*(Some very important notes in Norbert Otto, "Stolpersteine")

>>[G. Feidman, The Israelites, AM 220]

Ludy and Roy visiting Berleburg (AM 217)

After the 12 years of barbarism unleashed by Nazi Germany in Europe, it seemed impossible to many that a Jew could ever travel to Germany again of their own accord. But Ludwig Gonsenhäuser and some others did this. Roy reports:

“When I came to Berleburg for the first time in the mid-1960s, I accompanied my father Ludwig Gonsenhäuser, a citizen of the Republic of South Africa. Regardless of the events that had caused him to emigrate from Germany in 1936, he remained in his own way “100%” a proud German citizen. (I know that this is an odd statement for many among you. But it was nevertheless the case!) My father and I travelled from Frankfurt and the closer we came to Bad Berleburg, the more agitated and tense he became. When we walked around the town, he showed me the house that he grew up in. He showed me the synagogue, the house of Uncle Levi and lots more. And to all who he encountered, he made it clear that he was “from here”, that he was “a Berleburger”. I had the feeling that he would burst from pure pride!”

[>>G. Feidman, Dilugim, AM 217]

So near and yet so far (AM 222)

After the disaster of the century of the Nazi crimes, it was almost inconceivable that a deep friendship could ever develop between a German and a Jew again. The Feldhaus family from Schmallenberg and the Gonsenhäuser family, whose ancestors came mainly from the region around Berleburg, provided the counter-evidence for this 50 years ago.

And this is how it came about:[**17**]

Although the two Westphalian towns of Schmallenberg and Berleburg are only 13.000 meters apart they, nevertheless, were strangers for a long time. Albrechtsplatz peak and Jagdhaus village for many people from Berleburg and Schmallenberg still seem to mark the line where —for both communities—their own world ends and another one begins. But there are always exceptions to the rule. And this is a case in point because there once lived in these two towns people to whom the differences between Schmallenberg and Berleburg did not mean anything at all. These people were Jewish residents many of whom were as familiar with the other community as they were with their own. The pleasure of meeting residents from their neighbouring town was something which did not disappear neither after the bitter experience of barbarity at home nor under the far away South African sky.

Over a period of almost 200 years—from the mid-18th to the 20th century—the Jews of Berleburg and Schmallenberg had been as close as close could be. They knew and visited each other and shared one another's joys and sorrows and would also engage in an occasional argument. Marriages between members of the two jewish communities were a longstanding tradition. The mountain chain Rothaarkamm was not a dividing line in their eyes but merely a topographical elevation requiring a greater or lesser degree of effort to pass over in order to do business with Schmallenberg's residents or vice versa. But the main reason for crossing the mountain range was to visit friends and relatives on both sides of the boundary. Their family names— to mention only a few— were names such as Stern, Goldschmidt, Frankenthal, and -- Gonsenhäuser.[**18.1**]

Cape Town, in the mid-1960s: The Schmallenberg civil engineering contractor Josef Feldhaus and his wife Liesel having completed a round trip of South Africa are spending the last three days of their holiday in Cape Town.

Looking for a souvenir to take home for their daughters, they enter a jeweler's establishment in downtown Cape Town. "Please feel free to speak German. My name is Kurt Baldinger and I come from Berlin," says the shop owner. In the conversation it soon became clear that the holiday-makers from Schmallenberg had really missed some of the highlights of the Cape region.

The following morning the Capetonian from Berlin without previous notice stood outside the hotel and surprisingly offered his German customers a sightseeing tour in his private car. Among other sights they visited some characteristic fishing villages and the famous Table Mountain. "If I hadn't taken you around today I would have gone to my club," Baldinger remarked to his guests in the early afternoon and asked them whether by completing their tour they wanted him to take them to the clubhouse outside the city.

The Star of David and the family names engraved on a plaque outside the building made the guests aware that they were going to visit a Jewish club. "Ludi," Baldinger shouted out loudly. "Visitors from Germany. Here are some Germans!" Ludwig Gonsenhäuser known to everyone as Ludi appeared on the scene: "Hello, my name is Ludi Gonsenhäuser. I am also German. Where are you from?" inquired the tall man with the slightly graying hair. "From near Dortmund," the visitors replied.

The sort of conversation which followed is not unusual for people meeting for the first time. It is friendly and marked by mutual respect but generally noncommittal. Until all of a sudden Ludi Gonsenhäuser started talking enthusiastically and wide-eyed about the snow he remembered from Germany. When the guests said that they also get snow in winter time, Gonsenhäuser replied confidently: "But surely, not in Dortmund!" Somewhat embarrassed the guests admitted that their previous remark about Dortmund was only meant to give a rough idea about their whereabouts in Germany.

"In fact, we're country folks", Josef Feldhaus said. "But you wouldn't know the small town where we come from." Since Ludi Gonsenhäuser's curiosity was now fully aroused he wanted to know precisely what their home town was. The guests replied: "We come from Schmallenberg."

For a moment silence descended upon the Jewish clubhouse and its visitors... Then Ludi Gonsenhäuser replied with a double question which so effortlessly and cheerfully tripped from his tongue that his guests were dumbfounded: "Do you know aunt Treschen from 'Stoffels'? And do you know Merten Jupp?"

Josef and Liesel Feldhaus were startled and not ready for an encounter with a person they had only known for half an hour and whom they happened to meet in the most unfamiliar place – some 5000 miles away from home - and who to their amazement pronounced some familiar Schmallenberg names with such an ease in such unfamiliar circumstances. [**18**]Of course they knew aunt Treschen from 'Stoffels', the cook at Stoffels tavern in Schmallenberg town. [**19**]And they certainly knew Josef Willmes, the butcher, called 'Merten Jupp', a family relative.[**20.1**]

Then Ludi Gonsenhäuser, born in Berleburg on 16th July, 1911 as the son of Jewish parents, began to talk about himself by saying that before he fled Germany he traveled around by bicycle selling textiles to farmers' daughters in the Berleburg region and also in Schmallenberg and the surrounding area. This job gave him the opportunity of getting to know quite a few families in such nearby villages as Holthausen, Grafschaft, Oberkirchen, Nordenau, and in the village of -- Werpe, situated north-west of Schmallenberg.

Ludi told them that while travelling on his bicycle through the Schmallenberg countryside he especially enjoyed meeting a great character on the Heite farm in the small village of Werpe. [**20.2**]"Outside the farmhouse," Ludi Gonsenhäuser went on to say,

"there was always a nice red-haired elderly gentleman sitting on a bench when I passed through the village at night.
We often sat happily together, chatting away and exchanging interesting stories." Once more in Cape Town the guests from Germany were startled. "The elderly man with the red hair," Josef Feldhaus said with his soft voice, " was the man who is responsible for my red hair. He was my grandfather."[**20.3**]

Ludi Gonsenhäuser died on 29th June, 1971, while on holiday in Spain, a few days before his 60th birthday. Josef Feldhaus respecting his Jewish friend´s most fervent wish saw to it that he was buried in his native town of Berleburg, from which he had been expelled 35 years before.

>>[G. Feidman, Bublitschki, AM 222]

The resting places of the Gonsenhäusers and Bachenheimers in Berleburg and Wetter (near Marburg) (AM 213)

It is a lovely custom that Jews – when they visit the graves of their ancestors, acquaintances and friends – leave behind a small stone on the gravestone. We Christians do not have this great tradition.

Should you – and this goes particularly for the young people among you – ever travel to Germany, then you should initially seek out the cemeteries in Berleburg and Wetter near Marburg. You will then see that your ancestors are not forgotten. Their graves are still visited.

The most important places in terms of family history for the Gonsenhäuser and Bachenheimer families are Berleburg and Wetter. In the Jewish cemeteries in these small towns, you will find graves, some of which are around 250 years old.

In Berleburg, there are two cemeteries where Jewish people have been buried: The old Jewish cemetery in direct proximity to the Berleburg Castle and the municipal cemetery, which is a little further away.

[**20**]Ludwig’s grave is in the Jewish burial ground at the municipal cemetery in Berleburg. [**21**]In three rows here, there are 39 graves of Jews from between 1906 and 1971. Ludwig was consequently the last Jew to be buried here.

The Jewish burial ground at the municipal cemetery is the final resting place of a total of 6 members of the Gonsenhäuser family. As well as Ludwig, these are:[**22**]

1. Henriette Gonsenhäuser (1837-1921) née Bachenheimer from Wetter, wife of Meyer Gonsenhäuser, [**23**]mother of Moritz Gonsenhäuser and thus grandmother of Moritz' seven children Käthe, Max, Ludwig, Kurt, Helmut, Hans and Werner.[**24**]
2. Frieda Gonsenhäuser (1879-1917) née Kanter from Neustadt, [**25**]the first wife of Moritz Gonsenhäuser and mother of Käthe, Max, Ludwig and Kurt[**26**]
3. Johanna Gonsenhäuser (1886-1920) née Bachenheimer from Wetter, [**27**]the second wife of Moritz Gonsenhäuser and mother of Helmut[**28**]
4. Levy Gonsenhäuser (1866-1920), the oldest son of Meier Gonsenhäuser and [**29**] his wife Henriette and therefore brother to Moritz Gonsenhäuser, among others [**30**]
5. Johanna Gonsenhäuser (1869-1926) née Stern from Schmallenberg, wife to Levy Gonsenhäuser, who was just mentioned.[**31.1**]

Allow me at this point to digress slightly about a member of your family, for whom there is no grave to be found in any German or European cemetery. I am talking about Auguste Gonsenhäuser (1893-1942) née Bachenheimer from Wetter, the third wife of Moritz Gonsenhäuser and mother of Hans Wolfgang (later known as Peter Grant) and Werner. Auguste is the grandmother of Richard, Michael, Barbara, Anita and Allen Gonsenhäuser.

Auguste Gonsenhäuser has - to quote the significant Jewish poet Paul Celan - a “grave in the air".[**31**]

From the registration files of the town of Berleburg, it is known that she had been married to Moritz Gonsenhäuser since 30th August 1920. [**32**]She left Berleburg on 14th September 1935 and moved to Rotenburg near Fulda. Two-and-a-half months before this, her husband Moritz had already left his hometown of Berleburg and was "travelling" together with his youngest sons on 27th June 1935, as the registry office records. [**33**]Auguste had been in Frankfurt since April 1936. She worked in the Israelite Hospital there in Gagernstrasse until she was deported to the Raasiku concentration camp near Reval/ Estonia at the end of September 1942 and murdered. Her fate is so tragic and her services to her own sons and to young German Jews who wanted to emigrate or flee Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1942 are so unique that she should have her very own, long chapter in the history of the Gonsenhäusers and Bachenheimers.

[**34**]I turn my attention now to the second Jewish cemetery in Berleburg, the old one.

Helmut Gonsenhäuser had recounted the following about the old Jewish cemetery (am Berlebach), just a stone's throw from the castle, to the local newspaper in February 1979: "I can still remember visiting this lovely old cemetery with my father when I were a child. And if I remember correctly, there were graves there from the start of the 18th century." [**35**]The oldest gravestone that is still preserved today at this old Jewish cemetery bears the Jewish date 5524, which corresponds to the year 1763/64. It is very possible therefore that Helmut, who was born in 1920, might have seen even older gravestones during his childhood and youth.

[**36**]At this old Jewish cemetery is the burial site of Meier Gonsenheuser (1831-1898), the ancestor of the Gonsenhäuser family and husband of Henriette. [**37**]Different to the other spelling, the family name is written on the gravestone with "eu" instead of "äu". The Hebrew inscription on the gravestone says:

“Here is buried Meier, son of Mosche Gonsenheuser. He died on Wednesday 22nd Adar and was buried on the eve of the holy Shabbat, on 24th Adar 5658. May his soul be bound up in the bond of life.” Jewish Rabbi Steinweg from Laasphe (Wittgensteiner Kreisblatt, 19.3.1898) spoke at the funeral of Meier Gonsenheuser. Meier Gonsenheuser’s wife Henriette was buried at the new cemetery in 1921, as the old one had been closed in 1905 as it was full to capacity. [**38.1**]

The family reunion of the Gonsenhäusers here in Virginia Beach could also be called a family reunion of the Bachenheimer family. Because the paths of these two families have passed more than once: The second and third marriages of Moritz Gonsenhäuser, who was actually called Max, were to women from the Bachenheimer family, Johanna and Auguste. The children Helmut, Hans Wolfgang (Peter Grant) and Werner resulted from these marriages. Moritz’s father, Meier Gonsenhäuser, was also married to a Bachenheimer, Henriette.

Burial sites and funeral monuments of the Bachenheimers – as well as the two burial sites of Henrietta and Johanna at the new Jewish cemetery in Berleburg – have survived in Wetter in particular.

[**38**]This cemetery is located far outside the village of Wetter on an impressive hilltop. It is mentioned for the first time in 1752. The dead of the Jewish communities in Wetter and in the neighbour villages of Goßfelden, Caldern and Sterzhausen were entombed here.

The ancestors of the Bachenheimer family are to be found at this forest cemetery:

[**39,40**]Marcus and Sara
[**41**]Susmann and Hedwig and the graves of
[**42**]Levi and Sophie
[**43**]Jettchen
[**44**]Bertha and
[**45,46**]Else.

[**47.1**]From the viewpoint of Mark and Joan, Frank and Anita, I want to give a rough outline of these family relations:

- Marcus Bachenheimer, born in 1796 in Bad Vilbel near Frankfurt, and his wife Sara are their great great-grandparents and
- Susmann and Hedwig Bachenheimer, born in 1849 and 1852 respectively, are their great-grandparents.

And another burial site at the Jewish cemetery in Wetter should also be mentioned today. [**47**]It is the burial site of Fred Buchheim, a German Jew who was born in Wetter and died in Wetter after the Second World War following flight and banishment. He is not a Gonsenhäuser and not a Bachenheimer either.

But he is someone who has very frequently mentioned with great gratitude that his survival is owed especially to one person from your family: Her name is Auguste Gonsenhäuser née Bachenheimer. Kurt Elieser Bachenheimer, who adopted the name Nahary after his emigration to Palestine, wrote: "I am convinced that many young people of this period (...) owe my Aunt Auguste their lives. I'm certain that they remember her fondly."

With the help from Auguste Gonsenhäuser Fred Buchheim was able to flee to the Netherlands in late 1938 and from there to Great Britain where he became a soldier in the British Army. After the war he came back to Wetter. Fred Buchheim passed away in 1958 and was buried on the local jewish cemetary. He was married with a christian woman who therefore put a christian cross onto the gravestone.[**48.1**]

>>[G. Feidman, Sholem-Alekhem, AM 213]

Roy's "Imagine" (AM 212)

In 2008, Roy Gonsenhäuser ended a speech in Berleburg as follows. Roy said:

“At the end of my little speech, let us think and imagine ---- something inconceivable, well impossible:

− We are looking at the old Berleburg Synagogue in the morning mist and see how a group of men are meeting in front of it in order to start morning prayers.
− At lunchtime, we pass by one of their houses and suddenly smell the exquisite aroma of their feast day meal.
- And then: In the peace of an early evening – we only hear exactly!, we hear through the fog of time a thirteen year old boy, who is reading from the Torah in his unmistakable German tone and is preparing for his bar mitzvah, for the transition from a young German boy into a young German man."

As wonderful as this utopia is, it is unfortunately inconceivable. But sometimes, you are allowed to dream the inconceivable and the unimaginable. But this makes waking from the dream then all the harder.

>>[G. Feidman, From the Shetl, AM 212]

My "Imagine" (AM 1)

At the end of my speech - to use the words of Roy -, let us think and imagine something ----that really happened nearly ninety years ago.

- It's Sunday, 30th June 1918. We are looking into a living room of a house in downtown Berleburg, Mittelstraße 5. Moritz Gonsenhäuser is living here with his four children. His wife Frieda had passed away the year before

- A 12 years old jewish girl is opening the autograph book of her christian girl friend
- Then she takes a pencil and sits down at the table
- Now she starts with writing down the first words:[**48.2**]
- In very accurate german letters you can read:
- "Behüt' dich Gott!": "May God protect you".

First, I read the poem in german. Please, listen to it's melody.

((And now: the translation of this wonderful poem, written by a jewish girl from Berleburg for her christian girl friend in Berleburg:))

"Behüt' dich Gott", so heißt das Wort,
"May God protect you", so goes the saying,

Das man sich sagt beim Scheiden.
That one says when parting.

Weil sich in dieses eine Wort
Because in this one saying

Die besten Wünsche kleiden.
Best wishes are clothed.

"Behüt' dich Gott" ich ruf dir's zu
"May God protect you" I call out as greeting

Als Gruß in fernen Landen.
to you in distant lands.

Und einzig glücklich sein wirst du,
And you will be only happy

Wenn du das Wort verstanden.
when you understand the saying.

"Behüt' dich Gott", in Freud und Leid.
"May God protect you", in joy and sorrow.

"Behüt' dich Gott", zu aller Zeit.
"May God protect you" at all times. [**48.3**]

Diese Zeilen schreibt dir zur
freundlichen Erinnerung
Deine Freundin
Käthe Gonsenhäuser.
Berleburg d. 30. Juni 1918.

Your friend Käthe Gonsenhäuser
writes you these lines
with fond memories.
Berleburg, June 30, 1918."[**50**]

[**51**]
>>[Herbie Hancock: The Imagine Project (Song), AM1]