

The Mainzer Family of Heppenheim

The Early Years

Here in this house - in Friedrichstrasse - they lived and worked for almost 30 years: the families of Jakob and Berthold Mainzer.

Just a short distance away stood their parents' house - with the original shop.

Mordechai Mainzer and his wife Chawa settled there around 1800 after moving to Heppenheim from nearby Lorsch. They lived in this house in Wilhelmstrasse until 1907.

It was Mordechai's son Jakob who laid the original foundations of a successful retail business. Then Jakob's extremely industrious son Wolf, a.k.a. Wilhelm Mainzer, took over his father's textile shop. Wolf and his wife Babette had nine children.

Their sons Jakob and Berthold joined the business; first Jakob, then seven years later Berthold. The range of available goods in their shop grew. The building became too small for the brothers' plans and ideas.

In 1906 they commissioned the renowned architect Heinrich Metzendorf to build a new store. It was to stand here in the Friedrichstrasse, known to Heppenheimers as "Bachgass". Living and working space, workshop, sales and exhibition rooms - everything was to fit under one roof. In 1907 the spacious new building was ready to move into.

A wide range of products was on offer to the people of Heppenheim and beyond. They continued to trade in textiles, but also added a comprehensive selection of furniture. There were also fitting rooms, needlework rooms, offices, a bank, and an emigration agency.

1911 was an anniversary - the store turned 50.

Jakob Mainzer married Berta Morgenthau from Crumstadt in 1906. Their children, Richard, Hildegard, Wilhelm and Fritz, were born and educated at school in Heppenheim and later Bensheim.

Berthold also had a family. His wife Johanna Meyer came from the other Heppenheim - an der Wiese, near Worms. Son Georg and twins Rudolf and Lotte were born.

In January 1914 grandma Babette died at the age of 70.

In the summer of that year World War One broke out. Jakob Mainzer fought for four years on the front. During this time Berta Mainzer shouldered all the responsibility. The business had to carry on. The young children needed caring for.

The grandfather reached the age of 84. He died in 1922. After his death, Jakob and Berthold divided the business in half.

The children received a very good schooling. But the parents also attached great importance to the "fine arts" - theatre and music. Wilhelm Mainzer wrote in his memoirs: *"I never enjoyed performances of Mozart's 'Marriage of Figaro', or Weber's 'The Marksman', or Verdi's 'Aida' more than those I saw in Darmstadt as a boy."*

About his parents, Jakob and Berta, Wilhelm wrote, *"My parents worked hard until late at night in their large department store. They simply had too little time to look after the children. Besides the nanny we also had a cook and a servant girl."*

The Family during the Nazi Period

In 1933 Hitler came to power.

"Germans, stand up for yourselves. Don't buy Jewish goods!" could be heard also in Heppenheim. SA men stood in shop doorways intimidating customers. By 1937 all of Jakob and Berthold Mainzer's children would have fled Germany.

Jakob and Berta Mainzer left Heppenheim in 1935. Peter Metzendorf, who had previously worked as an apprentice for the Mainzer's, now took over the running of the business. They meanwhile went to Berlin to stay with their daughter Hildegard, then travelled to their son Wilhelm in the Ukraine, and finally to Holland. They were there until their internment in the transit camp at Westerbork. Berta was arrested in November 1942 and was deported to Auschwitz in January. Jakob had already been sent to Auschwitz. His date of death was given as 15th October 1942 and Berta's as 14th January 1943.

Berthold and Johanna remained in Heppenheim. Other businesses and people moved into the building. Life became more difficult, and worry about the children more acute. In 1938 they lived through Pogromnacht. Their living quarters and the shop were destroyed, beds and pillows slashed, furniture thrown out onto the street. A newspaper reported: *"They tried to throw a piano out of the window but it didn't fit. One of them started running around in the Bachgasse in a hat with Mainzer's price ticket still hanging from it."* Berthold was taken along with the other Jewish men of Heppenheim to the concentration camp at Buchenwald. In December he came back. In 1940 he was interned again, this time in the Gestapo prison in Runde-Turm-Strasse in Darmstadt. He didn't survive his imprisonment. *"When I heard that he had died in Darmstadt I knew he had been killed"*, wrote Peter Metzendorf later. Johanna Mainzer left Heppenheim in July 1940. Her escape route led her via Poland, Russia, Siberia, Manchuria, and Japan to her children in Paraguay. Later she settled in Argentina. She died there aged 90.

The Children's Escape

The Little Difference by Mascha Kaleko

A German emigrant
Spoke to Mr. Goodwill:
"Sure, it's still the same,
I now say land instead of Land,
And for Heimat I say homeland,
And for Gedicht poem.
Sure, I'm very happy
But glücklich I am not."

Georg, the eldest son of Berthold and Johanna, being an active member of the Social Democratic Party, was frogmarched after the March elections of 1933 through Heppenheim by SA men and forced to wipe off the three arrow symbol of the Social Democrats. A photo of this humiliating act is on display at Berlin's Holocaust memorial.

In August 1935 Georg left Heppenheim. His escape led him to South America. After the war Georg lived in Buenos Aires. He married and had one daughter. He died aged 57.

Rudolf, the brother of Georg, left Heppenheim on July 1st 1933 and also left the country. His destination was Paris. He studied Law and Economics in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Then he emigrated to South America. He spent time in Brazil, Paraguay and finally Argentina. He married and had two children. Rudolf died in 1971 in Buenos Aires. He was 58 years old.

Lotte, Rudolf's twin sister, trained to be a nursery teacher. She fled just in time and went to the USA. She married Sally Gernsheimer from Viernheim. She died at the age of 82.

The Children of Jakob and Berta Mainzer

Richard, the eldest son, studied Law and worked as an assistant to Professor Sinzheimer in Frankfurt. He lost his licence to practise as a solicitor and moved to Holland. Richard and Hugo Sinzheimer's daughter married there. They had a daughter and a son. The family were split and were only reunited again in 1946, in Cuba. In 1949 the family, now with three children, moved to New York. Dr Richard Mainzer died there in 1966 at the age of 58.

Hildegard studied Medicine and worked as a doctor in Berlin. In 1936 she left Germany and went to Holland where she found work in the Jewish hospital in Amsterdam. She fled in 1938 to America and settled as a medical doctor in New York. She married in 1947. Hildegard died aged 91 in New Jersey.

Wilhelm also studied Medicine. He took his examinations in Switzerland. In 1933 that was no longer possible in Germany. He was denied permission to practise his profession. He found work in the Ukraine. Due to suspicions of spying he was forced to leave the country again. His journey took him to Holland, and then in 1939 on to China. He also worked there. In 1949 he emigrated with wife and children to Israel. Wilhelm died in Israel at the age of 83.

Fritz, Jakob and Berta's youngest son, studied Law and National Economics. In 1935 he left Europe on a refugee ship headed for South Africa. He found work in Durban. He got married. He emigrated with his wife and son to America. He died at the age of 89 in San Francisco.

The members of the Mainzer Family lived and worked in Heppenheim for almost 140 years.

During the Nazi period three family members were murdered.

Eight people were forced to emigrate and lived scattered around the world.

The successfully run business was destroyed. The grand building no longer in the possession of the family.

Emigration Poem

by Hilde Domin

The things see me coming
Barefoot
I give them back their freedom
My bed, that wanted to be my bed
My table
The walls that promised to wait for me
Like the walls of childhood.
My gentle things
You wanted to collect me.
Things
You see me leave.