

Gärtnerplatz 4 (today Klenzestraße 26)

Leopold Schwager

born Aug. 31., 1884
in Kötzing
deported Nov. 20., 1941
to Kaunas,
murdered Nov. 25., 1941
in Kaunas

Leopold Schwager was born August 31, 1884, in Koetzing, Bavaria. He was the oldest of Anna (Steindler) and Isidor Schwager's three sons. His brothers Albert (1885) and Fritz (1887) were also born in Koetzing where the family owned a grocery store. Leopold's mother died in childbirth, together with her fourth child, Anna, in November 1888. Following Anna's death, Isidor moved with his three young sons to Cham, Bavaria, which had a small Jewish community.



Photo: private

In 1889, Isidor married Karolina (Karla) Fleischer, Anna's cousin. That year, he also established the family leather business, Isidor Schwager Lederhandlung, (Leather Handler), which became a successful enterprise that later employed his sons and daughters. The company purchased leather from tanneries, manufactured leather products such as uppers for high quality shoes and sold leather to finishers of products such as shoes, luggage, and clothes.

Karla raised Isidor's three sons and, together, Isidor and Karla had six more children, Emma (1890), Siegmund (1891), Auguste (1892), Ida (1894), Hermine (1898), and Josef (1901). All nine children were educated in the local public schools and received religious instruction in Cham, Bavaria. After completing his primary education, Leopold went to Munich to apprentice for three years to prepare himself to join his father's business. When he returned to Cham, Leopold worked tirelessly for the company, traveling all week by train and bicycle throughout Oberpfalz, Niederbayern, and Oberfranken, where they had many customers.

In 1910, at the age of 26, wanting greater independence, Leopold left Cham and went to Munich to establish his own business, Leopold Schwager Lederhandlung und Schäftefabrikation (Leather Handling and Shoe Upper Manufacturing). Like his father's business, the company purchased leather from tanneries, manufactured specialty leather products, and sold leather to finishers of leather products, especially shoemakers. To help Leopold establish his company, Isidor turned over all his clients in Oberbayern and the contents of a warehouse to his son.

On August 31, 1911, Leopold married Sabine (Bini) Teller in Munich. Like many marriages during the time, it was probably an arranged marriage. Sabine (born July 3, 1885) was from Unterhaid, Bohemia. Following their wedding, Leopold and Sabine resided at Gärtnerplatz 4/III in Munich, across from the Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz (State Theatre at Gärtnerplatz), which was known

for operetta. The apartment 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. Leopold and Sabine lived in this home until August 1940 when they were forcibly moved to another apartment.

In 1912, Leopold and Sabine'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 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 the older employees. Leopold and Sabine's third child, Karl, was born July 17, 1921.

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, which were used by the family and the company's sales representatives to travel throughout Bavaria selling leather products and materials. The business suffered during World War I and again during the post-war inflation, as did other businesses. They successfully rebuilt the company and lived very comfortably until the late 1930s. Although they were members of Munich's main synagogue, and their sons received a Jewish education and bar mitzvah, Leopold and Sabine 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.

Isidor and Karla Schwager moved to Munich in 1921 and resided on Liebigstrasse, where holidays, such as Hanukah and Passover, were celebrated by the extended Schwager family, including Leopold's siblings and their families. In 1968, Siegmund Schwager (Leopold's younger brother) wrote to Erwin (Leopold's older son): *The time spent in Munich was the happiest for Isidor. We brothers in Cham and Leopold in Munich were again successful with flourishing enterprises. We all crowded around our parents. Every opportunity to be with them in Munich was gladly taken.... Liebigstrasse was home for all of us. There one could relax, discuss all problems, and make plans to improve the happiness of our various families.*

Leopold and Sabine 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 was an avid walker, spending most Sunday mornings, between 7:30 am and 1:00 pm, on lengthy walks along the Isar River, in Munich's parks, and in the nearby Bavarian countryside and mountains. He did not have hobbies or play a musical instrument, but he was a passionate reader.

Leopold was slow to realize how dire the Nazi situation was for Jews. He held that the politics would change. These beliefs kept him from applying earlier for emigration for his family. Also, his

business was successful, and, as a man in his mid-50s, he was reluctant to leave Munich for an uncertain future and possible dependence on his sons. It was not until early 1938 that Leopold and Sabine sought to help their sons emigrate. Karl, like several of his cousins and uncles, was a Zionist and eager to leave Germany for Palestine. Assisted by his parents, 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, they secured an affidavit through Morris Katz, who lived in New York City. (Morris was the son-in-law of Emilia (Fleischer) Hollub, Karolina (Karla) Schwager's sister.) Arrangements were made for Erwin to leave Munich, and on October 24, 1938, Erwin (age 25) left Munich for Hamburg by airplane, seen off by his parents, Uncle Pepi (Sabine's brother) and Aunt Auguste (Leopold's sister). 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 City 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 Sabina were allowed to receive only RM 400 a month, including rent, from their accounts.

After Erwin and Karl left Munich, Leopold and Sabine wrote to them often to provide emotional support and stay connected. They encouraged their sons, wishing them the best in life. Erwin kept copies of these letters and translated them for his children in the 1980s. In June 1939, in anticipation of Erwin's 26th birthday, Leopold wrote to his son, now living in the United States in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: *Mother and I wish you everything good we can think of for your birthday, everything that parents could wish for their good, brave and beloved child in a distant country. Stay healthy and G'd's help and blessings may protect you on your future way in life. May you have luck for good advancement and hope for a secured, satisfying future.*

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 for many months to liquidate his business and collect debts to pay the taxes required to obtain emigration papers and passports. Sabine helped by selling the family's possessions.

On July 30, 1939, Leopold wrote Erwin that the money received from the recent sale of merchandise inventory, together with earlier debt collection, would allow him to pay all taxes (including the Jew Tax) and that he could now apply for the official clearing papers for emigration.: *Our store merchandise inventory was sold to the SEG for RM 15,500. The first installment will be made to me August 1. I just saw the trustee again. Because of this, I can pay all taxes. The biggest part already was settled by money coming in from customer debits. Now, I can apply for the official clearing papers for emigration.*

During 1939, Leopold and Sabine decided to pursue immigration to England. By late July, they had secured jobs as housekeepers in London through Bloomsbury House and were very close to immigrating. But war broke out between Germany and England in September 1939, and this opportunity was lost. They continued writing letters to pursue other avenues for emigration, including to Cuba, Chile, Palestine, and the United States. And they waited.

While most of the letters that Leopold wrote focused on dismantling his business, collecting debts, and pursuing immigration options, he did not fail to express his love and devotion to his family, especially his sons. He routinely demonstrated his affection by the following types of closings to his letters: *Stay well and be most cordially greeted and kissed by Your always true loving FATHER.*

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. During 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. Howe-

ver, 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 had 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 by Dianne Schwager

Sources:

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- Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, LEA 33925.
- Yad Vashem, The International Institute for Holocaust Research: Transport, Train Da 27 from Muenchen, München (München), Bavaria, Germany to Kaunas, Kaunas, Lithuania on 20/11/1941. Online verfügbar unter <http://db.yadvashem.org/deportation/transportDetails.html?language=en&itemId=9437950> (zuletzt eingesehen am 08.01.2019).

Literature:

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