



Bella's story: Fighting the windmills of continuity



Bella Uhlfelder in 2005

(photo: private)

This is a story from the Bavarian province ranging from the late 1930s to recent times. It confronts the reader with questions about justice, stubbornness, human decency and the difference between what German officials say during solemn commemorations on holidays and how they act on weekdays.

Supporting her claims we offered Mrs. Bella Uhlfelder this opportunity to tell about her disappointing and embarrassing experiences. Any sincere legal or political assistance would be welcome. We will mediate the contact.

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One of my father's sisters was a very good story teller. When we were children, we used to love to listen to her tell these stories; we loved our aunt very much. She lived with my grandfather in Hüttenbach, a small village in Middle Franconia, Germany, and her name was then Emma. In 1938 my aunt Emma emigrated to America and became aunt Erika. She was never married and she took care of my grandfather in his house until he moved into an old age home. We used to visit them in Hüttenbach frequently and I remember my grandfather's house quite well, though I was only 10 years old in 1938.

My parents, my sister and I lived in Nuremberg in quite comfortable circumstances; my father never thought that his country, for which he fought in World War I, would ever disown him. In May of 1939, after having been arrested, he suddenly decided that we no longer could remain in Germany; on the way home from prison he stopped at a steamship agency to purchase four tickets to Cuba, Havana, on the SS St. Louis. We had two weeks to get ready to depart and, of course, we did not get permission to pack any of our belongings. We left our home with just two suitcases and traveled to Hamburg to board ship.

On May 13, 1939, we started our voyage to what we thought would be freedom. After five weeks aboard the ship and many, many disappointments, we finally ended up in France. We spent the next eight years in France. Shortly after we arrived in France the war broke out; the part of France where we were became soon occupied by the Germans. We lived in constant fear and, for most of the time, without money. - We were sent to a concentration camp and my father was killed in Auschwitz. My mother, sister and I were set free, only to be arrested a second time - and now we were sent to Drancy. We were lucky to survive. We finally came to America in July of 1947.

We settled in New York City and we were at last reunited with our relatives there, including my aunt Erika. By then I was 19 years old. I visited my aunt Erika quite often. She still loved to tell stories and I loved to hear them. On one of these visits she looked very sad and I wondered what was bothering her. After having a cup of coffee with her, she said she had to tell me a very sad story. She took me back to 1938 and to Hüttenbach. She told me that one day there was a knock on the door and when she opened the door a man in uniform was standing there. He told her, *I have orders to buy some of your furniture and to take the pieces to a museum in Lauf. Here is one Reichsmark as payment.* My aunt was speechless, but, being afraid, she had no choice but to agree. While she told me the story, tears ran down her cheeks - I understood why she was so upset. They actually stole her furniture and she had no say about it. It was the price she paid for being Jewish.

My aunt never spoke about this again, but for years this story kept bothering me. Whenever I brought up the subject, she would say: *let's talk about something nice.* She died at age 91. I



Eduard Isner, Bella's grandfather, after moving to the Jewish old age home in Nuremberg
(photo: private)



Emma Isner, Bella's aunt
(photo: private)

was left with this awful feeling that my grandfather's furniture was somewhere and that it really belonged to our family.

When the *Gedenkbuch für die Nürnberger Opfer der Schoa* came out in 1998, I told my story to Gerhard Jochem and he wrote back to me that, if the furniture is in a museum, it can only be in Lauf an der Pegnitz, the county seat of Hüttenbach.

I immediately wrote a letter to a Mr. Glückert and in a very short time I had an answer. I was overjoyed. The museum had 5 wardrobes, one dresser, a Biedermeier basket and the unique jug of the local brewers' guild which most likely had once been donated by his business partners to my grandfather who was a hop merchant and well respected member of the community before 1933. You cannot imagine how lucky I felt to find my grandfather's belongings after sixty years! My whole family was overjoyed and we made plans to share these things, as none of us own any souvenir from our parents or grandparents.

But my happiness was short lived. Shortly thereafter I received a letter from the First *Bürgermeister* (mayor), Mr. Pompl telling me that I have no right to the furniture because my aunt had received payment for them. The people at the museum have a receipt for 540 Mark and therefore the furniture belongs to the museum. Even if my aunt ever received this sum, it would have been a bargain for the museum because, as I learned from German auction catalogues of those days, the price of one single antique wardrobe vastly exceeded this amount.

I contacted a newspaper in Lauf, asking for help, but found out that they were working with the mayor. When I saw that they were not going to help me, I asked them not to publish my article, but they ignored my request and published it anyway, in a very negative sounding article.

In June of 2000, I was invited by the city of Nuremberg to revisit my birth city. While there, I also went to Lauf. I made it my priority to go to the museum where a very nervous Mr. Glückert let my son and me in. He told us that Mr. Zitzmann, mayor Pompl's assistant will be here shortly. We waited for him and, when he arrived, he immediately told us that they do not know which of the furniture belonged to my grandfather, as they didn't catalogue them at the time. They have a signed receipt from my aunt, Emma Isner, which shows that she was paid for the furniture. I tried to tell him, that in 1938, when a Jew was told to sign a receipt, a Jew would have no choice but to sign. The man got very upset and asked me if I am trying to tell him that she was forced to sign. - I asked to see the jug of the brewers' guild and was told that they didn't have any such jug. I asked him if it could be in a different room; now Mr. Zitzmann got very nasty and said that I was calling him a liar. We left the museum quite shaken, because, in my opinion, this man was the closest thing to what I remember the German officials of the late 1930s to be. I had hoped to find someone with a bit of compassion, but instead I found an arrogant man.

I have not yet given up on this project and am hoping that, with the help of friends, I will be able to someday get back what belonged to my grandfather. I would only be too happy to share it with the rest of my family.



Eduard Isner's former house in Hüttenbach
(photo: private)

October 2000

Bella Uhlfelder, nee Isner

And here comes the continuation of the saga as written to us by Bella in May 2001:

In February 2001 I read the newspaper AUFBAU and an article *Shame on you Sterbfritz* caught my attention, because it reminded me of my unpleasant experiences with the municipality in Lauf. Therefore I called the newspaper and told them about my furniture story. They were very interested and after an interview with Ms. Laaser they wrote a very nice article which appeared on March 1, 2001.

I suppose that the mayor or his functionaries read the article because on March 30, 2001 *Bürgermeister* Pompl wrote a letter of apology to me. It was actually quite a nice letter. In it he told me that he was sending me a 18th century stein from the municipal collections.

Well, the stein arrived and from what I found out from an appraiser, it dates back to the 19th century only and is not anything that ever belonged to my family. I wrapped the stein up very carefully and returned it to mayor Pompl with a note telling him that I am not a collector of antiques and the stein has no meaning to me.

However, I still hope that my grandfather's *Zunftkrug* (mug of a guild) will turn up. I also had another interview with the AUFBAU. This time it was Ms. Martin that came to see. On May 10, 2001 there was another article in this paper.

So, this is where I stand. I hope that someday my story will find a happy ending.

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