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Background

As the Second World War progressed and Hitler's ethnic cleansing of the Jewish people from Europe known as the Holocaust continued, the Gestapo began to round up Jews from mixed marriages. In 1943, the final roundup of Jews from Berlin occurred, including hundreds of Jewish men married to Aryan women into an assembly camp on the Rosenstrasse. On February 27, 1943, hundreds of women whose husbands were held captive flocked to the streets to protest the injustice. The Rosenstrasse Civil Courage Foundation aims to tell the stories of these brave women who engaged in one of the only open protests in Nazi Germany and their families. Throughout the course of the project, the Rosenstrasse Civil Courage Foundation provided its research assistants with information on who may have been involved with the protest. Its researchers would then insert their information into Ancestry to attempt to find matches. When matches were found, the team would continue to several other databases and document collections to piece together a full story. The stories of multiple families were retraced and uncovered whose bravery deserves to be forever enshrined by the Rosenstrasse foundation. Multiple biographies have been constructed to show how the civil courage of a few women was able to free hundreds of Jewish men in the face of one of history's most brutal authoritarian dictators. These biographies will be utilized in curriculums to teach about the importance of civil courage, and the unique role that women play in history and resistance.



Figure One: Letter sent by Rudolf pleading for a U.S. Visa

Figure Two: Certificate of death for the husband of Margarete Sochaczewer, example of what is often found on ancestry

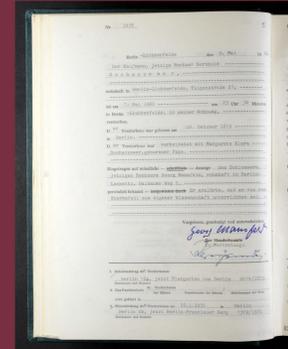
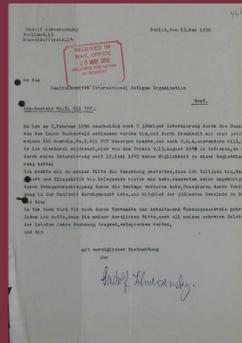


Figure Three: Letter of Frieda asking for compensation for her efforts in the Rosenstrasse

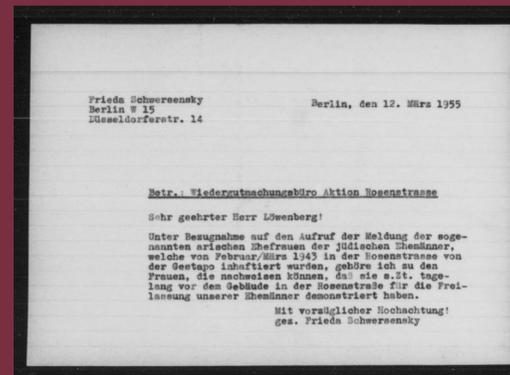


Figure Four: Timeline of Important Events

1933, Dachau Concentration Camp, the first of World War Two

1943, Final roundup of Jews from Berlin and Rudolf is detained

February 27th, 1943, Rosenstrasse event begins and Rudolf is freed

June 12th, 1945, Rudolf is taken prisoner by the Soviet Union at Buchenwald

February 2nd, 1950, Rudolf writes applying for a U.S. Visa upon release from Buchenwald

March 12th, 1955, Frieda writes asking for compensation for her role in the protest

Results

Throughout the research process, two separate and complete family biographies were constructed. While the production of quantifiable data and official stories is important, the historical themes they embody and lessons they teach are just as important. The historical research process itself also is crucial to analyze. Many people don't understand why it's necessary to continue looking into seemingly inconsequential past events. However, if nobody is willing to do the work of digging through ancient archives and foreign databases, then so many impactful and personal stories would never be told. Not only is it important for the candidate's family members and other people involved with the event to know of the events of Rosenstrasse, but also anyone who cares about the state of the world today should be interested. A basic analysis of a story as simple as this one can exemplify just how impactful civil courage can be, and the unique role women can carve out in history. The stories of the families researched also serve as warnings about contemporary authoritarianism and cult-like political factions. Without individuals doing the important work that the Rosenstrasse Civil Courage Foundation does, the world could be a much darker place in the future. Throughout the research of the RCCF's undergraduate assistants and the biographies they constructed, important stories of the courage of women and resilience of Jewish men in the face of rabid prejudice were uncovered. Frieda Shwersensky, for example, not only protested for her husband's freedom, but also utilized her unique position as a woman in society to demand compensation. Her husband Rudolf's story perfectly encapsulated what the evils of authoritarianism and group think look like in real life.

Rudolf Schwersensky and the Power of Women

Throughout all the research done this semester, one specific example stood out to everyone involved with the RCCF: Rudolf Schwersensky. After marrying his wife Frieda, Rudolf worked making socks in a Berlin factory. He was a German Jew, in a privileged mixed marriage with an Aryan Polish woman. In 1943 he was taken to the detention center on the Rosenstrasse as a part of the factory action roundups. While detained, Frieda was one of the incredibly brave women who protested in the streets of Berlin in the face of the Gestapo for his freedom. He was eventually released, however, in 1945 during the short period between when the Soviets captured Berlin and the West arrived in the city, he was again taken captive. The Soviet Union imprisoned Rudolf in Buchenwald labor camp. After five years in prison, he applied for citizenship in the U.S. in 1950. Rudolf was likely rejected, as court records show him working in Berlin years later. While Rudolf's story may sound as if it's one man's tale of struggle, hardship, and bad luck, it's indicative of a number of much grander continuums. Frieda's mission to save her husband from torture while facing the real possibility of imprisonment herself shows the power women have while engaging in civil courage. The protest was only as successful as it was because of the courage of these brave women. The Nazis were incensed upon holding the court of public opinion, and if women, who were the ones tasked with raising the next generation of Germans, dissented, then anyone might. Rudolf's story also exemplifies how dictators and authoritarians of all kinds utilize those who lack political or social capital as scapegoats, a trend that is still alive and well today.

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