

## Ferdinand Eberstadt (1808 Worms - 1888 Mannheim) and his Family

by Ernest Goldsmith



(Collage: *rijo*)

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Eberstadts had been living in Worms which is near the Rhine, about 50 miles south of Mainz, at the time belonging to the Grand Duchy of Hesse and one of the oldest towns in Germany. An important ancestor, the earliest one we can name with certainty, is Johanna's father, August Ludwig Eberstadt. He founded the family business, A.L. Eberstadt, which dealt in wholesale textiles and haberdashery. August Ludwig was a loved and respected figure in Worms, as we gather from a letter written by his son Ferdinand to his sister Johanna (who lived in far away Iserlohn) after their father's funeral in January 1839:

"You have no idea of the universal sympathy and mourning which was shown during his funeral," Ferdinand wrote, "An immense procession from all walks of life and every religion followed our dear father in a sacred hush to the grave. Since time immemorial no one here,

Jew or Gentile, has been mourned so openly and universally. Nor have so many tears flowed as at the bier of the departed.”

August Ludwig had endeared himself to his fellow townsfolk partly through his integrity and generosity. His wife was Esther Gernsheim (1774 - 1819). She died 20 years earlier at the age of 45.

As far as we know, August Ludwig and Esther had 7 children, the most prominent amongst them being Johanna's brother, Ferdinand (1808 - 1888, Merchant, Local Democratic Politician, Mayor of Worms 1849 - 1852). He gets into the history books because he was active in politics. In a letter written to Johanna in June 1847 he said life had become expensive and business in their part of Germany was slack but, he went on:

“In spite of that there is no lack of entertainment since I am more and more taken up with the official appointments with which I have been honoured, due to the enlightenment and trust of our fellow citizens. So I am now a member of the Chamber of Commerce, as well as being on the Election Committee and in the Welfare Association. Recently I even tried my hand at authorship.

Most flattering of all though is the notification I received yesterday to say our Government has appointed me as Justice at the next Assizes in Mainz. I am the first Jew here to be given this distinction. It is, however, an expensive honour because, as well as forcing me to neglect the business, it will hardly cost me less than 100 fl to carry out my new duties. Nevertheless, it is worth every sacrifice to find ancient prejudices being uprooted daily and to share the pleasure of fellow Jews in seeing rights restored which have been so unjustly and undeservingly infringed. Such a gratifying sign of the times must fill everyone with satisfaction whatever his religious or political creed.

We live at a difficult time; a time of progress and development and of the reform of all existing institutions. There is an unending fight for truth and for right against prejudice and privilege. Up to now in this fight, even though there have been reverses, good has always triumphed. We have advanced slowly, step by step, winning timely reforms. But we must not weary in the struggle because a great deal remains to be done - especially for us Jews.”

If Ferdinand sounds a little euphoric one must remember that after years of effort by Jews to reach true equality, the ferment of 1948 and the sudden chance of emancipation was pretty intoxicating. Then for the first time in the family's history Ferdinand was enjoying his immersion in a national political drama of which he felt himself a part.

A year later, in 1848, he became even more deeply involved in the movement for German unification and for elections. "It would take too long," he wrote to Johanna, "if I were to describe to you all the events - the public meetings, the committees, etc. In short, I act here as a most important figure and all day long my house is filled with every kind of visitor. Today at noon there is a committee meeting when I shall propose the motion that a protest against the good and worthy king of Prussia be lodged: namely that the whole of Southern Germany resists this man being placed at the head of the freedom movement."

Ferdinand belonged to the Republican-Progressive party that in Worms formed itself into a democratic Society of which he became chairman. In 1849 these democrats won the elections for Mayor and Ferdinand was chosen to fill that office, despite the fact that he got less votes than two other men in his party. As the first Jewish mayor of Worms he was energetic. He fought for the freedom of the press. When he told Johanna he had tried his hand at authorship he was probably referring to the articles he was writing for the newspaper the democrats had started in the town. Many democrats were manual workers and tradesmen so another of their aims was to expand local industry so as to do away with the idea that you could not buy furniture, for instance, without going to Mainz or Mannheim. In some of their projects, Ferdinand and his colleagues got a little carried away as when they decided to form a Citizens Militia. For this they needed rifles and to buy them they made a house to house collection. Householders became annoyed because the democrats did not stand on ceremony and their demands sounded very like blackmail at times. The whole matter of the rifles and various inflammatory speeches came to a head in the Rhine-Hessian case for high treason in 1850. Ferdinand and various other democrats were put in the dock though they were all acquitted finally.

Considering he was a democrat, Ferdinand could be distinctly autocratic. One of his duties was to select jurors and there was the occasion when he drew up a list of 23 candidates, 13 of which were Jews and five of those bore the name of Eberstadt! This led to a cartoon in the opposition newspaper with the caption: "Are there no more Eberstadts?" Arraignments for his treason and packing juries made little difference to Ferdinand's popularity in his hometown. He continued to be re-elected as mayor until he resigned in 1852.

The name of Eberstadt had of course been honoured in Worms since the days of his father. The whole family seemed conscious of it and was at pains to keep it so. As Leopold Eberstadt, one of Ferdinand's brothers, wrote to Johanna after their father's funeral: "This posthumous glorification is not just idle praise, I do feel now that the unblemished name which our

father bequeathed is worth more than if he had amassed a million for us.” For one of his sons to become the Mayor of Worms must have given them great satisfaction.

Yet Worms, though famous in the past, was now just another small town and over the years had been overtaken in importance as a political and trading centre by neighbouring towns like Mannheim and Frankfurt. In 1858 Ferdinand moved to Mannheim with his family which consisted of his still beautiful wife Sara and 10 children. Sara was born Seligmann and she came from Kreuznach. Through her the Eberstadts became related to the Metzgers, to the Anspachs in Brussels and to the de Rothschilds in Paris. Ferdinand died in Mannheim in 1888. Meanwhile, Leopold had gone to Darmstadt, Abraham and Regina to Frankfurt. Finally, only one sister, Henrietta and her family lingered in Worms. By 1892 no one was left there. The Eberstadts had dispersed to all four corners of the globe from Paris to New York, from London to New Orleans.

*Taken from Ernest Goldsmith: Against the Tide. The Chequered History of our Ancestors and their Families. Manuscript, Tunbridge Wells 1988, p. 19 - 21. We would like to thank Mrs. Netta Goldsmith for giving her permission to publish this text on the internet.*

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