

Civil Courage in Nazi Germany

How the story of one of the twentieth century’s unluckiest men exemplifies the power of women in protest

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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

Methodology

The RCCF’s student research operates based on a document containing the names and potential addresses of hundreds of women who protested in the event itself. Historical research can often be incredibly difficult and tedious, especially because there is often very little information to work off of. Ancestry.com was used by research assistants as a starting point. The website and database allowed them to search a candidate’s name, as well as the year of the event and its location. The database would then generate a vast array of results, which would then be sifted through to find the best possible matches. Often no great or exact match was found, however, sometimes a potential match would stand out and lead to further academic investigation. Research assistants like myself were instructed to head to the Jewish Gen online database to enhance their research on Ancestry to confirm their identity.. After using the two aforementioned databases, as well as a number of others(Yeshiva, USHMM, Grave finder, etc) the foundation provided assistants with, information about the person’s address, Marital status, name, age, and birthday would generally be accumulated. To compile enough information to form a full life story, however, assistants would often have to turn to google. Buzzwords and basic information found from the previous two databases could be plugged in alongside the candidate’s name to get precise results. While most of the time nothing more was found, occasionally groundbreaking discoveries were made. New information would come in many forms from several sources. Some of the most common sources that are found include books and written works that contain links to new databases in their citations, German court records(which often required translation), and immigration registries and documentation papers. As further and deeper information regarding a candidate was accumulated, it would be compiled into a google sheet to track progress and make finished biographies. Often times, including in the case of Rudolph Schwersensky, biographies would be continuously edited as new information would emerge through new findings.

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 Rodulf’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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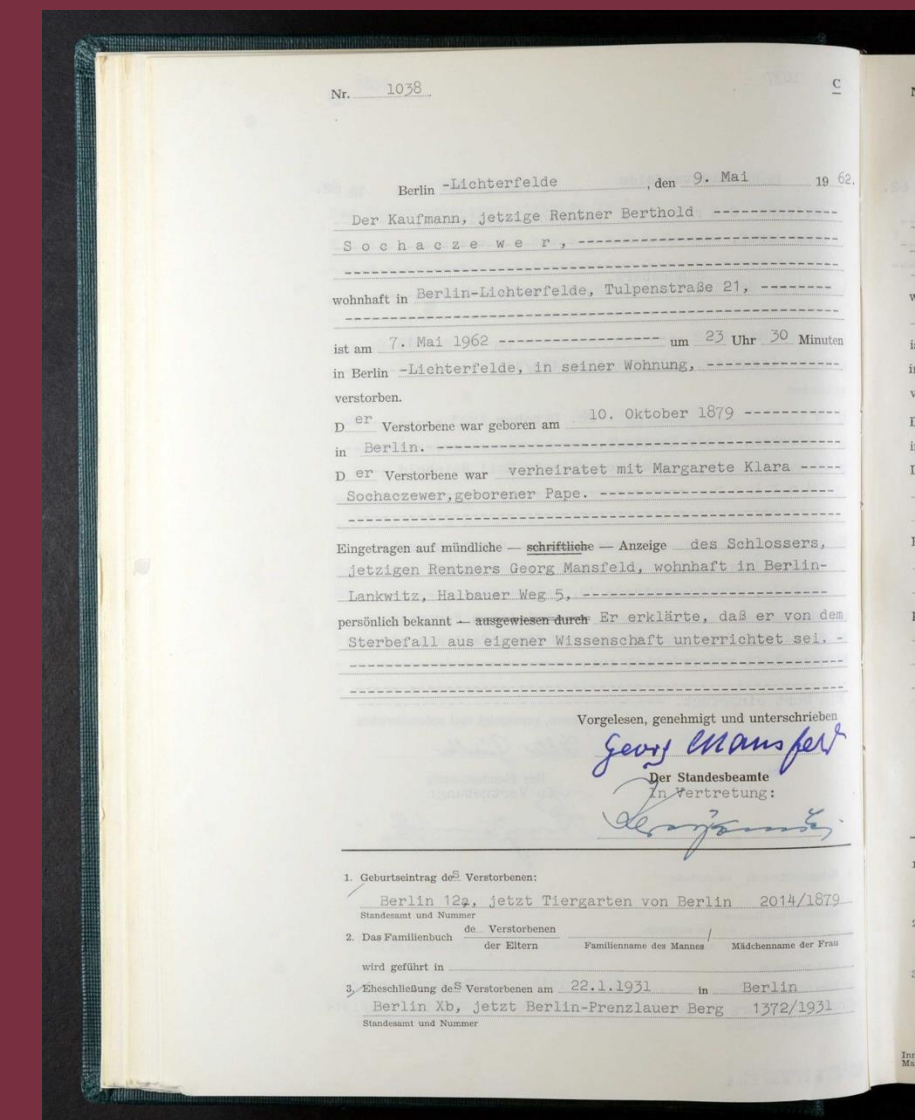
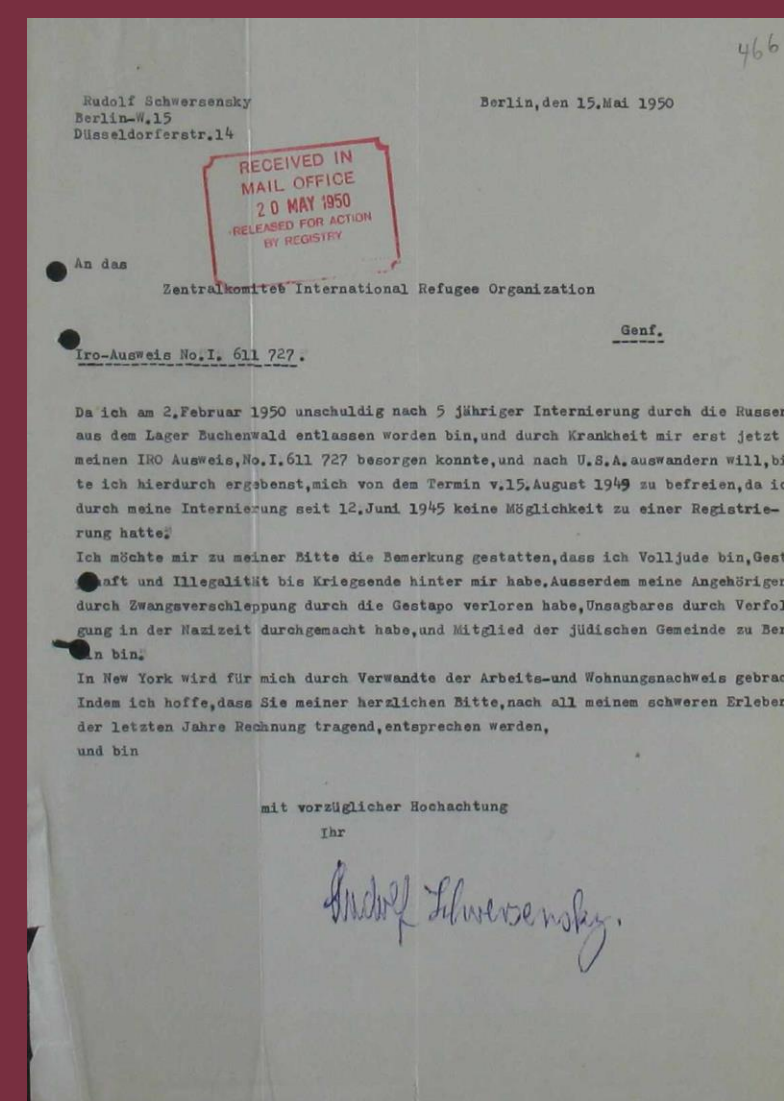


Figure Three: Letter of Frieda asking for compensation for her efforts in the Rosenstrasse

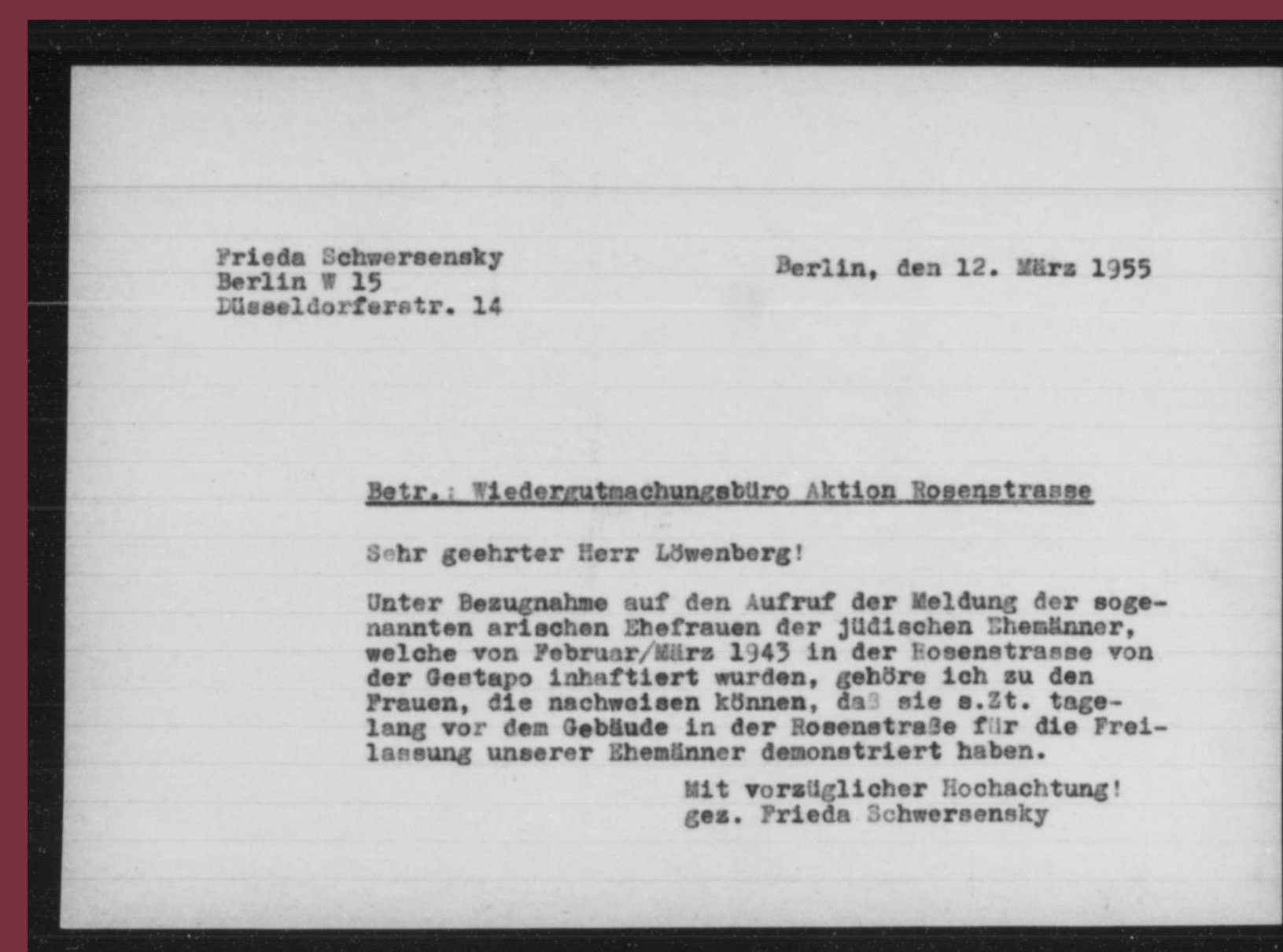


Figure Four: Timeline of Important Events

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