

Speech for the Laying of the Stumbling Stones
for

**Frieda, Paul and Elisabeth Alexander
May 10, 2017 in Berlin, Mommsenstrasse 47**

Dear All,

This speech is translated by Katherine Wolff and the quotations are read by Frieda and Paul Alexander's great-grandchildren: Ruth, Celia and Noam Zeilberger.

There is an old Jewish saying which I place at the beginning of my speech as the *leitmotiv* for my thoughts:

Seeking to forget makes exile all the longer; the secret of redemption lies in remembrance."

We have gathered here today in order to remember two families: Alexander and Nathan. I will say some words to the Alexander-family:

Frieda and Paul Alexander lived with their daughter Elisabeth in this house Mommsenstrasse 47 until they were violently taken away on August 4, 1942. Frieda and Paul were deported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt. There Paul died on September 5 as a consequence of his imprisonment. Frieda was taken to the Treblinka extermination camp and murdered there on September 26.

When she too was to be deported on the same day, August 4, 1942, Elisabeth threw herself out of their apartment's window, three floors above ground-floor.

It is a consolation to know that the Jewish Community of Berlin, which was still able to function, could bury her.

It is very fortunate that today we can learn something about these three people from their letters, from which I shall quote.

But how did I become able to do this?

My name is Karola Nick. I transcribed all the papers left by Frieda's daughter Ruth Alexander Zeilberger.

Gil Zeilberger, Ruth's son, had left them to the Frankfurt Jewish Museum as a bequest. I'm working there in the archives and transcribed them, as I did before with the papers of Hans Julius Wolff, given to our house as a bequest from Katherine Wolff, his daughter, who is present here today.

I'm happy that Doron and Gil, Ruth's sons with their families, are here, together with other members of the extended Alexander-family.

In order to understand everything that we shall now quote from their letters, it should be remembered that five of the couple's six children had already been able to escape, emigrating to Palestine or to South Africa. Since Elisabeth was ill (with heart disease and she also suffered from depressions), she was not accepted in any country. This led to her parents definitely not wanting to emigrate without their child, although all five children who had emigrated strongly called for their loved ones to flee from Germany. All five children tried desperately to find something for Elisabeth – but in vain. This finally led to Frieda, Paul and Elisabeth's remaining in the Mommsenstrasse 47 and then to their death.

We now quote from letters dating from December 1938 till July 1939

Frieda (12.12.1938)

“The burning question is now what is to become of us... We would never have thought of emigrating if our possibilities for living weren't gradually being taken away. Nevertheless, we aren't letting ourselves be brought down. Don't think that we're constantly sitting around moaning.”

Paul:(15.12.1938)

. “...You South Africans are surely just as convinced as are you others that we would not leave any of our children... to an uncertainfate, so long as a higher power does not force us to do so...

*One doesn't need to be a medical person to be able to say that under the given circumstances the possibility of complete recovery (**for Elisabeth**) is excluded. What she lacks is an awareness of filling a place and of being able to stand on her own two feet...*

But I am convinced that in the country of her longing (the country meant is Palestine) she would also be able to overcome the unavoidable disappointments that await one there. She herself does not believe that a paradise on earth is waiting for her there.... So we shall try to get an entry visa to South Africa. But it is out of the question that, so long as we ourselves can decide, we would leave our daughter to the fate that we wish to escape.”

Frieda (21.01.1939)

“... Now as regards your request, you good Capetowners, you have in the meantime surely received our decisions in this matter. All of you in South Africa and Palestine must surely see that we cannot abandon our Bethchen here... We are her parents as well as yours, and so long as we can keep ourselves more or less, we want to stick it out here with Elisabeth. As much as the prospect of seeing you all again tempts us, it is our duty to care for the child of ours who is in need of help as long and as well as we can. But it is very dubious, how long we will be able to do this. To get free of the conditions here is also becoming more difficult every day. We are just always glad that you left on time.”

The way Frieda ends is moving:

“Now I'm looking at all of your pictures that are standing on the desk, and in my thoughts I kiss each of you twelve one after the other. With love, your mother and grandmother.”

Frieda:(04.03.1939)

An important turning point has occurred in the life of Frieda and her little family:

“Since the evening of March 1, Aunt K(äthe) is gone. We together with Uncle Edgar and Elisabeth brought her to the Charlottenburg railway station at 11:15 p.m. A difficult parting for ever.”

We know how closely these two sisters had lived together for so many years. It must have been very hard for Frieda as well as for Käthe. In addition, Frieda felt that it was a parting “for ever”.

Here we should also remember Käthe's son Reinhard Wolff, who was murdered in the Shoa 1941. He was very close and much loved by all Alexanders. Katherine, his niece, and all members of the Alexander-family are often think about his fate.

Elisabeth (20.07.1939):

She urgently asks her siblings to think about how she can come to them as soon as possible:

“... although I know that you are already racking your brains about how you can get our parents and me to Palestine, I still want to ask you yet again to think for me too, how I can best come to you. Here, I continue to see no way out in order to recover fully.

Elisabeth describes with forceful words how conscious she is of the difficulty of life in Palestine. One can feel that she has gathered a lot of information in the meantime so as to understand the difficult situation.

But how difficult it must have been for all her siblings to read this:

“But life here is much more difficult spiritually speaking, so that I can assume... that I will earn my living there, whatever it takes. I must get away from here, since I can no longer stand it and would be destroyed not only by my fate but also by the fate of most of our fellow Jews. I feel this very clearly...”

Elisabeth from Charlottenburg to “My dear Ruth”:(24.07.1939)

“... My heart does have some scars to show now, but they don't disturb me in continuing to live; for I want to continue to live, even though I have no hope for myself as regards the future. My biggest wish is to be able to leave here and to come to you. There I would become entirely well and able to work...”

To her sister Brigitte and her husband Hans she adds at the bottom:

“... You have surely also already understood that I would like to come to you. How is that possible? Can I do something in view of this? If you know something reasonable, please give me eizes (eizes = Yiddish = tips, advice).

The basic mood of this letter is fatalistic – one can sense that she feels abandoned. Particularly distressing is her exclamation: *... for I want to continue to live...*”, since we know how her life ended.

Frieda to her sister Käthe in USA and to her five children who had all emigrated (06.08.1939)

Frieda says that Elisabeth was better, that she is also working and practicing the piano every day, but:

“She is quite sad that Anni as well, her last friend who was still here, is now also leaving.”

Here we shall end the quotations from the letters. We see that in the end Frieda, Paul and Elisabeth are completely alone, since almost all of their friends and acquaintances have emigrated.

The correspondence ends with the beginning of the war on September 1, 1939.

For many years, the parents and siblings heard nothing from one another except general matters through newspapers and radio.

It is assumed that the children who had emigrated only received news of their family members' terrible end after about 1946.

I want to close with this quotation from Paul's last letter to his daughter Ruth, written on July 25, 1939:

“... But there is something else that can travel without a passport and visa, that can cross every border without fear of the border guards. This is our immeasurable, incredible and inexhaustible love. It is with you, with all of you, on every feast and every day of the week.”