

A Stone for Friedel

“The universe is made up of stories, not atoms.” - Muriel Rukeyser

The trio of lawyers was just entering the courthouse when the trouble began. Two men sidled up out of nowhere and began yelling at them, “Get out of town! We don’t allow Jews here anymore!” and then lunged at them, grasping at their necks and driving them all the way back to the train station with vicious punches and kicks. The date was February 21, 1936; the place, Steinau, a small town near Frankfurt. The victims? The elderly Dr. Elkan Sondheimer, one of the region’s most highly respected attorneys, and a colleague, Dr. Max Rapp. Both were Jews. The third lawyer, a gentile, was Wilhelm Harff.

Though Harff attempted to stop the thugs, pleading with them and then shouting “I’m warning you! Stop at once! You’re going too far!” he could hardly have been incredulous. The infamous Nuremberg Laws, which effectively barred Jews from taking any meaningful part in German society, had been passed the previous September; and though the Jewish lawyers had dared to make a professional appearance in the backwaters of rural Steinau, it is highly unlikely that they could have still been practicing anywhere else in the country.

Nonetheless, Harff was apoplectic and demanded, in a letter to the regional chief of police in Kassel, that legal action be taken against the assailants. Writing of Sondheimer’s unblemished character and professional competence – he had known him 24 years – he seethed at the memory of how his colleague had been beaten “like an animal” and warned that if such brazen behavior wasn’t addressed, things could only get worse for citizens everywhere. When this proved ineffective, he wrote to Berlin: first to Himmler, and then to Goering. No one replied.

Worse things were indeed in store for the Sondheimers. Once admired as cultural linchpins of nearby Gelnhausen, where their villa loomed on the steep hillside above its picturesque



marketplace and ancient, triple-spired church, Dr. Sondheimer and his wife, Gertrud, were known for their cosmopolitan tastes. Gertrud’s brother Franz was director of the Munich Pinakothek, one of Germany’s most famous art galleries, and over the years, her soirees had given the family home the reputation of a salon graced by artists, actors, and visitors from abroad.

But if the Sondheimers gave their provincial hometown a connection to the world beyond it, their presence was never a matter of true civic pride. After all, they were Jewish, and this was

Germany. Already in 1926 – seven years before Hitler’s rise to the chancellery – the Nazi Party had organized locally and decided to “cleanse” the place of Jews. As elsewhere, they had soon proved themselves a force to contend with.

Two years after his public humiliation in Steinau, Elkan Sondheimer made ripples again, this time on trumped-up charges of tax evasion. According to a newspaper article from October 4, 1938, this “Jew” and “swindler” had been lining his pockets by cheating the state for the entire previous decade. This time there was no one to rise to his defense, let alone write to Berlin in protest.



Subjected to a crippling fine of RM 34,000, the Sondheimers saw their property confiscated by the bank and were forced to seek temporary lodgings elsewhere – first in Munich, and then near Birmingham, England. By the outbreak of World War II, they were virtually penniless, having lost the rest of their savings on exiting Germany, by virtue of the *Judenvermögensabgabe*, a cruel tax levied on emigrating Jews. In the Sondheimer’s case, Elkan was required to pay RM 12,600, and Gertrud an additional 1,000.

It was a bitter end to the family’s fortunes, and to their life in Gelnhausen. Their eldest child, Hans (1901-1984), was already long gone. Having studied engineering in Munich, he was now working with the famed Jewish Culture League (*Jüdischer Kulturbund*) in Berlin. Within a year, he was to emigrate to New York, where he taught at the New School and went on to have a long and celebrated career with City Opera.

(In 1967, he was decorated by the West German government for promoting cultural relations between Germany and the United States).

The couple’s youngest child, Lotte (born 1907), had also left home. Emigrating to Switzerland in 1933, she had later moved to Paris with her fiancé, an Egyptian, and was now pursuing her dream of becoming an actress. In May 1940, Lotte would be arrested by Nazi authorities in occupied France. After two years at Gur, a prison camp in the south of France (where a survivor reports that she played Titania in a prisoners’ production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) she was transferred to another camp. On August 10, 1942, she was sent with the 17th Drancy-Paris Convoy to Auschwitz. She was never heard of again.

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Today, there are three commemorative stones in front of Villa Sondheimer: one for each parent, and one for Lotte. (Elkan and Gertrud died in Newark, New Jersey, in 1949 and 1946 respectively. Hans died in Manhattan in 1984, but was apparently not considered a victim of

Nazism). In fact, there ought to be at least a fourth stone, because there is one more family member who belongs to the story: the middle child, Fritz.



Fritz “Friedel” Sondheimer was born in Gelnhausen on September 10, 1903. Doubly disadvantaged, he was, first of all, a Jew in a time and place where Jews were despised, envied, and generally *unerwünscht* – unwanted. Second, in a culture that prized athletic prowess and intellectual brilliance, Friedel, who was physically awkward and academically deficient, had nothing to bring to the table. According to records at the city’s main secondary school, he received unsatisfactory grades in almost every subject. Yet that is not at all what the people who knew him later in life would remember him for.

In 1920, some 40 kilometers away, in the village of Sannerz (and a stone’s throw from Elkan Sondheimer’s birthplace, Vollmerz) a certain Dr. Eberhard Arnold and his wife Emmy had left the established church and founded a radical Christian commune based on the teachings of the New Testament. Upper-class Berliners from a long line of nobles and scholars, the Arnolds were weary of conventional piety, bourgeois competitiveness, and the illusion that wealth brings happiness. Their aim was to build up a new social and economic order among those Jesus once called “the least of my brethren” – anarchists and wayfarers, single mothers, war veterans, and a hodge-podge of young and mostly moneyless idealists.

By 1928, in dire need of living space, the growing community had bought a cluster of old farmhouses in the hills near Fulda and begun to rebuild them. They had also begun to solidify, structurally, as an organization, and in drawing up new bylaws and articles of incorporation, they turned for advice to none other than Dr. Sondheimer. Not surprisingly, the Arnolds soon became acquainted with Friedel – and with his parents’ increasingly desperate search to find a place where their son (now in his mid-20s) could blossom, or at least find some niche or purpose as an independent adult.



By the summer of 1930, Friedel was living at the community, now known as the Rhön Bruderhof (“place of brothers”). Given the material comforts of his upbringing, it must have felt like landing on a different planet. Trudi Huessy, a teacher at the community’s school, recalled the laughter that erupted when, on Friedel’s first night with them, he put out his shoes in the corridor to be polished. (Of course, no one touched them – there were no maids, and several people didn’t even own shoes, but only clogs or sandals.) The food was meager and tended

toward the vegetarian, heating fuel was in perpetual short supply, and work hours on the farm were long and strenuous. As Friedel told a caregiver years later, almost everything he was asked to do required learning a skill he had never needed before.



At the same time, he was truly happy, because – perhaps for the first time in his life – he felt useful. What was more, as the strangeness wore off, he grew to feel that he *belonged*. After all, the new society being built up at the Rhön Bruderhof was based not only on equality (everyone was regarded as a brother or sister, regardless of their gifts, abilities, or education, and no one had any money) but on love. When this became clear to him, it affected him so deeply that decades later, he could remember the circumstances exactly. He had approached Else von Hollander, a co-founder of the community, and voiced his fear that he wasn't capable enough to stay. Her response? "Friedel, you will *never* be a burden here."

In October 1932, Friedel was baptized, sealing a gradual but certain conversion to the way of Christ. The same day, he was accepted as a full member of the community, committing himself to the Bruderhof for life. To his fellow members, and especially to Eberhard Arnold, who had all but formally adopted him, his Jewishness was not at all compromised by his newfound faith.

Writing to him in a letter of September 22, 1934, at a time when the government was slowly tightening its noose around the dissident group (among other things, the Bruderhof refused to use the greeting "Heil Hitler!" and sent its children and men of military age abroad to avoid



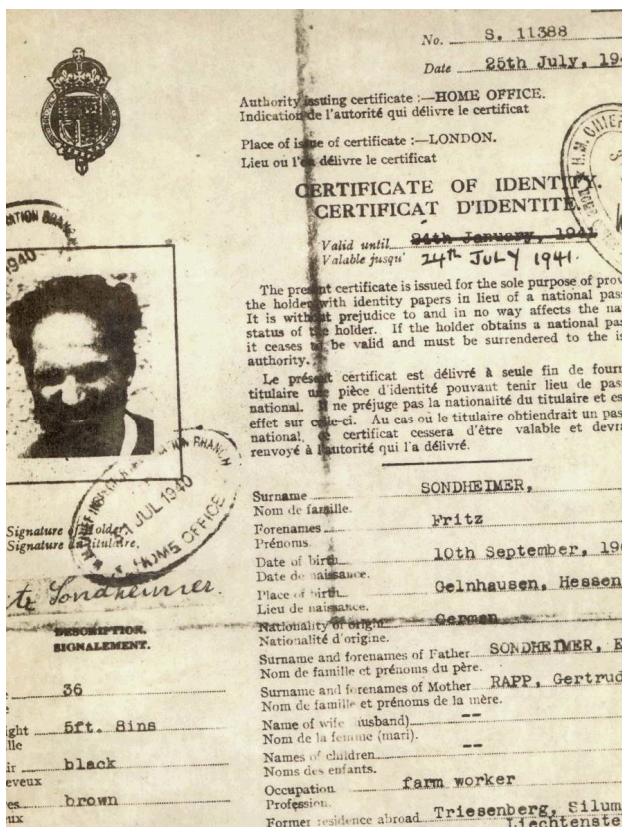
Nazi schooling and conscription) Arnold wished him courage and resolve:

Dear Friedel! What bones the prophets of your ancient people of God had – and what strength and firmness was given them by the inspiration of the Spirit! Friedel, become a complete Jew and a complete Christian, as were the earliest believers in Jerusalem. Grasp the double blessing of the old and new people of God.

From left: Friedel, Georg Barth, Eberhard Arnold (with glasses) and Elkan Sondheimer, ca. 1930

Sometimes Friedel’s firmness was closer to stubbornness: once he had absorbed a request or set of instructions, nothing could deter him from fulfilling it. On one occasion – a raid on the farm by the secret police, ostensibly to uncover a cache of firearms (there weren’t any) – this doggedness almost cost him his life. Arnold’s son Heinrich, a peer, recalled the scene:

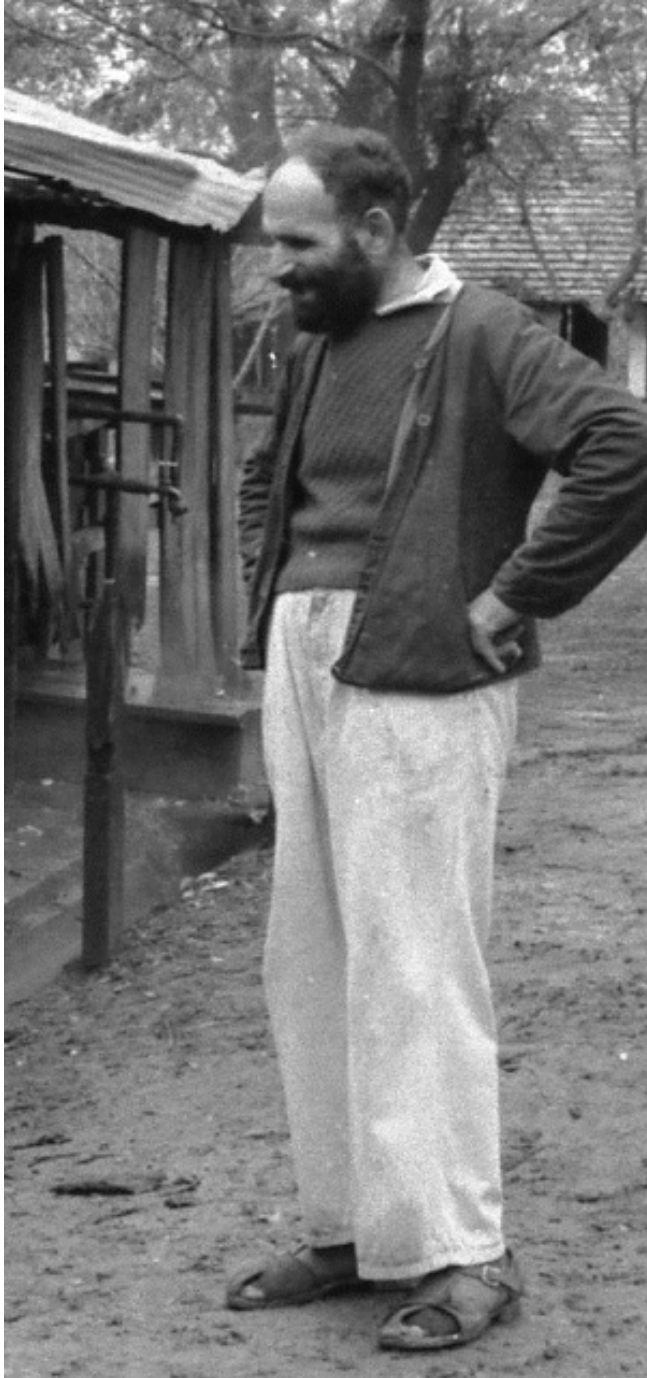
They had surrounded the courtyard and came in from all sides, almost as if out of the ground. Several of them were armed. “Stop! Stop!” they shouted at me...An SS officer stood there with his revolver drawn and shouted, “Line up against the wall! All of you!”— and we all did so, against the wall of the print shop. I thought they were going to shoot us. Josef was there, and Peter, Alfred, Arno, and Kurt. So were Adolf and Ludwig and Friedel. Friedel was our only Jewish member, and he refused to stand by the wall. I pleaded with him, but he said, “No! The work distributor just told me to bring in the firewood.” Luckily he then gave in....



In April 1937, the Bruderhof was the target of another raid by the secret police. This time, several members were arrested and imprisoned, and the rest were given forty-eight hours to leave Germany. Miraculously, everyone made it safely across the border into the Netherlands.

By the time war broke out in September 1939, the community, now swelling with dozens of new members (mostly British pacifists) had regrouped in rural England. A year later, however, they were preparing to flee once again: the Battle of Britain was at its height, and with paranoid locals spreading rumors that the Bruderhof was using signals to guide German bombing sorties from the ground, the Home Office was under increasing pressure to expel this “dangerous nest” of “enemy aliens.”

February 7, 1941, found Friedel leaving England on the *Avila Star*, in one of several large groups of Bruderhof members that crossed the submarine-infested Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro (and then Buenos Aires) in search of a new home. Their destination was Paraguay, where, despite heat and mud, snakes, insects, tropical disease, and the deaths of several infants and children, they would eventually succeed in building up a new home: three self-sufficient villages, each with its own school; ranches and plantations, a saw mill, and a hospital to serve their impoverished indigenous neighbors. Among the travelers were Friedel’s parents, who had entered England as refugees sponsored by the Bruderhof and had been living in a gatehouse at the entrance to its property at Oaksey (Wiltshire). Now they were planning to part ways with the community in Brazil and make their way north to New York. That much



worked out – but not without another blow. At Rio, the crew did not give the Sondheimers time to unload the crates containing their last valuables, and they had no choice but to leave them in the hold.

Bruderhof member Phyllis Rabbitts, a nurse on the ship, remembers, “It was a lot of luggage, but there was no way they could retrieve it... They later wrote and said we should keep it, and it proved a great boon to us, as it contained much linen and other useful things.” According to another member, Arthur Woolston, “Among the things they bequeathed to us were a refrigerator, carpets, and paintings [which were later sold to fund a community center in Asuncion...] That fridge was the only one we had in the hospital for many years.”

For the next two decades, Friedel worked mostly on the community’s farm, or with a team of horses hauling firewood and water to the kitchen and laundry. Living with a small group of other single men, he was cared for on weekends by various families, including Ted and Ruth Land, and John and Gwen Hinde. Both couples were childless and lavished hospitality on him; and over the years he grew devoted to them. He also grew close to Harry Magee, his roommate for a time

and work partner on the ranch. In Harry’s memoirs, he writes:

Friedel had a most unusual gift with horses. Every morning before starting the day’s routine we would feed and groom them. Now, some of these horses hated to be approached from behind. One had to be on the watch and ready to spring aside in case one caught a kick from a flying hoof. But Friedel never got hurt. He was completely without fear. He would push the horse aside if it got in his way, and invariably it would move over to let him pass not taking the least notice of him. Woe to anyone else who tried it!



Friedel and I lived for a while in a tiny mud-walled, thatched roof hut fairly close to the hospital. Although limited in various ways, he had a quiet sense of humor and a magnificent memory (he never forgot anyone's birthday). I can still hear him singing a little ditty that made fun of Hermann Goering, one of Adolf Hitler's top generals. It ridiculed a Nazi decree that stipulated the days on which Germans should show their patriotism by going without meat. The joke was that while encouraging the populace to tighten its collective belt, Goering was so fat, it was obvious to one and all that he did not practice what he preached.

John Hinde, too, remembered Friedel's way with horses: "He trusted them, and they trusted him. He would walk right behind animals that often kicked, and they hardly ever kicked him. Once I saw one kick him, and he was quite

surprised and indignant and admonished the horse, "What did you do that for? I didn't do anything to you!"

John also recalled two other gifts of Friedel's – his capacity for gratitude, and his pride and meticulousness even in the most monotonous work: "In his later years he worked for many years on a little machine that removed the corners from wooden parts, and by the end of the day he would proudly tell you how many thousands he had cut. He worked steadily and

faithfully – with joy – at a job which many might find boring."



In 1961 the Bruderhof closed its Paraguayan settlements, and emigrated en masse to the United States, England, and Germany, where existing communities absorbed the newcomers. Friedel moved to Oak Lake, a community southeast of Pittsburgh that had been founded a few years before. He would stay there almost twenty years, until his death on April 26, 1979. As in Paraguay, various couples and families took him in their homes and cared for him – an increasing necessity, as his slow, shuffling gait deteriorated into a complete inability to walk, and left him



confined him to a wheelchair. To quote John Hinde once more:

Friedel was part of our family for many years. He could be stubborn, but he was generally cheerful. He had little jokes that he would repeat over and over. If my wife or I would sneeze or cough, he would look at us severely and say (always in German), “Two weeks bed rest!” If we offered him another helping of a dish we knew he liked, he would pretend he did not want it, but in the end he would accept, saying, “If I burst, you are to blame.”

Though slow of speech, he was quite adept at languages. He learned English fairly well, and picked up some Spanish too. Once we even received a letter from him in Spanish. He had a great love for music, having grown up with it in his parent’s cultured home. He liked opera especially, and told us about his brother, Hans, who had worked for an opera house in Europe doing staging

and lighting, and was now doing the same in New York. Hans came out to Pennsylvania to visit Friedel several times over the years.

Stella Kleiner, a Bruderhof member whose husband was another of Friedel’s long-time caregivers in the 1960s and 1970s, also remembers Friedel’s love of classical music, and his impressive knowledge of opera.

Chief among the lasting impressions left by Friedel on those who knew him was his joy in interacting with little children – holding a new baby, for instance – and his undying gratitude to Eberhard Arnold, who had opened his heart and home to him so many decades before.

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Wherever the question of *Stolpersteine* comes up in Germany today, opinions divide. Literally “stumbling stones,” these commemorative brass-plated paving stones are set slightly higher than the stones around them in front of properties from which Jewish owners were driven, or fled of their own accord. In some municipalities, there is broad support for the practice; in others, it has been vociferously opposed and voted down. For many, they are an unwanted reminder of guilt. There is resentment, too: perverse as it sounds, some Germans –

to quote an Israeli psychoanalyst – have “never forgiven the Jews for Auschwitz.” Why, they ask, should an entire nation be forever judged by twelve years of its history?



But other questions ought to be asked too. Instead of chafing at such stones’ negative function, as a producer of collective embarrassment or shame, why not welcome them as a positive nudge: in this particular instance, as a reminder of the good that even a tiny handful of citizens can do when they are brave enough to risk censure (and even persecution) in order to follow their consciences?

Couldn’t a *Stolperstein* for

Friedel just as well commemorate generosity, broadmindedness, and compassion, as bigotry and hatred? And what if it could inspire similar acts of mercy in the future?

It has become a cliché to repeat Santayana’s truism that remembering the past is important because “those who fail to learn from history’s mistakes are doomed to repeat them.” But it is also important for another reason. The act of remembering leaves us with an obligation. In this case, perhaps it is to look out for the unloved, unneeded, *unerwünscht* person who crosses our own path, and to affirm and fan the spark within – the spark that is in every human soul.

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< The Jewish Cemetery in Gelnhausen, April 2013

Sources: This piece could not have been written without the aid of Christine Raedler, town historian of Gelnhausen, Hessen. Aside from showing me Villa Sondheim (now under landmark protection and currently being renovated), she gave me copies of numerous documents from her own research on the family, including local newspaper clippings, school records, photographs, and information from *Memorial de la Shoah*. I am also indebted to her for information from her article “Titania’s Traum – das kurze Leben der jüdischen Schauspielerinnen Lotte Sondheim,” in *Zwischen Vogelsberg und Spessart* (Gelnhäuser Jahrbuch 2011), 30-31; and for Georg W. Hanna’s piece, “Ein Gerichtstag ohne Verhandlung,” in *Bergwinkel-Bote* (Heimatkalendar 1994), 97-103. Further information on the family came from Hans Sondheim’s obituary in the September 3, 1984 edition of the *New York Times*. Lastly, I perused numerous unpublished memoirs and letters in the Bruderhof Historical Archives, Walden, NY.

CMZ, January 2014

Appendix

Eberhard Arnold's Attitude to Human Gifts and Disabilities

Jesus says, "I thank thee, Father, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to the babes." Precisely those who are lowly and unworthy in the eyes of the world are called by God to do the most vital task on earth, that is, to gather his church and to proclaim his gospel.

Again and again, what it amounts to is a clash between two opposing goals. One goal is to seek the person of high position, the great person, the spiritual person, the clever person, the fine person, the person who because of his natural talents represents a high peak, as it were, in the mountain range of humanity. The other goal is to seek the lowly people, the minorities, the handicapped and mentally retarded, the prisoners: the valleys of the lowly between the heights of the great. They are the degraded, the enslaved, the exploited, the weak and poor, the poorest of the poor. The first goal aims to exalt the individual, by virtue of his natural gifts, to a state approaching the divine. In the end he is made a god. The other goal seeks the wonder and mystery of God becoming man, God seeking the lowest place among men.

Two completely opposite directions. One is the self-glorifying upward thrust. The other is the downward movement to become human. One is the way of self-love and self-exaltation. The other is the way of God's love and love of one's neighbor . . .

We pray for the whole human race to be released from the folly and delusion of exalting "wonderful" people. We pray that they may see that the meaning of history and of every human life lies in Jesus Christ, who is the new man. He is the new man toward whom we must strive in organic unity; then we belong to him. Through him and in him humankind will be renewed. And this renewal will begin in the body of Christ, which is the church.

Eberhard Arnold (*in God's Revolution*)