



Our visits to Germany in 1987 & 1998

written by Ludwig Bauer Ph.D. Professor Emeritus

edited by Gerhard Jochem

Introduction

My wife Ella Bamberger Bauer and I both were born into established orthodox Jewish Families in mid-1920 and were raised in different towns in Bavaria. In our pre-teen and teen years, along with our families, we suffered denigrations in the 1930s by the reigning brutal Nazi regime. During our childhood years it was quite normal to have intense verbal insults as well as barrages of stones hurled at us, particularly when no adults were around. Normal upbringing could not be sustained and had to be modified drastically. Attendance in public schools after mid-1930 was denied to Jewish children and parents had to seek education for their children in parochial schools.

In the 1930s both Ella and I suffered through unbelievable and frightening episodes of persecution in our respective home towns. Some instances are included below as they pertain to the narrative and serve as grim reminders.

Our families were finally able to leave Nazi Germany. Ella and her parents left Thüngen, Bavaria in December 1937 for America while my parents and I had to wait until August 1939 to flee from Forchheim, Bavaria for a 2 month voyage to enter Australia. We vowed never to return. After 50 years our 2 sons prevailed upon us to revisit Germany with them in order to educate them of when and where certain events took place and to help them to broaden their understanding of their heritage.

I became an unwitting eyewitness to unrelenting persecutions and unbelievable public events between 1933 and 1939. That dreadful period of my life until our departure in August 1939 is narrated in my previous essay *The Destruction of the Synagogue and the Jewish Community in Forchheim, Upper Franconia (Bavaria, Germany)* which is available from the Web.¹

The major difference in Ella's and my departure from Germany was that she and her family were not subjected to the *Reichspogrom*, November 9/10, 1938 while my family and had to endure that event and suffered further until we finally departed.

For the months after the *Reichspogromnacht* I felt that I was under virtual house arrest since former *Aryan* school friends were not permitted to associate with me in Forchheim because their parents were threatened by the Nazis with possible loss of jobs. I did not resume formal schooling until after our arrival in Australia in October 1939.

It is almost a miracle that my family and that of my wife's managed to escape the claws of death. Unfortunately, after the war, we found out what happened to the Jews of Germany and the occupied countries.

Events described in my previous essay and in the text below did not present any incentive whatsoever to visit Germany.

¹ See: http://www.rijo.homepage.t-online.de/pdf_2/EN_BY_JU_bauer_forchheim.pdf

My life in Forchheim 1933 - 1939

One of the premises of my utter reluctance to ever visit Germany was of course based on my experiences while growing up in Forchheim. My youthful years during the Nazi regime became a daily precarious existence.

Trials and tribulations of Jewish citizens of Forchheim increased precipitously after 1933 in the wake of constant vicious verbal attacks by the Nazis. Their life became living hell after the execution of the well-planned and vicious surprise attack during the night of November 9/10, 1938, *Reichspogromnacht (Reichskristallnacht)*. The unsuspecting Jewish community was ambushed and ruthlessly destroyed at the behest of the local Nazi Party leadership.

The evening of November 9, 1938 in Forchheim began with Nazis assemblies and parades from Forchheim and adjoining districts and was followed, as usual, by predominantly Jew-baiting speeches at the Paradeplatz. After that rally the Nazis retreated to Hotel National and allegedly were waiting *to hear the word*. It is now assumed that the shooting of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath by Herschel Grynszpan in Paris on November 7, 1938 triggered the long awaited *time for revenge to teach the Jews of Germany a lesson*. This was as good an excuse to assume that *the day had arrived to finally take care of the Jews of Germany* and of course that would include Forchheim.

Apparently in anticipation of that day a select group of Nazis of Forchheim and surroundings had in advance staked out carefully all addresses of Jewish homes and businesses in Forchheim - in case this information was needed at short notice.

Finally the telephone call the Nazis had been waiting for came late that evening and the *mission* was on. The *Gauleiter* (district leader) called upon well-informed individuals to form groups to carry out their charge. Each group consisted of ardent Nazis, in and out of uniform, and civilian sympathizers with the expressed mission to destroy as much Jewish property in Forchheim mercilessly (short of murder). The groups knew exactly where to go to and carried out their task fearlessly. Many Nazis were armed with revolvers. The local police force was officially muzzled by the Nazis. They were told to appear, stand on the sideline, *in case they were needed*, but not to interfere under any conditions.

In the quiet of the night all Jewish homes and businesses in Forchheim were invaded, unsuspecting Jewish citizens arrested, handed to the local gendarmes for lockup in the local jail - for the sake of their protection! Their properties were then ransacked and demolished. While these attacks almost defy description, their prize savagery was bestowed upon the synagogue of Forchheim. In an absolute fit of rage the sanctuary was broken into and mercilessly gutted and leveled. To ensure that this target be absolutely destroyed, the very next morning the synagogue was dynamited by a specialized team brought in from Nuremberg.

To add insult to injury that afternoon all of the Jewish men (predominantly World War 1 veterans) and me, then 12 years old, were forced to march from jail through the streets, ringed by an assembled and jeering mob, to the site of the dynamited synagogue, now a heap of dust and stones. A house of worship defiled and destroyed! Now we were expected to clean up *the mess!*

It was an unforgettable traumatic moment for me to see the synagogue destroyed and along with it our apartment and its contents which had been on the upper floor of the synagogue. All reduced to rubble in hours! These images are simply seared into my mind.

But the attack was far from over.

Early next morning all Jewish men of Forchheim were forcibly shipped off by train to what was then the closest concentration camp, namely Dachau near Munich, for indefinite internment. It was obvious to the Jews of Forchheim that the end was near!

The jailed women and I were released later that day. The municipality assigned us to 2 rooms in a lesser ransacked Jewish home and that was it for the duration.

My father was finally released from Dachau December 30, 1938. All this took place unabashedly, in an alleged country of laws, in a modern, relatively educated society.

The panicked Jewish community of Forchheim looked everywhere to escape. But where to? From about 1935 most free countries sealed their borders to German Jewish refugees and enforced more stringent entrance requirements, thereby successfully restricting further emigration to their lands. With huge sums of money some countries granted entries. For ordinary mortals prayer was virtually the only answer.

Through the perseverance of my uncle and aunt who had emigrated to Australia several years earlier, my parents and I were granted entrance visas to Australia, May 1939. We left Germany early August, several weeks before the outbreak of WW2.

Based upon our experiences before WW2 and with the revelation and consequences of the *Final Solution* after the war ended, we had absolutely no desire to ever visit Germany.

My life beyond 1939

After our family arrived in Sydney in October 1939 I resumed my high school education. After winning a full scholarship to the University of Sydney I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry with 1st Class Honors in 1948 and a Master of Science degree in 1949. Subsequently I studied at Northwestern University (near Chicago, Illinois, USA) and was awarded a Ph.D. (Chemistry) in 1952. After post-doctoral studies at Harvard and Columbia I accepted an Assistant Professorship at the College of Pharmacy, University of Illinois at Chicago in September 1955. After teaching courses and pursuing research in organic-medicinal chemistry I retired as Professor in 1997.

During my tenure I published some 150 original research papers and trained 9 Master of Science and 28 Ph.D. students.

In 1989 I received the University of Illinois at Chicago Award for *Excellence in Teaching* and in 2009 the University of Illinois and the College of Pharmacy *Legacy Achievement Award*.

Pressure to visit Germany in 1987

Over the years my wife and I received many personal and professional invitations to visit Germany. Many of these were sincerely issued by younger Germans and due to no fault of theirs we had to decline. We adopted the attitude that younger Germans (born after mid-1930) should not be held responsible for the crimes of their forefathers.

We had some interesting conversations with younger Germans. Their attitude, perfectly normal, seemed to be that we should consider ourselves lucky to have fled before the war started and thus escape all the miseries the war brought on like undue hardships, hunger and misery, bombings in large cities and on and on. True, but our comments should have been: Yes, like being shipped off to Auschwitz! They were clueless!

I remember well a private conversation with a young distinguished Professor of Chemistry from the University of Würzburg. He ended a long conversation by extending a very sincere

invitation to visit *his* country in the near future! We left it at that since I could not explain to him in so many words that it was *my* country once until we were declared *stateless*.

So what could have possibly caused us to change our minds? One day, out of the blue, around New Year of 1987 our 2 grown sons approached us seriously with the request that we consider taking them to Germany to show them the places we stemmed from as well as those places of infamy that they had heard of from either us, other members of the family or other refugees, topics mentioned in many places during reminiscences. We flatly told them this subject of us (ever) visiting Germany was not debatable.

They persisted using the argument that I should really attend the Scientific Conference (being Treasurer of the International Society of Heterocyclic Chemistry) scheduled for August 1987 in Heidelberg. I had absolutely no plans to attend. They became more persuasive, finally falling back on the argument, that *if you don't show us where you were born, raised and suffered, no one can*. True! At that time the concept of tracing one's ancestry through the book *Roots* was very popular.

They could not imagine that a country with such a pretty countryside could have become so violent! True! I recalled an incident during Nazi times, once sitting on a train next to a very nice American couple who were among the many tourists traveling through Germany, maybe around 1937 - 1938. They were drooling about the beauty of the countryside, the charming people they met, the great food and on and on. Obviously they were totally ignorant of the darker side. I had just commenced to take private English lessons and I could converse somewhat with them, but I would not dare to raise the specter of what was really going on. I was smart enough to realize - even in my early teens - that the consequences of degrading the Reich could have been deadly.

After a deep and intense soul-searching over several weeks Ella and I relented. We reluctantly agreed to give our two sons a brief personally conducted tour of some parts of Germany, particularly of Bavaria for a week in August. The trip was designed to educate them at many levels. We agreed to show them their roots in Germany, the places where Ella and I were born.

Ella and I were to reach Germany ahead of our sons. We felt we needed to reassure ourselves that we could handle the situation before the boys arrived.

Arrival - The first week

For Ella and me it was an extremely traumatic moment when the American Airline plane touched down on German soil at Düsseldorf airport in Germany. After the sleepless overnight flight from Chicago there arrived that dreaded moment to disembark. That very cool and extremely quiet early summer morning added seemingly eerie atmosphere, not unlike going to a funeral as surreal images flashed through our minds.

An inexplicable apprehension overtook us when we finally had to leave the plane to begin that seemingly endless walk from the plane across the tarmac to reach passport control. The silence was deafening, all the time wondering how we could have done this. We began to question our wisdom and sanity. It seemed like an endless march. At the first window they did not even open our US passports. The formalities to enter the country were really uneventful. It was still so quiet!

Memories of our exodus played in our minds, over and over again. There were no uniforms, no flags, no saluting and no arrogant barking of commands. No piercing eyes to scrutinize the crowd for *undesirables* (called *racial profiling* these days). It felt more like entering a cemetery. Unbelievable! The changes in attitude with seemingly an entirely different breed of humans running around - it was unreal. Could it be we landed in the wrong country?

Reality returned quickly. We were shaken out of our thoughts quickly when reality set in when we had to compete in our rented car with all the other maniacs on the *Autobahn* in what seemed like an endless 200 km/h race. The combat to remain alive on the *Autobahn* became the first order of business. We ended up in Bonn and stayed at Bad Godesberg for a week.

During that week I presented a lecture in English on some of my research, *Synthesis and Reactions of 3-Benzenesulfonylalloxazine*, at the Institute for Organic Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of Bonn, West Germany on August 7, 1987.

The only non-chemistry question posed privately was from an old-timer when he said to me: *It must have been a very difficult time for you?* I knew what he meant ... But the rest of the times we felt like typical tourists as we roamed around the countryside sightseeing. This kind of *touristy* feeling crept over us as we visited towns and monuments we had absolutely no associations with during our childhood in the 1930s. This feeling dramatically changed the following week as we visited places of our youth.

Week 2 - Return to what was home

The next section is arranged in the order we visited these former places we called home as we traveled from Frankfurt airport into Bavaria. There was an instant change in mood: *Déjà Vu!*

The places had not changed since we left in the late 1930s. The buildings stood there as before, virtually untouched, maybe slightly remodeled, repainted, maybe some new windows or doors, but essentially the overall landscape was intact. The dirt roads were now paved, but wound their way through the scenery just like 50 years ago.

Cruel and lasting memories were revived instantly. Whenever we visited a place associated with our youth memories hit us like lightning: Events replayed instantly and we relived *yesterday* in spite of trying to erase events from the mind. No way, here we go again ... It felt we never left and the images etched in our minds came back to life to haunt us.

We stood there, frozen in time. There was nothing that vanquished the memories. Scenes seemed to be created in our mind, like it was today or maybe yesterday.

My wife and I could only stand being in these, our former home towns, for a minimum time, maybe several hours overall. The first visit back turned out to be so stressful that we could not even attempt to engage in any conversation with any of the current citizens milling around. We were just in a deep thought and reflection, mortified of what did transpire and simply unable to cope with the emotions. Surreal, a bizarre dream!

Würzburg

After the boys landed the same day, one in Frankfurt, the other later in Düsseldorf, we drove to Würzburg for an overnight stay.

We tried to tour the *Residenz*, once the palace of the bishop, now a museum, but being Monday it was closed.

But the familiarity of the area revived memories for my wife Ella. In particular she recalled that she used to take a bus from her hometown Thüngen on Monday morning to attend the Jewish secondary school in Würzburg for the week (she was boarded then). She remembered vividly getting off the bus which also carried some non-Jewish children from Thüngen to attend *better* schools in Würzburg. She vividly recalled being chased off the bus across the large parking lot by some of these thugs hurling epithets and stones at her as she fled. She distinctly remembered falling on one of the stone pavements and injuring one of her knees.

The synagogue and the attached Jewish school were just a block away. They were burned down November 1938. A plaque closely remembered their existence.

Wiesefeld 1987 and 1998 (35 km northwest from Würzburg)

After Würzburg we drove to the small town of Wiesefeld where Ella's father Berthold (Benno) Bamberger was born and raised (1 of 9 children). Ella had spent considerable time with some of her Bamberger uncles and aunts during summer vacations in the mid-1930s.

We found one of the former Bamberger houses. Not far from there there stood the former synagogue, kind on a little island and surrounded by a small iron fence, a tall majestic red brick building, a reminder of the past. It was ravaged on *Reichspogromnacht*, November 9/10, 1938. With its windows blown out, its roof damaged and large black soot streaks emanating from the former windows it was a living monument of its fiery death. One could only speculate why that partially destroyed building was not razed.

In 1987 we found the building used as storage facility and a coop for chicken and geese as they roamed freely on the ground, inside and outside.

The boys entered the building, now completely gutted, and retrieved one complete and one half of the original pretty six-sided inlaid stone floor tiles: A grim reminder of the past.



The destroyed synagogue in Wiesefeld, used for storage and as a goose pen, and its surroundings in 1987
(photo: Ludwig Bauer)

11 years later we returned and were surprised to find that the burnt-out synagogue had been cleaned up with windows and roof repaired. After we parked we talked to a farmer standing across the now fine looking building. He asked us if we would like to get the key to look around inside. We declined for a number of reasons, time being perhaps one of them, but more by the emotions it would raise. After all it was a synagogue, burned out, gutted and used as chicken coop for some time!

That farmer, same age as I, told us that some authority had cleaned up the building, put in windows and renovated the inside at the alleged cost of some 2 million marks. A choral society had adopted it as its home, undertaking the task to give concerts on order to keep the building up as a museum. There were appropriate plaques on the outside now delineating the origin of the building. The farmer who had not lived in town in 1938 wistfully commented on

the state of things in the late 1930s including the destruction of that building and summarized it in good Franconian: *Und des hätt's olles nit brauchen sollen* (All of these goings-on should not have happened).²



The restored former synagogue in Wiesenfeld, 1998
(photo: Ludwig Bauer)

Thüngen, Bavaria (25 km north of Würzburg, 30 km west of Schweinfurt), 1987

After a relatively short car trip from Wiesenfeld through that idyllic landscape adorned with rolling hills, carpets of bright yellow rapeseed fields and picturesque villages, we arrived at the quaint village of Thüngen, ca. 1300 inhabitants, also relatively close to Würzburg.

It is interesting to note that around 1900 Thüngen had some 218 Jewish inhabitants which shrunk to 152 in 1933 (among approximately 1300 inhabitants). After the deportations the village was *judenfrei* in 1942.³

Ella and her family as well as other members of the Jewish community endured many confrontations with Nazis.

Upon our arrival in Thüngen Ella directed us to her former family home on the Hauptstraße (Main Street). There stood the house she was born in and once called home, on the same corner across from the small river Wern, virtually unchanged since she saw it last in 1937. Just the idea that her family was forced to flee in 1937 was most upsetting. She was so upset upon her return in 1987 that she could not engage any of the inhabitants roaming around into any conversation whatsoever. Nor would she talk to any of the older ladies on the street that seemed to recognize her (why anyone would be looking over the house or taking pictures of that house?).

I know how she felt. There would be much apologizing and much of *what did you do the last 50 years?* Just the idea to try and remember who may or may not have been Nazi sympathizers was too repugnant.

The Bamberger family and Ella Bamberger's life in Thüngen in the 1930s

My wife Ella Bamberger is the only child of Berthold (Benno) Bamberger and Leah (*Rosa*) Dinkelspiel Bamberger of Thüngen. Her father was born in Wiesenfeld and moved to Thüngen into his wife's house after marriage. The family suffered through numerous indignations

² Details regarding the Jewish community of Wiesenfeld can be found on this website: http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/wiesenfeld_synagoge.htm

³ For additional data on the Jewish community of Thüngen see: http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/thuengen_synagoge.htm

and chicaneries imposed by the Nazi regime. Fortunately they had obtained one of these treasured immigration visas and left Thüngen, hence Germany, the end of December 1937. They sailed on the U.S. steamship *Washington* from Hamburg to New York City. The family settled in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan.

I met Ella in Chicago in July 1957. We were married there in October 1957 and lived in that area for 40 years. Because of our similar Bavarian backgrounds my wife and I had much in common. We could compare many similar stories of our human endurances during Nazi times in Germany. We raised 2 boys and they are both college graduates.

As we drove through a number of the streets in Thüngen, Ella pointed out some of the former Jewish homes. There were also other structures that she remembered from her youth. Not far from her former house there stood the former synagogue, untouched from the outside. We got out of the car and stood there for a moment in silence and prayer to pay our respects. There was no way we could (or really wanted to see) the interior. The building was not damaged for a number of reasons.

The expulsion of the Jews of Thüngen

Since the Bamberger family left in December 1937, the story was told to them by other Jews of Thüngen who resettled in New York, particularly the family of Albert Fröhlich who arrived in New York in late 1938 and lived in the same apartment building as Ella and her family (West 178th Street) in Manhattan.

A major and significant story goes as follows: Apparently one Saturday in April of 1938 Nazis arrived and fanned throughout the village of Thüngen to inform the Jews that they had to leave within 24 hours. They were told the reason they were kicked out was because Alfred Fröhlich did not milk his cows on Saturday. The Jews never milked their cows on Sabbath which for the Nazis was tantamount to *Tierquälerei* (cruelty to animals).

They were to pack a suitcase and leave within 24 hours. Remember in those days not everyone had a telephone nor a car. They had to find shelter among family or friends in neighboring villages. Once more chicanery of the first order!

Virtually no pogrom took place in Thüngen on November 9, 1938. The synagogue had been closed at the time of the expulsion and therefore not destroyed - there might have been some damage to the interior. Essentially the building was already in the hand of the town and was then appropriately leased or sold. It housed a *Kunstweberei*, (a handicraft weaving studio) in 1987. No one really knows exactly what happened to the interior, religious paraphernalia, lighting fixtures etc. There is now a commemorative plaque attached to the building.



Headstone for Ilse Fröhlich at Laudenschbach am Main (Stadt Karlstadt) Jewish cemetery
(photo: Ludwig Bauer)

Alfred and Rosalie Vorchheimer Fröhlich experienced a gruesome event in 1937. Their daughter Ilse (3rd of 4 children) took her youngest sister Marion for a buggy ride on a Friday afternoon some time in summer of 1937. Alois Haider, a well-known village drunk and shepherd for the Barons Dietz and Lutz von Thüngen kicked Ilse without provocation in the stomach for no apparent reason other than being a Jewish kid, causing her appendix to burst. Ilse and her parents sought help but the local physician Dr. Voemel refused to see Jewish patients.

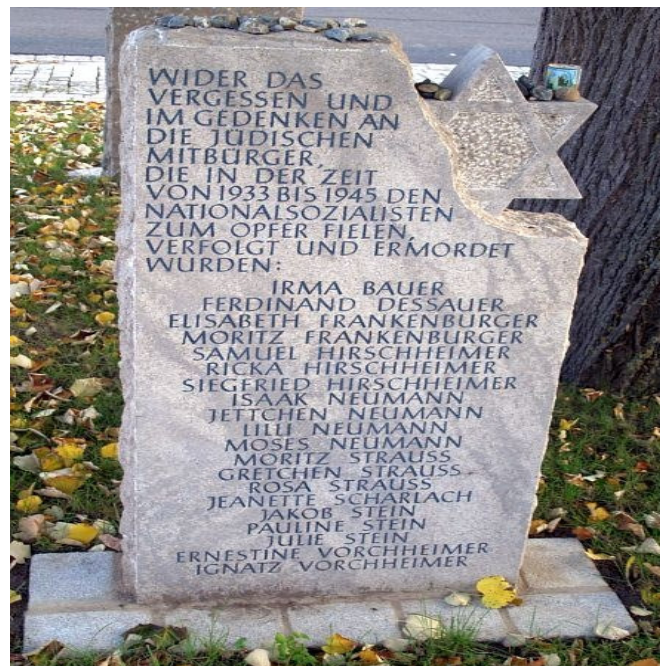
Next day, on the Sabbath, Ilse was admitted to the *Juliusspital* in Würzburg, a general hospital. After 2 weeks she died at home because they could not operate. Rabbi Dr. Hanover of Würzburg permitted her girlfriends to attend her funeral though custom being that children with living parents were not allowed to attend funerals. Her stone rests in the Jewish cemetery of Laudenbach.

After the war the Fröhlich's brought charges against Haider and he was sentenced to 2 years.

Another one of the Fröhlich children, the only son Walter fought with the U.S. Army in the Pacific war theater.

World War 1 memorial and another memorial stone

An unbelievable incident took place in Thüngen sometime in the mid-to-late 1930s which illustrates the sick mentality of the Nazi zealots at that time. They went as far as defiling the stone memorial standing in the center of town honoring all of Thüngen's fallen heroes of World War 1. During Nazi times (around 1937) the names of the 7 fallen Jewish soldiers on that memorial were deleted, actually chiseled out - which is incredible since they gave their lives for Germany during the war. By 1987 it was somewhat reassuring that a new memorial had replaced the partially damaged memorial of the 1930s, now complete with the names of all fallen heroes from Thüngen including the 7 Jewish soldiers.



Memorial stone at the Jewish cemetery in Laudenbach for the 20 deported and murdered Jews from Thüngen (Stadt Karlstadt am Main)

(photo: Ludwig Bauer)

Freiherren (barons) Dietz and Lutz von Thüngen

Thüngen has a castle which was occupied in the 1930s by twin brothers, *Freiherren* (barons) Dietz and Lutz von Thüngen, born in 1894.⁴

⁴ See: <http://thuengen.net/vonthuengen/vonthuengen.htm>, <http://de.academic.ru/dic.nsf/dewiki/334730>, http://www.geneall.net/D/per_page.php?id=156425, http://www.geneall.net/D/per_page.php?id=156436

The twin had considerable different dispositions. Dietz was a gentleman and friendly to the Jewish community. Lutz and his wife professed to be Nazi sympathizers.

Ella wants to comment briefly on the behavior of the son of Lutz named Wolf-Hartmann II. von Thüngen (1923 - 2001) who was then the leader of the local *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) of Thüngen. Their paths intersected a number of times.⁵

After finishing her attendance in the Jewish school in Thüngen around 1936 Ella was enrolled in the Jewish school in Würzburg which was attached to the synagogue then. Now she had to commute by bus every day in the morning and the afternoon between Thüngen and Würzburg.

Ella remembers only too well when she and maybe 10 other children took the bus from Thüngen to Würzburg. Among the children was Wolf-Hartmann who also attended a school in Würzburg. Wolf and some other Nazi kid thugs regularly chased Ella after they all left the bus near the *Residenz*. Epithets were hurled at her and she was pelted with stones as she tried to make her way from the bus to the nearby Jewish school. Once she fell on the uneven stones and injured her knee.

Eventually Ella boarded in Würzburg for the week to avoid the daily commute. On Monday morning and Friday afternoon her mother would accompany her in the bus. Jews were all *fair game* in any attack these cowards could get away with!

There is prominent mention in the literature of another von Thüngen who is distantly related to the aforementioned ones. He achieved fame when he was identified as one of conspirators in the attempted assassination plot of July 20, 1944 to kill Hitler. In the pages of genealogy for the von Thüngens he is listed as Lieutenant General Karl XI. von Thüngen. He was executed in 1944.⁶

End of the visit to Thüngen

After that brief tour of Thüngen in 1987 we were exhausted from what to us has been an overpowering experience . Emotions needed to be curbed and the help was in the form of a virtual *liquid lunch* in the garden of the *Castle Pub* where the local beer is brewed. Never has tasted beer that good! A natural remedy for an extremely stressful morning! Lunch was followed by much coffee and much reminiscing. This was one of these occasions when I had to permit a *very long time* between the last drink and the wheel.

Visiting Thüngen 11 years later (1998)

In contrast a subsequent visit to Thüngen was much more pleasant. We parked our rental car close to Ella's former home. Ella went to see her mother's garden once more. I was looking for places to once more photograph the house, the little river Wern running across the street from the house and the general surroundings. There was a man working around the garage of Ella's former house and in response to Ella's inquiry if he lived there, he responded positively. When Ella mentioned that she was born in that house he immediately asked us in. He immediately knew who Ella was! We met his charming wife and spent several hours with that family. It turned out that the wife was also born in that house! Her 82 year old mother lived upstairs. She and her husband bought the house from the family to which Ella's folks had sold it in 1938. As a matter of fact, without searching very long, the lady of the house produced the

⁵ See: <http://thuengen.net/vonthuengen/vonthuengen.htm>, http://www.geneall.net/D/per_page.php?id=156437

⁶ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Freiherr_von_Th%C3%BCngen, <http://www.markt-thuengen.de/vonthuengen/vonthuengen.htm>

original deed formalizing the sale of Ella's house by her dad in 1937 for the sum of 7500 Marks - which Ella had remembered to be the sum! Of course the house had been completely and beautifully remodeled and looked lovely. Between that Mr. and Mrs. Rath, her mother and another lady that we met outside Ella caught up on the lives of a number of people and had all of her other questions answered. We enjoyed a cup of coffee with this very hospitable family. It was a remarkable afternoon.

Forchheim (Bavaria) 1987



Prewar postcard of Forchheim

To continue our 1987 visit we drove from Thüngen mainly by autobahn in a much shorter trip than anticipated to Forchheim, now about 30,000 compared to 10,000 inhabitants in 1939. After finally procuring a parking spot I parked as close to the *Rathaus* (city hall) as possible to begin my conducted walking tour with the family.

The inner city of Forchheim had stood still in time since my parents and I left in August 1939 *Déjà Vu!* It was one the most difficult moments in my life: Standing in the middle of

the Rathausplatz with tears streaming unabashedly down my cheeks, bringing back all of the devastating memories of my youth!

After regaining my composure I led the family to the first exhibit, the commemorative bronze plaques are still attached to the city hall. These were the heroes from Forchheim who gave their lives for Germany during World War 1. There was clearly inscribed the name of Ludwig Bauer, my uncle, one of my father's older brothers, on the honor scroll who fell for Germany in 1916 at a battle of Verdun. I was named for that uncle.

Then I marched the family up *die Hauptstraße* (main street) pointing out former Jewish-owned stores, particularly the former Gröschel store, and continued onto the infamous Paradeplatz. After crossing that square we walked to the house where I was born and had lived for many years (Marktplatz and Vogelstraße). We just viewed the house from the outside and made no attempt to contact any of its current occupants.

From there the *conducted walking tour* continued down Hornschuchallee and crossed the river Wiesent on the bridge closest to the former synagogue which now is a small parking area. That also was our last home in Forchheim since we lived on the 3rd floor of the synagogue.

Across the street from that parking lot the land was filled with a large construction project in progress. Judging from the size of the pipes it had to do with water and sewage pipe refurbishments. But sticking out above the pipes was the monument that had inscribed on it an apology! We were totally unaware of its existence. I just stood there in disbelief to see a sandstone memorial with an apology! Would that make things right?

The first thought that came to mind was perhaps a cynical one wondering if anyone ever stood there long enough to read it? Total reality of the November 9, 1938 pogrom took over my mind, provoking memories of the moments I stood there in front of the dynamited synagogue and our apartment. I felt ill and thought I was going to collapse.

That event alone brought forth such bitter memories which I had hoped had sunk into the depth of memories. No way!

How could we have known about the monument's existence? There was no one left to communicate with since 1939. The impact was overpowering! I was totally overcome with emotions. Someone actually remembered and cared enough to try and apologize! Yet the bitter truth was that no one tried to locate any survivors to tell them about it. It was too much!

We made our way back to the *Rathaus*, parked the car and toured the rest of Forchheim including the *Keller* (beer cellars) in *Kellerwald* forest. Three hours were enough and the frayed raw nerves could take no more.

My predictions were realized that the visit would be a painful experience for me. Memories were revived, scenes replayed and there was no way I could stay longer. We left and spent the night in Erlangen.⁷

Aftermath to the 1987 visit to Forchheim

After our return to Chicago in August 1987 I corresponded with the then *Oberbürgermeister* (lord mayor) of Forchheim inquiring how this memorial came about. *Oberbürgermeister* Ritter von Traitteur sent me a long letter decrying the fact that we had not apprised him of our visit since he would have liked to greet us.

To my absolute amazement he sent us all kinds of documents and memorabilia dealing with the competition for the design and final creation of that sandstone monument. The episode ended in a formal religious dedication of the memorial on November 10, 1988 by Rabbi Ruben Rosenfeld from Nuremberg with great fanfare. The *Oberbürgermeister* gave a very conciliatory speech atoning for the sins of the former regime which concluded the ceremony.

Ms. Sabine Ponater's essay

Among the many documents I received from the lord mayor was an remarkably accurate 13 pages, single-spaced essay by a Ms. Sabine Ponater, written as a student at the technical college in Bamberg. Her research was part of a special project of her class. Her precise and detailed paper is entitled *Die Judenverfolgung im Dritten Reich in Forchheim unter besondere Berücksichtigung der Reichkristallnacht* (The Persecution of the Jews in the 3rd Reich with particular reference to Crystal Night in Forchheim).

I was flabbergasted! At last facts were emerging from the dark depth of German history during the reign of the Nazis 1933 - 1945. Dark whispers and assumptions were now replaced by black ink carved indelibly on white paper, truth revealed in print.

Some light was shed on the prelude and proceedings of that infamous night of November 9, 1938 in Forchheim. Unedited, stark and painfully realistic Ms. Ponater painted a grim picture of a night of unbelievable sequence of events, a record of the deliberate and rampart destruction of Jewish properties. Her facts are obtained from records pertaining to a number of court proceedings held post-war in Bamberg from charges brought in conjunction of the destructions of November 9/10, 1938. She used these public records - not face-to-face interviews because no one would talk - to construct her essay.

That paper reveals the full extent of the rampage in Forchheim in the name of Nazi righteousness. It portrays the seamy and dastardly coward acts of a band of thugs acting in the guise of *national interest*.

⁷ Additional information on the Jewish community of Forchheim can be found here: http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/forchheim_synagoge.htm

Having lived through the terror of that night I was acutely aware of many of the atrocities, but not of the many details which she provides. Ms. Ponater's essay is available for public perusal in the Archival material in the municipal archives in Forchheim.

I spoke to the author by telephone. She was born and educated in Forchheim but took advanced training at the technical college in Bamberg. She undertook this project as a means to receive a better grade and never thought about it anymore. That is until we spoke. Little did she realize what kind of public service she performed in digging out and reporting the facts. She is a trained social worker now who has worked in Ireland, South Africa and is residing in Germany. Her specialty is the treatment of children affected by the trauma of turmoil.

Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of *Pogromnacht* in Forchheim, November 9/10, 1938

The lord mayor also sent us a copy of a newspaper article published on November 10, 1988 commemorating the 50th anniversary of that night of infamy. This lengthy and highly detailed article entitled *Als das Grauen losbrach* (As the horror set in) embellishes the contents of Ms. Sabine Ponater's essay. The story in the local Forchheim newspaper traces the events that created a dark cloud hovering over the town, staining its history with moments from hell.

The fact that this unflattering essay appeared in print for the public to be reminded of their past really took me by surprise. Certainly it is a soul-searching piece of journalism.

This full and unadulterated account once and for all sets the record straight. It establishes the reality of what occurred during that night and publicly acknowledges the descriptive brutality of the event and the absolute denigration of Jewish citizens.

Totally unexpected was the inclusion of a most revealing black and white photograph taken by Mr. Julius Brunner on November 10, 1938 of the dynamited and partially destroyed synagogue and that of our apartment above it.

This newspaper article starts with the following statements: *Court depositions document the events of Crystal Night. In the judgment of the justices the goings-on in Forchheim were extraordinarily brutal, mobs roamed the street, dwellings were trashed and Jewish inhabitants were roughed up.*⁸

All Jews were arrested in the middle of the night and herded off to jail, men and women thrown into separate cells. They were incarcerated *for their own safety*, ostensibly to prevent attacks on them by the *incensed public* allegedly bent on mob lynching.

To add unwarranted and excessive punishment (penultimate denigration) the following day all Jewish males and me, then 12 years old, were forcibly paraded like a herd of animals through the streets of Forchheim to the devastated synagogue to face a jeering mob assembled there. They were then forced to confront the destruction of their revered place of worship and mandated to shovel some of the rubble into a 2-wheel cart moved into position. It reminded me of uncivilized events in the Coliseum, a so-called civilized society out of control!

All of the Jewish men, many of them World War 1 veterans, were transported by train to the ever infamous concentration camp at Dachau (near Munich). The maltreatment of the inmates of concentration camps is well-documented. They were eventually released, several signing over their businesses to *Aryan* buyers to speed up the *Aryanization* in the town. Other *extenuating* circumstances that could lead to the release would have been proof of honorable service in World War 1. This was the avenue my mother pursued to have my father released from

⁸ German original wording: *Gerichtsakten dokumentieren die Geschehnisse in der Reichskristallnacht. Das Urteil der Justiz: In Forchheim waren die Ausschreitungen besonders schwer, Mob durchzog die Straßen - Wohnungen zerschlagen, jüdische Bürger misshandelt.*

concentration camp. The fact that my father had a bullet lodged permanently in one of his lungs did not enter the equation for his over 6-week incarceration. Furthermore the fact that his brother Ludwig gave his life in 1916 for Germany became irrelevant. What rewards for patriotism and sacrifice!

How Rolf Kießling from Forchheim contacted me in 1998

There appeared another unsolicited and remarkable turn of events in the search for knowledge of what transpired in those dark days of the late 1930s and early 1940s. It was only through 2 remarkable coincidences that I met Mr. Rolf Kießling. He was born in Forchheim in 1949 where he is currently living. After his tertiary education at the University of Würzburg he is teaching at the Herder Gymnasium Forchheim Religion and German.

Mr. Kießling has developed an intense research interest of the history and fate of the Jews of Forchheim from time immemorial until 1942. He has published extensively on the life of local Jewish families. His many publications include the one which appeared in *Nordbayerische Nachrichten* newspaper on November 9, 1998, the 60th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. In this succinct article *Schonungslos brutal* (Mercilessly brutal) he summarizes the happenings during and after that night in Forchheim.

My per chance meeting of him took place through a series of unexpected events: After my father passed away in November 1964 my mother lived alone in the family home in Belmore, a suburb of Sydney. Her house was within walking distance to a train station thus enabling her to travel to downtown Sydney frequently. Upon returning late afternoon from one of those excursions to the city the following fortuitous encounter took place, as narrated by Joshua Eisenberg in his own words:

It was during an afternoon, when I was rushing to Belmore station along Burwood Road, that my weekly train ticket fell out of my jacket pocket which I was carrying over my arm. I suddenly heard a female voice calling to tell me that I had lost my ticket. I turned around and saw an elderly lady holding my ticket. I thanked her and we exchanged a few sentences. I realized by her accent that she was of German origin and possibly Jewish. I was in a great hurry to catch my train, so I quickly asked for her address, which was easy to remember since it was only some hundred meters from my own house. The same night I told [my wife] Dora about a Jewish widow living alone so close to us without us knowing, though we had been living in the area for over 2 years. Since we were almost at the Jewish New Year, we decided to invite her [my mother] to our New Year's dinner. Paula accepted the invitation willingly and brought with her a beautiful strudel. After this time, Paula was our regular guest for Passover Seders and Rosh Hashonoh Dinners.

From this brief encounter my mother and the Eisenberg family became good friends and towards the end of her life it was the Eisenbergs who visited and took care of my mother virtually every day. The Eisenbergs had emigrated from Poland to what was then Palestine in the 1930s. They decided later on to leave Israel with their two children, Masha and Joe, to resettle in Sydney.

It was Masha Eisenberg who mentioned in a letter to us in September 1998 that she had read that someone by the name of Rolf Kießling from Forchheim in Bavaria was trying to trace me. He had placed an ad in a local Jewish newspaper in Sydney. Masha spotted the ad and sent it to me in September 1998.

I sent Mr. Kießling a letter acknowledging his ad. He was most appreciative of the fact that he could now communicate with a bona-fide survivor of the 1930s directly who might be able to

supply him with additional first-hand data for his research on the fate of the Jews. Thus between October 1998 and now we have exchanged literally hundreds of messages.

We found out that of the 7 Jewish children living in Forchheim in the 1930s 2 escaped via *Kindertransport* while 5 left with their parents upon emigration. Everyone tried to give Rolf as much information as possible. By conventional mail and email, faxes and phone calls we were able to corroborate and reconstruct many of the unbelievably sad events that took place in the incessant persecution of the Jews culminating in the *final solution*. His succinct comments after some of our initial exchanges were simply: *unglaublich, unfassbar* (unbelievable, beyond comprehension).⁹

Ottensoos, Bavaria (26 km northeast from Nuremberg), 1987

After a short drive from Erlangen on one of the autobahns, by-passing Nuremberg, we arrived at the small village (ca. 900 inhabitants in 1939) of Ottensoos, the birthplace of my mother. It was another *déjà vu*: Nothing had changed in the center of town except perhaps paved streets. There was the church and, turning right, the beautiful 3-storey duplex house once owned by 2 Sommerich brothers, one half by my grandfather Phillip Sommerich and family, the other by his brother Anton Sommerich and family.

We parked and did a lot of walking. There was the train station, the brewery, a small lake with ducks on it and then more outlying newer parts of the town. There was the intact synagogue, not destroyed in November 1938 but have the interior vandalized, now passed into private hands. Hints of its former life were the almost faint Hebrew letters chiseled in the weathered stone crowning the doorway. The building had a commemorative plaque attached and was in the process of being restored.¹⁰

Then again lunch at the local pub. Upon leaving we asked some of the elderly patrons regard their residence in Ottensoos. They seem to answer uniformly that they migrated from East Germany near the end of World War 2.

I did not have the nervous energy to confront the past - to try and enter my grandparents' former home and chat with the current occupants. I was fully aware of who they were - actually truly wonderful people - and knew how their parents looked after my grandparents in 1939. I was still in the grip of the emotions from yesterday's visit Forchheim, emotions ran high and time was of the essence since we had an appointment in Nuremberg that afternoon.

Nuremberg 1987

After our short visit to Ottensoos we drove to Nuremberg (about 30 km). The trip by car was so short compared to the time it took to cover the same route with these seemingly endless slow locals train rides in the 1930s.

The place sustained heavy damage during WW2 and has been rebuilt to resemble the former medieval city. In Nuremberg our prime interest was to visit 2 former inhabitants of

⁹ A summary of the history of the Jews in Forchheim since 1645 is on the website <http://www.ffw-forchheim.de/cityhi09.htm>. - In 1988 there surfaced a book authored by Israel Schwierz, *Steinerne Zeugnisse jüdischen Lebens in Bayern* (Stone witnesses of Jewish life in Bavaria). That book summarizes the fate of each synagogue in Bavaria. Short paragraphs on these former Jewish communities in Bavarian towns are listed with or without pictures.

¹⁰ Additional material on the Jewish life in Ottensoos is outlined here: http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/ottensoos_synagoge.htm

Forchheim, Mr. Josef (Sepp) and Mrs. Betty (Hutzler) Bernhard. We had corresponded with them and arranged for this meeting. They bridged the gap between 1939 and now.

Betty was 87 and Sepp 92 years young, he (legally blind) still tall and erect. They both had total recall of their minds. They recounted at great length of some of the indignities that they endured during the War. Sepp had the audacity - flying into the face of Nazi laws - to remain married to his Jewish wife Betty from Forchheim. They had married before the Nuremberg Laws were enacted and he stubbornly refused to divorce his wife in the face of constant pressure.

They left Forchheim since it was too small a place and the larger city seemed safer. As the war progressed and manpower for civilian jobs diminished the regime looked the other way when he applied for and was hired as a banker in Nuremberg. During one of the many bombing raids on Nuremberg by the Allies the building Sepp worked scored a direct hit. They found Sepp alive, but completely wrapped in the steel wire that is used to reinforce concrete. It took months before he recuperated. At the same time Betty was constantly threatened that she would be deported. In spite of these harsh times they survived, but her parents were killed.

It was an incredible afternoon. After champagne (called *Sekt* in Germany) to celebrate our reunion they recounted clearly of what happened to every Jewish citizen that had remained in Forchheim after we left in August 1939 including the sad tale of her parents who also had moved to Nuremberg. The older folks kept getting weekly letters from the authorities that the time is near when they would leave Nuremberg to resettle in an all-Jewish community to enjoy tranquility and peace at last. Betty and Sepp took her parents and appropriate suitcases in the 1941/42 to the designated train platform. They said their goodbyes and the train took off. It was one of those infamous deportation trains. As the train pulled out of the station Sepp and Betty were the only ones left on the platform. But the train left without the last car, the baggage car! Wherever they went to they did not need any baggage! Of course they never returned.

After a short walk-around in Nuremberg history was beginning to haunt us, so we decided to leave this once seemingly familiar town and head to places we had never seen before.

Revisiting Ottensoos, 11 years later, May 1998

In 1998 Ella and I visited Ottensoos once more. The family tree records that Ottensoos was the original seat of the Sommerich clan since before 1750. The aforementioned house was home to 2 families: Philipp and Babette (Himmelreich) Sommerich, my grandparents, and their 3 children Justin, Paula (my mother) and Arnold, as well as Jakob, a single brother of Philipp. The other side of the duplex was occupied by Anton and Agathe (Schmitt) Sommerich and their 3 children Bella, Albert and Selma. Justin and Paula ended up in Australia, Bella and Albert in South Africa. Selma and her husband fled to Amsterdam, Holland in the late 1930s and ended up being deported by the Nazis to Poland where they were murdered.

Philipp and Babette Sommerich lived there until 1939. Due to the early deaths of Anton and Agathe and the departure of their three children, one half of the duplex was rented out in the 1930s to the Gentile Singer family.

On that Sunday morning in May of 1998 we had parked across the street from the Sommerich home, but noticed a person standing in the doorway. I approached this person to inquire if he lived in this house. When he answered in the affirmative I mentioned that I spent a lot of time in this house, virtually every summer from birth to 1938 being then the only grandchild to *Oma* and *Opa* Sommerich). I was looked at like an apparition - I could virtually see the wheels of his

brain spinning furiously: Who the hell could that be?! After I mentioned that my mother was Paula Sommerich, pandemonium broke loose. To his utter disbelief I had returned.

The current occupants had bought that half of the duplex belonging formerly to my grandparents in 1939 and were descendants of the Singer family. The Singer family of the 1930s had five children. One son Hans was my age and we played together during the summer months when I was stayed with my grandparents. 3 of the Singer children including that son had succumbed to diphtheria in the late 1930s or early 1940s. The 2 remaining daughters were alive. I met again the older daughter Louise and we reminisced about the time when we played in the backyard.

The younger daughter Gunda and her husband Herbert Birner who stemmed from German-speaking *Sudetenland* in what was then Czechoslovakia purchased and remodeled my grandparents' home. They raised their family in that house. Their daughter Edith is married to Helmut Gemmel and they live with their 2 daughters in Ottensoos. Their son Alexander had just gotten married the day before we visited. Alexander, Anke and their 2 daughters now live in that completely remodeled house.

I found out some of which had transpired in my grandparents' village at the time of the pogrom of November 9/10, 1938. It was not a pretty picture. Remember, these were all older persons. No one was injured, but they were all kept under arrest in one house for a day or so. I did discover that the Singer family who then lived in the house attached to my grandparents supplied them with food which they were not supposed to have done and really Those acts of kindness by the Singers are not forgotten.

Arnold Sommerich (1900 - 1938)

Arnold Sommerich, the youngest son of Philipp and Babette Sommerich born June 1, 1900 in Ottensoos became a victim of Nazi persecution. His death wreaked havoc into the family since he was the major breadwinner for his parents, in part due to the fact that he knew how to operate an automobile. He and his uncle Jakob Sommerich (brother of Philipp) were traveling salesmen representing farm-machinery manufacturers, selling equipment to farmers of that region. They traveled during weekdays, calling upon potential customers in their designated areas.

The story of Arnold's arrest, his incarceration in mid-1938 and his death early in 1939 is documented in a book written by Martin Schieber entitled *Ottensoos - Ein Streifzug durch elf Jahrhunderte Geschichte* (Ottensoos - A journey through 11 centuries of history). The author summarizes the existence and activities of the former Jewish community of Ottensoos.¹¹

I took the following information from the book: Arnold Sommerich was arrested by the Gestapo on August 23, 1938 in Ottensoos. He was charged of making derogatory and accusatory statements against Germany while in Czechoslovakia during an one-day driving business trip with one of the bosses of a firm he represented. Since June 1938 Arnold had tried to emigrate to Australia and obtained all the papers necessary. Essentially there were no outstanding debts or warrants out for Arnold as he seriously pursued obtaining entrance visas for other countries. He also held a valid passport.

I wrote to the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen, Germany to inquire the charges against Arnold warranting his eventual incarceration in Buchenwald concentration camp. My request was honored and they answered that he was registered in the camp as a Jewish political prisoner.

¹¹ See p. 79-103. Mr. Schieber devotes the chapter *Jahrhundertlang eine Heimat. Die jüdische Gemeinde* to the history of the Jewish community.

He was held incommunicado all the time. I cannot imagine what my grandparents went through. Not only did they lose their precious son, they lost all means of earning a living. I was then 12 years old and never once saw them during that period. Since we had no phone there was no means to communicate. I have no idea if they could have bought off someone to obtain his freedom (the Nazi were pretty good at blackmail). I understand after his death several immigration visas came through. Even if true, it was too late. If he could have obtained a visa, he might have been able to travel from the KZ directly to the border, to exit. ITS reported that the official cause of death of this 39-year old man who has been never sick a day in his life before was *circulatory insufficiency with supporting lung and coastal pleurisy*.

Munich

After this biographical digressions back to our trip in 1987: After leaving Nuremberg we settled down for the night at Ingolstadt on the Danube. Next day it was onto picturesque Munich and the foreland of the Alps.

There were 2 events of a different kind in Munich: We parked the rented car at the perimeter of the town and decided to take a long walk into the center. At the insistence of the boys we visited the *Hofbräuhaus*, one of the places frequently mentioned as the location of Nazi meetings and diatribes. Yes, there were the tables and benches. Just imagine the leaders dancing on these tables to harangue the crowd ... The visualization of scenes of the 1920s made the beer taste bitter!

On our walk from the *Hofbräuhaus* back to the car an older man deliberately bumped into our younger son with such force that almost knocked him to the ground. This was not an accident but a mean-spirited individual's *protest* against the presence of Americans because he never even turned around. We all felt it was very deliberate and we did not wish to cause a scene, but it brought back moments of hate (so we all felt). Had it been an accident he might have at least stopped to apologize.

Other places and back to Chicago

There were other places that we visited. After attending that scientific conference in Heidelberg for a week it was time to return. It was an emotional and draining 3-week trip. We had 9 hours in isolation on the plane between Frankfurt and Chicago, Illinois to reflect on all of our experiences. Emotions still ran high and we were debating whether or not we should have undertaken the trip. While the 3 weeks left us emotionally drained, in the long run it was a perhaps necessary catharsis. It helped to make subsequent trips more palatable and the undercurrent of feelings diminished to a small degree.

The 3 weeks in Germany had not erased our memories of the persecution in Germany 1933 - 1939 nor the difficulty of trying to start a new life in a new world. Nostalgia played horrible tricks on us, having us oscillate between scenes of total rejection as humans and genuine acts of kindness by the current citizenry. It had been a powerful journey, but did not reconcile the past with the present.

Reflections into the future

Currently annual *Yom Ha-Shoah* Holocaust Memorial Days are observed by many Jewish communities to commemorate the Holocaust. These commemorations will fade as the ranks of the current survivors are thinned. Written Accounts may withstand the test of times to pro-

vide a permanent legacy for generations to come. After all these years the world is still trying to come to grips with Auschwitz.

Epilogue

The above was composed in the spirit of reconciliation rather than continuing confrontation. The events happened in an era in which unfettered hate was officially encouraged, condoned and freely promulgated under the guise of *doing good for the country*. Gross and evil acts were committed by the Nazis on *unacceptable* people. Eventually properties were destroyed or confiscated and first all German and then most European Jewish communities were destroyed. Pleas to alleviate these oppressions fell on deaf ears. Governments ignored these screams for help and millions perished.

The foreign countries looked the other way and became stone-deaf. This reaction encouraged Hitler to carry on: Jews were rounded up and transported like cattle to the slaughtering houses and the world did not appear to be concerned. Human tragedies taking place before and during the war were ignored. After the war, when all the pieces of the final puzzle were put in place, the world finally realized what had happened and it promised that future holocausts must not be tolerated. Sounds good! In ending on such a downbeat note it was hoped that repetitions of acts of inhumanity would vanish from face of the planet leading to a kinder human race. The events of September 11, 2001 seem to fly directly into the face of such a plea.

But let us hope ...

Revised July 2012

[Index*](#)

[Home*](#)