

The destruction of a family



A project by Sebastian Walter and Malte Lundschien, students
at the John-Lennon-Gymnasium
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Laying of memorial stones for Erika and Meta Haitner



photos: family property

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Our motivation

I am interested in this project and therefore the lives of Erika and Meta because in school we just talk about the general facts about the Nazi regime but never deal with concrete fates of people, aside from Anne Frank. Of course I could just read books about the topic or use other sources. But the special thing about this particular way of dealing with the past is that I get to gather the information about the lives of the two girls myself and in little steps until the story is complete which makes it more manifest emotionally. Another reason why I am interested in this is the location of the story. The two sisters lived directly in my neighbourhood, walked down the streets that I walk down every day, they could have even went to my school. Because of that their fate is related to me, too in a way.

Malte Lundschien

First of all I am part of this project because I think that the victims of the Nazi regime have to be remembered in order to prevent these cruel crimes from happening ever again. I also think that one can only really

understand the inhumanity of what happened in that time by dealing with such a concrete case. Additionally this case took place in my direct neighbourhood which makes it even more interesting for me since that means that I can connect it to me in a way.

Sebastian Walter

translated by Sebastian Walter



left Malte, right Sebastian

The little we know about Erika and Meta Haitner

Malte Lundschien

Erika and Meta Haitner were both born in **Berlin** (Erika on 23 May 1927 and Meta on 28 November 1928) and spent their first years in a flat at **Kottbusser Damm 93**, with their father David, their mother Lisbeth and their elder brother Leo.

The family seems to have been fairly well off; they already had a telephone from 1925 onwards. Erika and Meta probably went to the 10th or 18th Elementary School in Hobrechtstrasse 76, a normal school attended by all the local children. Even at this period, they may have increasingly faced anti-Semitic insults and been ostracised at school and on the streets, because violence and discrimination against Jews were becoming more frequent in public life. From 1935 onwards, therefore, Erika and Meta were no longer able to go swimming, to parks or cinemas with their friends and many restaurants did not allow Jews to enter. I can hardly imagine a time at primary school without these activities. I can also hardly imagine their fear of Nazi children on the streets.

In 1937, the family moved to **Lothringer Strasse 55** (now Torstrasse 112) in Mitte district in Berlin. The girls' new school was probably the Jewish girls' school in Auguststrasse, because from this time onwards, Jewish children were only allowed to attend state schools if they were in special classes. In this way, they were even more excluded from the school community and relationships to non-Jewish children, even if they had previously been friends, were broken off in almost all cases.

The family saw that their situation in Germany was getting worse all the time. They were subject to more and more restrictions, starting with a Jewish identity card and the obligation to take the names Sara or Israel, the closure of all Jewish shops, the ban on attending state school, up to the reparation payments of 1 billion Reichsmark for the pogroms on 9th to 10th November 1938.

From today's perspective, I find these regulations completely incomprehensible, arbitrary and unjust.

Fortunately, thanks to the ORT organisation, Leo had the opportunity to go to England in 1938. But this was also the point where the family's separation began.

In September 1939, after the outbreak of the Second World War, David Haitner was deported to the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen. Where were the girls when their father was taken away by the Gestapo? Were they perhaps at home when it happened? Lisbeth then went to stay with her sister in Fehrbelliner Strasse 8, while the two girls went to the **Jewish children's home** in the same street.



*photo: Abraham Pisarek 1939
left Meta and right Erika Haitner*

When their father was released from the concentration camp, the girls had to say goodbye to their parents at once, because they emigrated a week later. The girls were left behind in Berlin with only their aunt Else Sonnenthal, the last of their family there, and their parents and brother never saw them again. The Palestine office had promised to arrange for them to emigrate later, but unfortunately that could not be organised; after 1 October 1941, it was no longer possible to emigrate.

The Jewish children's home was now their home, where they felt safe and cared for. They were subject to even more attacks and insults on the streets, as they were clearly marked as Jews by the Jewish star which they had to wear from 1 September 1941 onwards. I myself was once attacked on the street for no reason and can clearly remember the fear of it happening again. But I knew it was an exception and so I was able to overcome my fear. I don't even like to think about how it must have been to live constantly with this fear.

Erika and Meta stayed in the children's home until it was shut in the summer of 1942. The school they last attended until 1942 was the Jewish school in Kaiserstrasse. In the following months, the two girls had to do forced labour in **Marburger Strasse 5** in a **house belonging to the Jewish Community**. Frau Bamberger, the last director of the children's home, also lived there. That must have been a support for them. They knew by then that their brother was living in England and their parents had arrived safely on Mauritius. What were their thoughts? How did they feel? I can hardly imagine the burden of knowing that one has no chance of survival, or the feeling of possessing absolutely nothing.

Their aunt was deported to Tallinn in October 1942, where she was killed. For this reason the two girls were the only left behind of their family in Berlin

On 29 November 1942, Erika and Meta, the director of the children's home and four other children from the home were first taken to the collecting point in **Grosse Hamburger Strasse** and then from **Grunewald** goods station to **Auschwitz**, where they were killed. This was the first of a series of mass deportations from Berlin to Auschwitz.

What remains of them?

Their names are included in the memorial book for the murdered Jews of Berlin.

Haitner, Erika geb. am 23.05.27* in Berlin; Mitte, Lothringer Str. 55; 23. Transport vom 29.11.42, Auschwitz; Todesort: Auschwitz, verschollen

Haitner, Meta geb. am 28.11.28* in Berlin; Mitte, Lothringer Str. 55; 23. Transport vom 29.11.42, Auschwitz; Todesort: Auschwitz, verschollen

Extract from the memorial book for the murdered Jews of Berlin

Sonnenthal, Else geb. am 19.10.87* in Berlin; Prenzlauer Berg, Fehrbelliner Str. 8; 20. Transport vom 03.10.42, Osten; Todesort: Reval, verschollen

Extract from the memorial book for the murdered Jews of Berlin

Stolpersteine¹ will be laid in memory of Erika and Meta Haitner in front of the family's last freely chosen residence on 13 May 2011.

*translated by Bridget Schäfer
with slight accretions by Malte Lundschien*

¹ Stolpersteine: small, brass-faced memorial stones set in the pavement in front of houses where Jewish people lived or worked before their deportation.

The history of Leo Haitner

Sebastian

Leo, Erika's and Meta's older brother, was already born in 1922.

Like his sisters he probably attended the 10./18. Volksschule (elementary school) in Berlin-Neukölln.

Because in 1938 he had already experienced the cruelty of the anti-Semitic pogroms, he left Germany with the age of 16. Together with other Jewish children he emigrated to England, with the help of **ORT**.



photo: private

In England he first worked in a bakery for matzo in **Leeds**, owned by the Rakusen company, before he moved to **London** to live with his friend Walter. He felt very lonely, because he had to leave his first girlfriend Edith and his entire family in Berlin.

Since he had his father's nationality he was able to join the British army and participate in the fight against national socialist Germany. After the war he went to **Berlin** where he found out about the tragic fate of his sisters which he told then his parents in a letter.

On the 2nd September 1946 Leo got married in London and soon after that he and his wife moved to **Palestine** in order to be reunited with his parents. However one year later they returned to **London** and David and Lisbeth followed them not much after.

Leo died in 1984 and left two children. With his granddaughter Lisa a first contact was formed. She participated in our research by telling us many details that she got to know in various conversations with her grandmother. In the autumn of 2010 she and her mother Ruth visited Berlin and the idea to lay the memorial-stones for Erika and Meta was born.

When did David Haitner move to Berlin?

Inge Franken

The **1939** population census files and information from the period David Haitner (the father) spent in Sachsenhausen concentration camp from 13 September 1939 to 06 December 1939 revealed his birthplace: it was **Buczacz** in Poland. He was born there on 18 September 1898. Buczacz was a city in Galicia where a high proportion of the population was Jewish before the First World War. The place had been a centre of traditional Jewish culture for centuries.

We already knew that the father and the son Leo had Polish citizenship. Erika, Meta and Leo's mother was called Lisbeth Sonnenthal and was born on 16 March 1899. I could find no information on her nationality.

GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVES R1 04 October 2010
Population census of 17 May 1939, supplementary cards for information on ancestry and education from the inventory R 1509 Reichssippenamt (Family Records Office)

Research:	Berlin		
Name:	Haitner	David	
Né:			Date of birth: 18.09.1898
Place of birth:	Buczacz		Ancestry: JJJJ
Resident in:	Mitte		
Address:	Lothringer Straße 55		

Name:	Haitner	Liesbeth	
Née:	Sonnthal		Date of birth: 16.03.1899
Place of birth:	Berlin		Ancestry: JJJJ
Resident in:	Mitte		
Address:	Lothringer Straße 55		

Name:	Haitner	Leo	
Né:			Date of birth: 19.10.1922
Place of birth:	Berlin		Ancestry: JJJJ
Resident in:	Mitte		
Address:	Lothringer Straße 55		

Name: **Haitner** **Erika**
 Née: **Berlin** Date of birth: **23.05.1927**
 Place of birth: **Berlin** Ancestry : **JJJJ**
 Resident in: **Mitte**
 Address: **Lothringer Straße 55**

Name: **Haitner** **Meta**
 Née: **Berlin** Date of birth: **28.11.1928**
 Place of birth: **Berlin** Ancestry: **JJJJ**
 Resident in: **Mitte**
 Address: **Lothringer Straße 55**

David and Lisbeth fled from Berlin in December 1939 when David was released from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Their flight lasted 16 months and ended in Mauritius. From there, David Haitner wrote very detailed, moving letters to his sister Anni. These letters reveal that the brother and sister had fled from Buczacz to Berlin in **1920**.

More information about their home town could be found on the Internet:

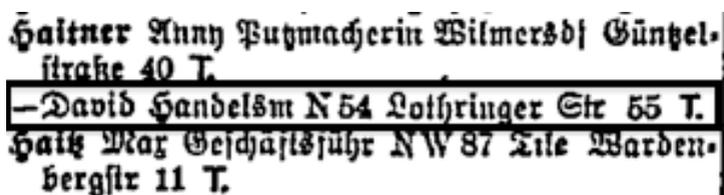
The city is now located in Ukraine, near Tarnopol. It had belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire up to 1918. When Poland regained independence after the First World War, the city became part of Poland. In **1920**, however, war broke out between Poland and the new Russian Bolshevist regime in Ukraine. Buczacz was the scene of terrible battles. I assume that this was what lay behind the Haitners' flight. David was 22 years old at the time.

David's son Leo was born in Berlin in **1922**. I have not been able to find out when the parents married or where the family first lived. However, the Haitner family is registered at Kottbusser Damm 93 in the Neukölln district of Berlin from 1924 – 1937:

Haitner, D., Maujm., S 59, Kottbusser Damm 93.
 — Bertha, Postfachamt. a. D., W 30, Speyerer
 Straße 19.
 — Ullrich, Ww., SO 16, Reanderstr. 10 L

photo: adressbuch.zlb.de 1924

David Haitner is described in the address books as a tradesman. I have not been able to find out whether he had registered a business in his own name. However, when I visited the Kreuzberg-Mitte Heimatmuseum (museum of local history), I discovered that there had been a large Jewish department store „A.Jandorf” on the corner of Kottbusser Damm 96. The Jandorf chain of shops was taken over in 1926 by **Hermann Tietz**; this later became the Hertie chain of department stores. Many Jewish tradesmen were suppliers for the department store; David Haitner may have been one of them. He must have prospered for several years, for we know that he had a telephone and that he could afford household help for a time.



Haitner Anny Fuhrmacherin Wilmerstr. Gungelstr. 40 T.
— David Handelsm N 54 Lothringer Str 55 T.
Haitz Max Geschäftsführer NW 87 Lise Wardenbergstr 11 T.

photo: adressbuch.zlb.de 1937

From 1937, the family lived in the Mitte district of Berlin, in the former Lothringer Strasse 55, now Torstrasse 112. Why did they move? Was the father forced to give up his business - were they driven out of their flat? What forms of discrimination had the family already experienced? There are so many questions. The family's life together ended in 1939.

translated by Bridget Schäfer

The torturous escape of David and Lisbeth Haitner

Sebastian Walter

The martyrdom of David and Lisbeth Haitner, Erika's and Meta's parents, began with the imprisonment of David into the concentration camp **Sachsenhausen** on the 13th September 1939. His release on the 7th December 1939 took place under the condition that he emigrated within a very short time. Since Lisbeth had already prepared the escape they followed that condition even though David was famished from his time in concentration camp.

ZUR PERSON:

Familiennamen: Haitner

Vornamen: David

Geburtsdatum: 08.09.1898

ZUR HAFTZEIT IM KZ SACHSENHAUSEN:

Häftlingsnummer: 009437

Häftlingskategorie: J

Häftlingsblock: 38

Meldung: Entlassen

am: 07.12.1939

ANGABEN ZUR QUELLE:

Quellenart: Veränderungsmeldung

Erstellungsdatum: 07.12.1939

Institution: Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen/Gefangenen- Geld- und Effektenverwalter

PROVENIENZ DES ORIGINALS:

Russisches Staatliches Militärarchiv, Moskau

1367/1/24, Bl. 044

SIGNATUR IM ARCHIV SACHSENHAUSEN:

D 1 A/1024, Bl. 461

Dokument aus dem Archiv des KZ Sachsenhausen



photo: private

That long escape began with their train ride to **Vienna(B)** on the 20th December 1939. From there they were sent on to **Bratislava(C)** with the promise to begin the shipping to Palestine within the next few days.

Along with other refugees they were quartered in an empty ammunition factory near Bratislava, where they lived until they could continue their journey. The living conditions were poor, there was a lack of everything: food, blankets, clothes and space. In order to better his and his wife's situation David Haitner already began here to earn some extra money with voluntary work. While the refugees got nothing but empty promises concerning the shipping, the fear of getting sent back to Germany grew bigger and bigger among them.

When after nine month the ships were finally ready, the anticipation about escaping the terror was almost euphoric. However, even though they escaped one horror they had to face another one, because the ship and its resources were far from sufficient for the almost 1000 people who now had to be placed in there. But even here David Haitner found a way to take care of himself and his wife. By voluntarily working at the food dispatch he made sure they always had enough to eat.

The ship went three weeks on the **Danube**, passing along

Budapest(D), through **Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Russia** and **Rumania**.

In the Harbour of **Tulcea(E)** this step of the journey was done. Here they were to change onto a bigger ship, the „**Atlantik**“, which was supposed to bring them to Palestine. However, journeying on that ship turned out to be even more torturous than what they had already experienced. 1700 people had to be quartered in the ship so that every single square metre on every deck was filled with people, even the roofless upper deck.

The living conditions on board were horrible. There was a serious lack of water (everyone got ¼ litre per day) and the sanitary arrangements were not nearly sufficient and in very poor condition (there were only 24 „toilets“ on the whole ship, some of them directly above the sea). The occupants of the upper deck were sometimes tortured by the rain, because on the decks below there was simply no empty space where they could escape the rain.

Besides the sea sickness that affected nearly every passenger and that left its mark all over the ship, heavier diseases were a serious issue that led to several deaths due to the insufficient medical care.

David, too was once the victim of such a disease that he survived after a horrible night full of fever, diarrhoea and unconsciousness, what surprised many people. In fact, the next day he went to work that he had already found again, having more energy than ever.

On the way to Palestine they passed **Greek** territorial waters where they got even more problems. A few hours after a stop in **Crete(F)** they stopped in the middle of the sea. The coal they had bought in Crete was not working which meant that they could not move and were stuck on open sea. After two days of waiting a British warship crossed their way and sent word to another ship that could bring them to **Cyprus(G)**. There the refugees sold every last property to afford the coal that finally brought them to **Palestine(H)**.

Sadly the British colonial rulers in Palestine did not greet them with open arms. They decided that all the refugees were to be transferred onto another ship, the „Patria“ that was supposed to bring them all to Mauritius. However that shipping got delayed due to an escalated bomb attack by the Haganar so that all the refugees were then brought to **Atlit/Palestine** where they got quartered in a refugee camp.

When the shipping to **Mauritius(I)** was then an issue again all the refugees decided to refuse to go so that they were forced violently.

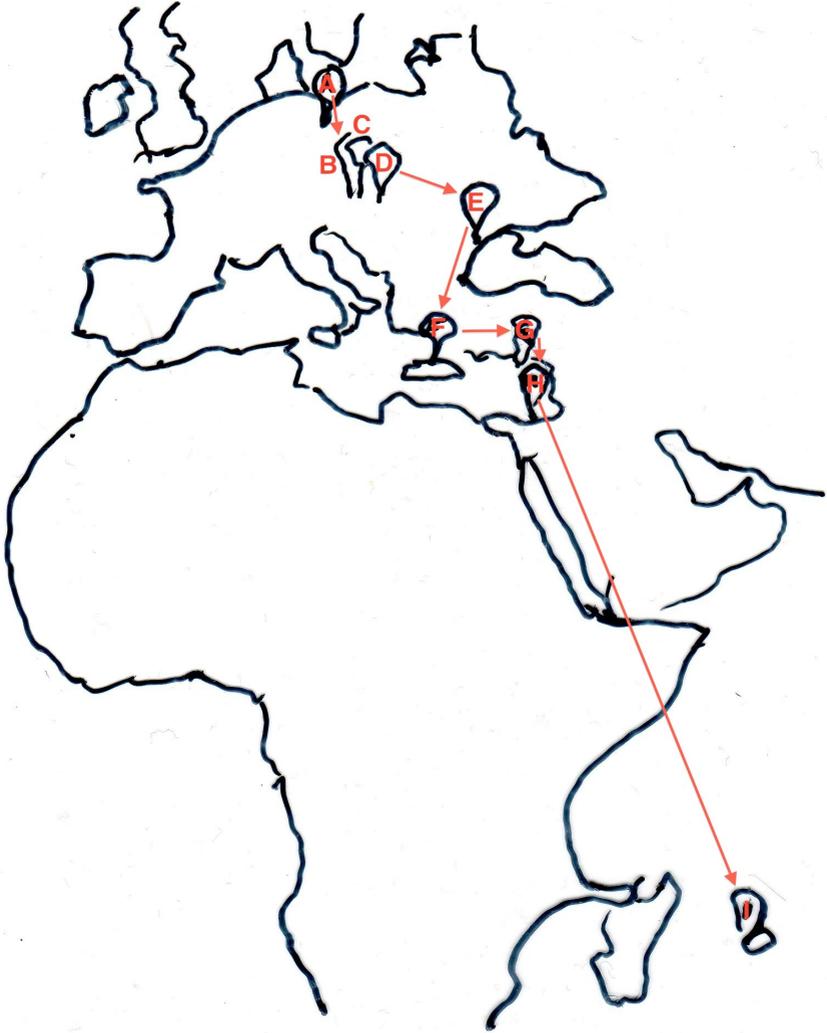
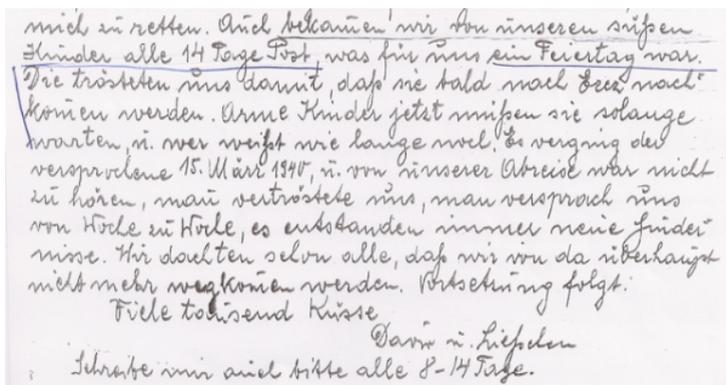


photo: Inge Franken, Klaus Frankens

However due to the bad living conditions for immigrants he and his wife moved back to **London** only one year later and David and Lisbeth followed them not much later. There they stayed for the rest of their lives. David died in 1973 and Lisbeth two years later.

During their entire journey David and Lisbeth thought much of their daughters Erika and Meta and their son Leo who was in England. They both worried about their children's fate but were also relieved that their children did not have to go through the horrors they went through themselves.

The message about their daughters' death was a stroke that they never able to recover from.



mich zu retten. Auch bekamen wir von unseren sieben
Kindern alle 14 Tage Post, was für uns ein Feiertag war.
Die trösteten uns damit, daß sie bald nach Meer nach
kommen werden. Arme Kinder jetzt müssen sie solange
warten, n. wer weiß wie lange wohl. Es verging der
versprochene 15. März 1941, n. von unserer Abreise war nicht
zu hören, man tröstete uns, man versprach uns
von Hole zu Hole, es entstanden immer neue Kinder
misse. Wir dachten schon alle, daß wir von da überhaupt
nicht mehr wegkommen werden. Botschung folgt:
Viele tausend Küsse
Darin n. Lieben
Schreibe mir auch bitte alle 8-14 Tage.

letter from David Haitner, dated: 24.09.1941 in Mauritius

We got all this information about that escape from 32 letters that David Haitner wrote to his sister Anni during the time from the 3rd September 1941 to the 24th February 1942 from Mauritius and which were in possession of their descendants in England.

translated by Sebastian Walter

Thoughts of Ruth Lipshaw, a niece of Erika and Meta Haitner

The history of my family has been changed thanks to my daughter Lisa finding the website and contacting Inge Franken. I have always lived with my grandparents sadness and despair at knowing their two daughters had died, and not knowing where. Now it is managed to fill in some of the missing pieces for us.

(...)

When I was a child, I used to stay at my grandparents house every school holiday and every weekend, it was as though I became their surrogate daughter. There were two large photographs on the wall of the two girls. I would catch my grandmother staring at them with tears in her eyes all the time. Now I am a parent, I can only imagine the torment she must have felt knowing that she had not been there for her 'little' girls. And that is what Erika and Meta were to me, just 2 photographs on a wall, that is until I came to Berlin, and it was so kindly managed to find out so much information and we were guided through what must have been part of their lives.

(...)

I cannot thank enough for all you have done, and all of the work you are still doing, not just for myself, but for all of the past children of the home and their families now.

slightly shortened by Malte Lundschien

Our work on the project

Malte Lundschien

The project began with a question from our former history teacher, Herr Bröcker. In the summer of last year he told us about a “stolpersteine² project” organised by Frau Franken and asked if anyone would be interested in taking part. Sebastian and I both said we were interested. That same evening we met Frau Franken and saw the Jewish children's home in Fehrbelliner Strasse 92. We arranged to meet again after the summer holidays and from then on, we met every two weeks to discuss our progress and what to do next.

To familiarise ourselves with the topic, we read Mrs. Franken's book about the Jewish children's home and studied all the documents and letters, which Mrs. Franken had already collected; then we began with the further research about **Erika und Meta Haitner**.

First of all we looked through the **Berlin Address Books** to find out the Haitner family's last address in Berlin: **Lothringer Strasse 55**. However, this street does not exist any more. Then we turned to the Berlin State Archive (Landesarchiv Berlin) where we discovered that the former Lothringer Strasse 55 was on the site of the present **Torstrasse 112**. This house and the Jewish children's home are both located very close to our school, the **John Lennon Gymnasium**. We knew that our school existed at that time and thought that Erika and Meta had perhaps even attended our school. However we could not confirm this.

Now we had enough information for the Stolpersteine coordination office and applied for a stolperstein to be laid - if possible within the

² Stolpersteine: small, brass-faced memorial stones set in the pavement in front of houses where Jewish people (or other victims of the Nazi regime) lived or worked before their deportation; each stone names one person.

same school year.

After completing the application, we visited the **Sachsenhausen Memorial**. Sebastian and I had already visited the memorial with our school, but this second visit was even more impressive because of what we knew about David Haitner's fate. We found documents on his admission to the prison and his release in the Sachsenhausen archives. Among other details, the documents revealed that David Haitner was Polish by birth, which was then confirmed by the 1939 **population census** in the **Federal Archives**. His and his wife's birthplaces were also documented in the archives.

While looking through the **Address Books**, we discovered almost by chance that the family had lived since **1924 at Kottbusser Damm 93**, before they moved to Lothringer Strasse in 1937.

Finally we went on a **tour around Berlin** to visit all the places which were connected in our minds with the family's fate. Most of our meetings had been in the Jewish Children's Home in Fehrbelliner Strasse; we had also already visited the house at Torstrasse 112, although that is unfortunately now a modern building, and the memorial in Grosse Hamburger Strasse, so we didn't visit those three places again. We began at **Kottbusser Damm 93**, the Haitner's earliest known address. This house is also not the original house, which was destroyed in the war. From there, we went on to **Theodor Storm Primary School** in Hobrechtstrasse 76, where Leo, Erika and Meta may have spent their first years at school.

Our tour took us next to several small sidestreets around Kurfürstendamm. First, we went to **Marburger Strasse 5**, the last place where Erika and Meta stayed. The building we saw here is the first original building on our tour, which still exists, although nothing in or on the building now recalls its past as a house of the Jewish community.



photo: private

We went on to the former location of the **Palestine Office in Meinekestrasse 10**, where the two girls' parents were enabled to flee. The original building here also still exists and a memorial tablet recalls its function at that time.

Then we walked on to **Bleibtreustrasse 34/35**, where the ORT organisation had its first office. This Jewish organisation mainly helped Jewish children like Leo Haitner to flee to England during the Nazi period. Here too a memorial tablet recalls the old house and its significance.



photo: private

The final point of our tour was the **memorial at Grunewald railway station**. The **Platform 17 Memorial** recalls the mass deportations from Grunewald goods station.

Over 50,000 Jews were deported from this station and the memorial lists the individual deportation trains with the number of people deported on a row of metal plaques along the platform. So we found the train on which Erika and Meta were deported to Auschwitz. We realised how significant and compelling this memorial is, for not only does it recall the individuals who were taken from here to their deaths, but the fact that it was a goods station also emphasises the cruelty of this genocide, where not even the victims' humanity was acknowledged; they were reduced to "goods".

translated by Bridget Schäfer



photo: private

Zum Gedenken an die
mehr als 50 000 Juden Berlins,
die zwischen Oktober 1941 und
Februar 1945 vorwiegend
vom Güterbahnhof Grunewald aus
durch den nationalsozialistischen
Staat in seine
Vernichtungslager deportiert
und ermordet wurden.

Zur Mahnung an uns,
jeder Mißachtung des Lebens
und der Würde des Menschen
mutig und ohne Zögern
entgegenzutreten.



HIER WOHNTE
ERIKA HAITNER
JG. 1927

DEPORTIERT 29.11.1942
ERMORDET IN
AUSCHWITZ

HIER WOHNTE
META HAITNER
JG. 1928

DEPORTIERT 29.11.1942
ERMORDET IN
AUSCHWITZ