

Oberndorf Family

“When I tie up a garbage sack today, I still do it exactly the way I was taught more than fifty years ago,” recalls Friedrich Rittersberger, the last apprentice of the Simon Hirsch wholesale flour business.

His two employers were Simon and Leo Oberndorf. Together with the widows of Ludwig and Simon Hirsch, they served as managing partners of this highly successful Heppenheim firm.

Simon, born on August 27, 1882, and Leo, born on March 28, 1886, were the sons of the wine merchant Maier Oberndorf and his wife Jeanette. The family lived at 4 Kleiner Markt in Heppenheim. Both brothers trained as merchants in the flour and wine trade.

In Heppenheim, Simon met his wife Hedwig, who was Protestant. She was born on July 3, 1892, in Wieda in the Harz region, the daughter of Friederike and Gustav Riefenstahl. Hedwig had five sisters and one brother, all born in different parts of Germany. Her father was a master machinist, and the family likely moved frequently because of his work. The youngest sister, Frieda, was born in Wiesloch in 1900; on April 23, 1904, the family registered in Heppenheim.

Hedwig attended Protestant confirmation classes there. Family members later recalled that Simon would already come to pick her up from those classes. She worked as a kindergarten teacher.

Hedwig came from a strictly Protestant family. A relationship with a Jewish man was surely not without difficulty for either family. On October 19, 1922, Hedwig and Simon were married in a civil ceremony in Mannheim. Their marriage remained childless. Simon’s brother Leo never married.

Friedrich Rittersberger later recalled:

“The flour business, located at 12 Mainstrasse—today Kalterer Strasse—was considered a modern enterprise. Leo, who was unmarried, worked rather like a travelling salesman, visiting bakeries across a



wide region and collecting payments. Simon ran the office and was the business mind behind the firm. On certain days he travelled to Frankfurt to the exchange. The company operated on a large scale. In East Prussia, for example, several railcars of flour could be purchased at favourable prices and then brought directly to our warehouse via our own rail siding.”

All of this changed completely after the Nazi seizure of power.

Rittersberger writes:

“Even though the owners never spoke about it in front of the employees, we knew that business was steadily declining. The bakeries no longer bought their flour from the Jewish-owned firm. The business had been deprived of its foundation.”



Leo and his uncle David Oberndorf

As early as 1933, Simon and Leo were imprisoned in Darmstadt for five weeks. They were tortured there. Leo in particular was subjected to severe abuse. His sister Cilly, who visited him in prison, found his face and eyes swollen and badly bruised. Two months after his release, he had to undergo surgery. His health had suffered lasting damage.

Simon Oberndorf remained in Heppenheim for a short time in order to attend to his real-estate affairs. When he applied for permission for himself and his wife to emigrate, he was described in the official files as a “cunning Jewish businessman,” a phrase reflecting the antisemitic language of the regime.

In 1937, Simon Oberndorf sold the Hirsch firm—including the warehouse, inventory, merchandise, and the right to continue operating the business—to his brother-in-law Willi Umbach, who carried it on under the name Umbach und Bauer until 1938.

Effective July 1, 1938, the four partners withdrew from the general partnership. Rolf Arnst, a publishing bookseller and a relative of the Riefenstahl family, entered the firm and initiated its dissolution and liquidation. From that point on, the business operated under his name.

On April 10, 1938, Leo Oberndorf fled with his sister-in-law Martha and her daughter, first to the Netherlands and from there to New York.

Simon and Hedwig Oberndorf left Germany from Bremen on November 17, 1938, together with Simon's sister Cilly. Hedwig had undergone a difficult operation, and they postponed their departure until she had recovered sufficiently. From then on, they lived in New York. In letters to her sister in



Heppenheim, Hedwig described their efforts to build a new life in the United States:

“Since December 24 we have been on our own, independent at last. It is only a small apartment, but it is quiet here. I would compare it to Jugenheim.

I have been out of work for six weeks now, but I am feeling well enough again that I want to try and see how work suits me.”

In another letter, she wrote of how happy she was to have found one of the toys that had once belonged to her nieces and nephews:

“Who all played with it, in happier times.”

During the November Pogrom of 1938, the couple's apartment was completely devastated. Friedrich Rittersberger also recalled this:

“A few days later, Willi Umbach took me into the apartment, which the couple had left behind largely furnished. It was terrible.



Everything had been destroyed. The grand piano in the living room, and even the pictures on the walls, had been smashed with axe blows.”

On July 19, 1943, Hedwig and Simon were stripped of their German citizenship and rendered

stateless.

Unlike Simon, who found work with a fellow émigré from Heppenheim named Feuerbach, Leo was able to work only to a very limited extent in New York. According to a psychiatric evaluation, he suffered from severe dizziness, headaches, memory loss, and an inability to concentrate. These symptoms were believed to be the result of the torture he had endured.

Leo lived with his sister Cilly and, from 1955 onward, in a nursing home. He died in New York in 1957.

After the war, Simon Oberndorf applied for compensation on behalf of his brother for his imprisonment. At first the claim was rejected. In the end, Leo was awarded 150 Deutsche Mark for one month of incarceration.

Around 1950, Simon and Hedwig Oberndorf returned to Germany and later moved to Grossgmain in Austria. Simon died there on October 6, 1955.

Hedwig Oberndorf later lived in Heidelberg. Until her death on May 18, 1969, she remained in close contact with her family in Heppenheim.

Simon and Hedwig Oberndorf are both buried in Heidelberg.

Simon Karl Oberndorf

Simon, known as Karl Oberndorf, was born on January 13, 1901, the son of Isaak Oberndorf and his wife Clothilde, née Löb. His sister was Alice Martha, who married the wine merchant Ludwig Hirsch and, after his death, became a partner in the Hirsch flour business.

Like his father, Simon Oberndorf worked as a wine merchant, real-estate broker, and businessman.

He married Rosel Mannheimer, who was born on April 25, 1904, in Naumburg an der Saale. The couple, who had no children, lived at 2 Starkenburgweg in Heppenheim.

In Heppenheim, Simon (Karl) Oberndorf held the agency for automobiles, engines, and bicycles. In December 1936, he and his wife succeeded in fleeing to New York.

In Flushing, he ran a business specializing in



Simon Karl Oberndorf und sein Onkel David Oberndorf

the mechanical and chemical cleaning of metal. Hugo Friedmann worked in its commercial division as a partner.

Simon (Karl) Oberndorf died on September 27, 1976, in Flushing, New York.

Sources

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- Private Documents kindly provided by Hedwig Oberndorf