

Gärtnerplatz 4 (today Klenzestraße 26)

Sabine Schwager

nee Teller,
born July 2., 1885
in Unterhaid
deported Nov. 20., 1941
to Kaunas,
murdered Nov. 25., 1941
in Kaunas



Foto: Privatbesitz

Sabine (Bini) Teller was born July 3, 1885, in Unterhaid, Bohemia (now Dolni Dvoriste, Czech Republic) and was the second child of Leopold Teller and Amalie (Kuh). Leopold had a business that sold grains and seeds to farmers. Sabine was one of five children. She had an older brother, Josef (Pepi) (1881), and three younger half-brothers [Robert (1897), Fritz (1899), and Rudolph (Rudi) (1903)] born to her father and step-mother, Mina (Mayer), after her mother died following childbirth. Sabine was educated in Unterhaid and later went to Prague where she stayed with family to continue her education, study piano and singing, and attend the theater and other social and cultural events.

On August 31, 1911, Sabine married Leopold Schwager in Munich. Like many marriages during this time, it was likely an arranged marriage. Following their wedding, Sabine and Leopold resided at Gärtnerplatz 4/III in Munich, across from the Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz (State Theatre at Gärtnerplatz), known for operetta. The apartment, which was the third floor of a small apartment building, had a wide entry hall, a large sitting/dining room, a big kitchen where most meals were prepared and eaten, a bathroom, and two bedrooms. It was furnished with contemporary Bavarian furniture. There was a grand piano in the sitting room which Sabine and, later, her sons played. Sabine and Leopold lived in this home until August 1940 when they were forcibly moved to another apartment.

In 1912, Sabine and Leopold's first child, Charlotte (Lotte), was born. The next year, on July 24, 1913, a son, Erwin, was born. Lotte died of pneumonia on May 1, 1914, at nearly two years old. In 1914, Leopold entered the German army along with his three brothers (Albert, Fritz, and Siegmund) and his brother-in-law (Sigmund Seliger). He was captured and imprisoned for two and a half years in England. Leopold returned to Munich at the end of 1919, when prisoners of war were exchanged. Throughout Leopold's absence, Sabine maintained the business, assisted by older employees. Sabine and Leopold's third child, Karl, was born July 17, 1921.

The Schwager family had a maid named Paula who helped Sabine with the housework and the children. Paula worked for the family from Erwin's infancy through 1939. Someone also came in

once a week to help with the laundry, which was hand-washed in the kitchen and hung to dry. Sabine shopped daily, typically at the Viktualienmarkt where she bought fresh produce, meat, poultry, fruits, and vegetables, which she prepared at home. Leopold and Sabine did not typically take vacations together. Instead, Sabine would return to Unterhaid each summer with her sons to spend a month with her parents and siblings. This was a warm annual reunion, as Sabine was very close with her family, especially her older brother, Josef (Pepi), who lived in Bozen (Bolzano) and later in Verona.

Sabine was a very warm woman. She had close relations with her sons, brothers, and many other family members. Sabine and Leopold often had company at home in Munich, including friends and members of their large families who eagerly visited as an opportunity to be “Bini’s guest.” Years later, in times of persecution and separation from her loved ones, Sabine’s letters show that she thoughtfully remembered birthdays and special occasions and openly expressed her love, especially for her children. On June 30, 1941, in anticipation of her brother Pepi’s, and her sons’ (Erwin and Karl) birthdays in July, Sabine wrote: „Every birthday we celebrate in our thoughts together, in memory of times passed. On these occasions, when the mind vividly turns years back, it becomes most pitiful that we cannot share these little birthday pleasures in person. However, as long as we are able to receive your beautiful letters regularly, we shall be satisfied and enjoy them. In your case, dear, good Pepi, it will be a special birthday, your 60th. My thoughts will be with you all day. How I’d love to mail you a little present for your table, that should show you my constant love and gratefulness. But, I only can congratulate you with empty words and tears. You, Karli and Erwin, my dear children, G’d should protect you and watch out for you on your future travels, you should just be fortunate in everything you undertake. I have many wishes that I have for you in my heart. Especially stay well and find joy in your successes – and we shall be joyful with you!“

Although Sabine and Leopold were members of Munich’s main synagogue and their sons received a Jewish education and bar mitzvah, they were not highly religious and did not keep kosher. They attended synagogue for the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and celebrated other Jewish holidays, typically with the extended Schwager family. Sabine and Leopold felt very strongly Bavarian. They enjoyed the many cultural events in Munich, regularly attending plays, operettas, and opera. They had both Jewish and Christian friends, employees, and customers.

Leopold and Sabine worked together to build a thriving business. At its height, the business employed 15 to 20 people and included a main store at Fliegenstrasse 3 and branch store at Burgstrasse 10. They owned several cars, used by the family and the company’s sales representatives to travel throughout Bavaria selling leather products and materials. Leopold and Sabine’s business in Munich suffered during World War I and again during the post-war inflation, as did many other businesses. They successfully rebuilt the business and lived very comfortably until the late 1930s.

Leopold was reluctant to believe how dire the Nazi situation was for Jews. He held that the politics would change. These beliefs kept Sabine and him from applying earlier for emigration for his family. In addition, their business was successful, and they were reluctant to leave Munich for an uncertain future and possible dependence on their sons. It was not until early 1938 that Sabine and Leopold sought to help their sons emigrate. Karl, like several of his cousins and uncles, was a Zionist eager to leave Germany for Palestine. Karl learned carpentry, a trade needed in Palestine, and Leopold and Sabine paid for his voyage and two years of living expenses as part of a Youth Aliyah program. Karl left Munich in August 1938 for Kibbutz Merchavia.

Erwin was 24 and an employee of the family business when Leopold began writing letters to family members in the United States seeking an affidavit for him. Within several months, an affidavit was secured from Morris Katz who lived in New York City. [Morris was the son-in-law of Emilia (Fleischer) Hollub, Karolina (Karla) Schwager's sister. Karla was Leopold's step-mother.] Arrangements were made for Erwin to leave Munich, and on October 24, 1938, Erwin left Munich for Hamburg by airplane, seen off by his parents, Uncle Pepi, and Aunt Auguste (one of Leopold's sisters). On October 26, 1938, at 1:00 a.m., Erwin departed Hamburg on the S.S. President Roosevelt accompanied by his good friend Anneliese (Iche) Wallach. They arrived in New York on November 5, five days before Kristallnacht.

Leopold was arrested on Kristallnacht and sent to a concentration camp at Dachau for about a month. This was the turning point when Leopold and Sabine decided to leave Germany. But, by this time, it was very difficult to emigrate. Shortly after Kristallnacht Sabine wired Erwin requesting affidavits for the United States. Erwin asked Morris Katz to again provide the affidavits and wired his parents the same day that the affidavits would be provided. Sabine and Leopold applied for emigration to the U.S., and, in December 1938, they received a waiting number from the U.S. Consulate of 39,000. This meant that they would have to wait for years to leave since the waiting lists were full of German Jews trying to escape the Nazi terror.

In December 1938, Leopold and Sabine's leather business was subjected to "Aryanization." It was handed over to a trustee and subsequently sold, at diminished value, to Gerhard Fiehler, the brother of the Lord-Mayor of Munich, Karl Fiehler. In February 1939, Leopold and Sabine were allowed to receive only RM 400 a month, including rent, from their accounts.

Between November 1938 and November 1941, Leopold and Sabine, assisted in particular by Josef (Pepi) Teller (Sabine's older brother who lived in Northern Italy) and Erwin (who pursued various options and carefully saved money to assist his parents), made determined efforts to emigrate. However, few opportunities for emigration existed, and it was not possible to leave until all taxes were paid. Leopold worked hard for many months to liquidate the business and collect debts to pay the taxes required to obtain emigration papers and passports. Sabine helped by selling some of the family's possessions. In July 1939, she wrote to Erwin: „On my birthday, the

grand piano was transported away. We received RM1050 for it; little enough but we could not leave it here any longer in case we have to move. Our living room is now so spacious ... If we just knew where we'll go, things would be easier. But this constant waiting! For what?"

On July 30, 1939, Leopold wrote Erwin that the money received from the recent sale of merchandise inventory, together with earlier debt collection, allowed him to pay all taxes and that he could now apply for the official clearing papers for emigration. During 1939, Sabine and Leopold decided to pursue immigration to England. While they secured jobs as housekeepers in late July in London through Bloomsbury House and were very close to immigrating to England, war broke out between Germany and England in September 1939, and this opportunity was lost. They continued writing hundreds of letters to pursue other avenues for immigration, including to Cuba, Chile, Palestine, and the United States. And they waited. In August 1940, the Nazi regime forced Sabine and Leopold to move from their home in Gärtnerplatz to an apartment at Rauchstrasse 10, a so-called Jewish House (Judenhaus), which they shared with other Jewish families preparing or hoping to emigrate. At this time, Leopold was forced to perform menial labor and Sabine largely stayed at home.

In February 1941, Leopold and Sabine's immigration numbers for the U.S. were called. Erwin applied for affidavits and deposited U.S. dollars for the purchase of boat tickets for his parents to come to the U.S. Erwin also purchased visas for Cuba, which were secured November 3, 1941. However, the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt) proclaimed a ban on emigration for Jews in mid-October 1941. Nazi authorities had decided to deport German Jews and Sabine and Leopold's emigration plans were crossed. They were deported from Munich by train on November 20, 1941. Three of Leopold's sisters, their husbands, and one niece were also deported, namely: Emma Seliger (Schwager), Sigmund Seliger, Auguste Schnurmann (Schwager), Elias Schnurman, Hermine Gunz (Schwager), Max Friedrich Gunz, and Eva Gunz (12 years old). A cousin, Max Schwager, and his wife, Berta Schwager (Holzinger), were also deported on the same date.

The Schwager family members were deported on a train intended for Riga, Latvia, along with about 1,000 other Munich Jews. This was one of the initial deportations of German (Reich) Jews. However, Leopold and Sabine's sons were not officially informed of the deportation. They only received a cryptic telegram from their Uncle Pepi in Italy, informing them that the emigration plans of their parents vanished into thin air: "YOUR PARENTS WERE MOVED TOGETHER WITH ALL RELATIVES TO ANOTHER LOCATION. EMIGRATION TO CUBA IMPOSSIBLE. PEPI LUGERT" Finally, in November 1953, the Jewish Cultural Union sent a letter that identified most of the Schwager family members as deported from Munich to Riga, but it stated that there never arrived any information of this transport from Munich to Riga. (Sabine Schwager and Eva Gunz were not identified in this letter. In May 1960, a second letter from The Jewish Cultural Union stated that Mrs. Sabine Schwager, née Teller, and Miss Eva Gunz were deported to Riga in November 1941 and never returned from there.)

In fact, the Munich Jews deported on November 20, 1941, never arrived in Riga. Their train was diverted to Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, as were trains with Jews from Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Vienna, and Breslau. The Einsatzkommando 3, a sub-unit of Einsatzgruppe, under Karl Jäger's command, took everyone off the trains after their arrival to the Ninth Fort, and shot them several days later. There were two separate shootings, on November 25 and November 29. In the November 25 shooting, 1,159 men, 1,600 women, and 175 children were killed (deportees from Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt). In the November 29 shooting, 693 men, 1,155 women, and 152 children were killed (deportees from Vienna and Breslau). It is not known who issued the orders for the murder of these people.

Leopold and Sabine Schwager were murdered in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, on November 25, 1941. It was not until the 1990s (after Erwin and Karl Schwager had both died) that Schwager family members learned of the IX Fort Massacre in Kovno, Lithuania.

Text Dianne Schwager

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