German again: Bay Area Jews reclaim citizenship the Nazis stole
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Seventy-five years after he fled Germany as a 10-year-old boy for safe haven in England, Leo Mark Horovitz had his German citizenship reinstated at the German Consulate General in San Francisco.

“My relationship with Germany has always been a big topic for me, but citizenship was a nonissue until recently,” the 85-year-old Horovitz said over lunch before the Feb. 25 ceremony the consulate arranged in his honor.

“This confirms that you have always been a German, because you were deprived of your citizenship by the Nazi regime,” said Peter Rothen, Germany’s consul general, as he handed the Antioch resident his citizenship papers. “I’m very honored and pleased to be able to hand over this naturalization document which reconfirms your German citizenship.”

At the end of World War II, it seemed inconceivable that Jews would ever want to return to Germany. Tens of thousands of them fled their homeland after Hitler came to power in 1933, and those who remained were stripped of their citizenship by the Nuremberg laws in 1935. Most were murdered in the Holocaust. At the end of the war, a Jewish population that had numbered 565,000 just 15 years earlier was reduced to about 37,000, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In the past two decades, however, Germany has become a country that people flock to instead of flee from.

In addition to the tens of thousands of Jewish émigrés who have streamed in from the former Soviet Union, Berlin’s reputation as an artistic, tolerant mecca continues to attract young Israelis — as many as 20,000, according to some estimates — as well as American Jews. Germany’s total Jewish population is estimated at 104,000, not including another 150,000 former Soviet émigrés who do not affiliate with the Jewish community.

Since 1949, Jews who fled Nazi Germany have had the right to reclaim their citizenship, according to Article 116 (2) of the German Basic Law, the country’s postwar constitution. And this right applies to their descendants as well. In recent years, more and more are actively doing so — last year, about 2,600 Jews from around
the world were naturalized as German citizens. In the Pacific Northwest region covered by the German Consulate in San Francisco, five or six Jews reclaim German citizenship every month.

They do it for a variety of reasons, ranging from the practical — for example, the holder of a German passport is allowed to work legally anywhere in the European Union — to the emotional, or “to right a [historic] wrong,” according to one person interviewed.

Horovitz falls into the practical camp: Having German citizenship will allow him to stay in Germany with the woman he loves, a German psychologist, without being restricted to the usual 90-stay tourist visa. “I never thought about citizenship before because the question always was ‘Would I use it or get something out of it?’” he said.

The vast majority of Jews who reclaim German citizenship under Article 116 are the children or grandchildren of Holocaust survivors or refugees from Nazi Germany. Horovitz is the rare example of a German-born Jew who lived through the Nazi era and is now choosing to reclaim his citizenship, according to Consul Antje Susan Metz, whose job it is to oversee such applications from the consulate’s region.

While citizenship documents usually are sent through the mail, Rothen wanted to handle Horovitz’s reinstatement in person. Not only was his case a rarity, but the two men hit it off when they met last November at a Lehrhaus event at the Jewish Community Library in San Francisco marking the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht. Horovitz relayed his personal story at the event, and Rothen acted as moderator; each was impressed with what the other had to say.

“We respect that many don’t want anything to do with Germany anymore,” Rothen said during Horovitz’s citizenship ceremony. “This is why Germany hasn’t forced it on anyone, but has made a provision that gives every such person the right to have it back, and I’m so glad to have a man like you as a fellow German citizen.”

The offer to become German citizens while maintaining their American citizenship has resonated for many in the Bay Area.

For Miriam Zimmerman, a 67-year-old Holocaust educator living in San Mateo, it was a way of connecting with her father, a doctor who attended medical school in Berlin and fled in 1937, settling in Terre Haute, Ind. Voicing a thought common to many Holocaust survivors and refugees, as well as their children, she said, “Without Hitler, I would be a different person. I would be a German Jew living in Germany.”

Zimmerman, who identifies strongly with the Reform movement in which she was raised, noted that it was born in Germany. She is proud of her German roots and thrilled that her three grown children became citizens as well, which means all

Leah Sharp (left) and Miriam Zimmerman
three of her newly born grandchildren will, too (the paperwork for new babies is minimal).

Zimmerman hopes to spend some of her retirement in Germany talking to high school students about her family’s history. While she’s taken up German several times already, she has yet to master the language.

“I don’t want to have to use a translator,” she said. “I can see having a prepared script for 10 or 15 minutes and then having a Q&A with a translator. Although our friends are retiring left and right, I don’t want to retire now that I have this other very attractive goal.”

Zimmerman’s daughter Leah Sharp, 34, a physics professor at the College of Marin, applied for her German citizenship while living in Munich for five years with her husband, also an academic. “I fell in love with German culture and had a wonderful experience living there,” said Sharp, who lives in Alameda.

A new mother, Sharp is already getting her daughter’s German citizenship papers in order. “This is an amazing opportunity she’s going to have with that document, being able to live in Germany or anywhere else in Europe. She can have her pick of European universities. That is the thing I’m especially excited about for her.

“It’s purely practical,” said Sharp. “For my mother, it was much more personal.”

Oakland resident Rob Shapera’s maternal grandparents fled Germany around 1935. He remembers that when he was growing up, his mother had a distaste for all things German. But when he learned a few years ago that he was eligible for citizenship, he researched the matter and decided to do it.

“I like the idea of having citizenship in the EU if I ever want to live or work there,” said the 42-year-old massage therapist. “I’m not so much interested in living in Germany; it’s more access to the EU.”

But “historically speaking, this was an opportunity to right a wrong that was done to my family. My grandparents were deprived of their citizenship, and this is getting something back that was taken away from our family: the right to be on European soil and live there if we want to, whether it’s in Germany or somewhere else.”

To get a copy of his grandparents’ marriage certificate, Shapera traveled to Cuba, where the couple married before settling in the U.S. Though he later found out he had sufficient paperwork to prove his lineage, he was still glad to have found the old document.

Applicants must show proof of their relative’s citizenship, such as a birth certificate or restitution payment, and then marriage and birth certificates proving lineage.

Metz said people should not get discouraged if they can’t locate the full set of documents. “We can help or give advice as to where to find the needed documents,” she said. “We cannot take over the search, but I can always help people get in touch with municipalities or other institutions that might have information.”
While applicants are not required to state why they are applying, Metz said some do share their reasons as they go through the process.

Those interviewed who have had their German passport for a few years said it is an added convenience when traveling in Europe. Zimmerman once almost missed a flight to an educators’ conference in Israel; she didn’t realize her American passport was about to expire, and Israel doesn’t permit entry if passports are within six months of expiration. So she whipped out her German passport and made the flight.

The ability to work in Europe was the reason two Bay Area–bred cousins decided to apply. Aaron Kaye, 31, from Los Altos and working for a technology company in London, and Moraga native Dan Aufhauser, 40, who works in Paris, share a set of grandparents who fled Germany.

Their grandmother left in 1934, when she was prevented from studying medicine as a Jew, and their grandfather traveled back and forth to the U.S. Both were from wealthy banking families. The two were introduced while he was on a business trip, and it was she who convinced him to leave Germany and his seemingly promising banking career in Munich.

Kaye first heard about the possibility of citizenship reinstatement from Zimmerman, who is a family friend. Initially ambivalent, he decided to go forward when he prepared to attend graduate school in London and realized with a German passport he could stay longer and work there.

“At first I didn’t have a specific plan to live in Europe, but it did seem like an amazing opportunity, and I should take advantage of it given my family’s past,” Kaye said in a Skype interview from London. “On the one hand, I feel a bit of guilt I have this amazing passport to the world, and I can work in Europe, and I feel like I’m using it a bit, but then on the other hand, I can look at it like I have this opportunity because my grandparents lost everything, though obviously there are a lot of stories much worse.”

Aufhauser studied in France and helped a European company open an office in San Francisco. Once he had his German citizenship, he was able to accept a job the company offered him in Paris with no additional paperwork. His wife can legally work in Europe as well through his German passport.

“This allowed me a very special opportunity to live and work legally in an area that is really connected to where I’m from,” said Aufhauser in a Skype interview from Paris. “I really feel I’m European, as I’ve always been drawn to Europe. I was always the one asking my grandmother questions, connecting with our story.”

While his grandmother never took advantage of Germany’s offers to fly her back for a visit, and died in 2007 before knowing that her grandsons had reclaimed German citizenship, Aufhauser thinks she would have appreciated the opportunities offered to her grandsons, considering all that had been taken from her. “After having seen why I obtained the passport and how I was using the status,” he said, “she would have been absolutely thrilled for me.”

Rothen, the German consul general, understands how that is the case for some applicants: “It is clear that those who have been mistreated so badly cannot forget about what has happened, but we’re grateful that some choose to look ahead and accept that this nationality and that this culture is somehow a part of their personality despite everything that has happened.”
Berkeley poet Elana Levy, 73, and her 44-year-old daughter Daniella Salzman of Oakland, a teacher, are among those who reclaimed citizenship for more emotional reasons. Levy’s parents fled in 1939, and many of her extended family members were killed. Levy grew up in New York, speaking German at home.

Levy and Salzman, both of whom have made the healing process with Germany a big part of their lives, received their German citizenship last December and their passports in February. Salzman said it was definitely strange seeing her citizenship declared as “Deutsch” in her new red Reisepass.

Mother and daughter have traveled to Auschwitz as part of a “Bearing Witness” trip with Bernie Glassman and the Zen Peacemakers, in which people of many faiths sit on the tracks of Auschwitz-Birkenau, meditating and chanting the names of the dead.

“My visits to Auschwitz were key to my own healing,” said Levy, who has done the trip several times. “The first one changes your life, and the ones after that build on that.”

Salzman added, “I found my mind just quieted down there to feel the experience of all of those who had been there, not just Jews but Nazis and Poles and Russian soldiers. I could relate to both prisoners and keepers of them. It was about going beyond ‘us and them’ or ‘victim and perpetrator’ [to think about] the human experience and both the mystery and catastrophe of it. [Taking German citizenship] is not only healing for me and for us, the Jews, but it’s really also for the Germans.”

Levy said that starting in the ‘50s, her parents took her along on vacations in Germany every chance they got, so she never developed anger toward the country like many other Jews did.

Salzman said her mother’s decision to apply for German citizenship made her feel OK about doing the same, “but it was still hard to do, partly because it brings up the pain and sadness which I believe is inherited, or passed through our genes. There is a brokenness in me, even though I never lived it.

“Applying for citizenship is part of that healing process,” Salzman said. “I have always felt this conflict between my German self and my Jewish self internally. There are ways in which I’m very German, yet I’m much more American, but part of this process for me has been about creating peace between those aspects of who I am.”