

Irene Glaser, nee Blumenthal, was born in Berlin on January 14, 1920 into a well-to-do Jewish family in Berlin Wilmersdorf.

Her father, Erich Blumenthal, born 1893, had graduated from the University of Koenigsberg after serving in the First World War where he was wounded. Later on he moved to Berlin to continue his law studies. Her mother Charlotte, nee Leske was born on October 13, 1895 and was brought up in a liberal, middle-class Jewish family in Berlin. After Irene they had another daughter, Eva, who was to become my mother after she married Martin Selig after the war (in Australia). She adored Irene, the two of them were very close.

Over the years the family settled into a very comfortable life, living in large apartments with a grand piano, enjoying the rich and lively cultural life of the 1920s and 1930s in Berlin. Their last freely chosen residential address, before expropriation, was Jenaer Str. 3 in Wilmersdorf.

On April 4, 1938 Irene married Paul Glaser, a commercial representative who was 14 years older. She left the family home and lived with Paul in Laubacher Str. 39 in Wilmersdorf. Yet in 1940 she filed for divorce which he agreed to only later - in March 1941 it became official. By then Irene had lived in lodgings on her own, her last address being Westfaelische Str 23 in Wilmersdorf (c/o Frieda Hirschlaff).

Irene, around 1940

Meanwhile Irene's family made efforts to emigrate to the US. While one of her father's brothers, Danny, had left Germany for Chile in 1936, and another brother, Martin, had made it to New York in early 1938 together with his daughter Dorit, Charlotte's close cousin, they did not manage to get visas, however. And so on January 1, 1939 her parents and her sister Eva were forced out of their family apartment and into shared lodgings at Wiesener Str. 33 in Schoeneberg (this house is still standing).

Fortunately, despite all odds, Eva and her her parents got the chance to leave Berlin in August 1939. They might have been helped by a Berlin police officer, maybe Erich still had some contacts from his earlier career as a lawyer. They made it to Melbourne with a total capital, as Erich stated, of £200. They had left behind their daughter Irene with her then-husband Paul Glaser, planning to ask their sponsor (Mr. Henly in Geelong, Australia) for sponsorship for Irene and Paul, on their arrival. But in September, with the outbreak of war, it was too late, it became impossible to get out of Germany.

It seems that even after the outbreak of war many people still managed to emigrate from Germany. Irene had indeed asked Rabbi Swarensky, their ex-Berlin Rabbi, already living in the US, for help which as he said was impossible by then.

Irene sent 14 postcards to her uncle in Amsterdam, Atty Leske, between early 1940 and March 1941 which still exist. They bring her alive for the relatives who survived and allow us all a small insight into her short but very brave and self-determined life that she chose for herself.

She wrote that she realised during 1940 that she had never really been in love with her husband Paul and wished to divorce him. Although she had to fight against legal complaints from Paul he later agreed and the divorce was pronounced in Berlin on March 19, 1941. To her uncle, on December 28, 1940, she wrote: "I am happy to be on my own. My new life started 2 weeks ago and I never want to go back. I am glad that you refrain from any moral lectures and just show me your understanding" (translated from the German original: "Ich bin glücklich, allein zu sein. Mein neues Leben begann gerade heute vor 2 Wochen, ich möchte nie wieder zurück. Ich freue mich, dass du mir keine moralischen Predigten gehalten hast und einfach Verständnis für mich hast").

Irene was a very intelligent young woman, she loved books and the theatre. Given the circumstances of these years and no longer having her family around it was very brave of her to make this choice which meant being totally on her own.

In other cards, Irene wrote that she wished to continue her studies and hoped to receive a bursary from the Jewish community to allow this. In early 1941 she completed her O-levels (Abitur). Although she managed to live on some part-time private teachings, it became more and more difficult. Her last card is from March 1941. We don't know how she lived in the months to come before she was deported.

On January 21, 1942 the Red Cross, via the Australian Red Cross, sent a telegramme to her father Erich at his Melbourne address informing of her departure the next day: "To my loved ones. Will depart tomorrow. Don't know when to write again. Do not worry, I am going with someone close. Goodbye and never forget me." (translated from the German original: "Meine Geliebten, reise morgen ab. Weiss nicht, wann wieder Nachricht möglich. Seid beruhigt, ich gehe mit jemand zusammen, der mir nahe. Lebt wohl, vergesst mich nie." That's the last message that was ever received from her.

Irene had to march to the collection point at the Synagogue in Levetzowstrasse and was deported on January 25, 1942 together with another 1,043 people from S-Bahnhof Grunewald arriving five days later in Riga.

Her family searched for Irene during and immediately after the war. From an unknown prisoner of war her father Erich received a letter in mid-1945 (dated September 1944). There was news that Irene was still alive. Erich tried to get more information from the American Joint Distribution Committee managing requests for displaced persons, from the Red Cross, and later ITS, the International Tracing Service (renamed to Arolsen Archives today) which still holds all the search files etc. in Bad Arolsen) in August 1946.

By then Erich had learnt of Irene's deportation to Riga from Fenia Rosenbaum. She had been in the ghetto together with Irene, she survived the war and emigrated to Australia in 1946 to rejoin her husband Ignacz who had been exiled to Australia on the Dunera, the same infamous ship as the husband-to-be of my mother Eva and my father-to-be.

Erich died in December 1946 still having no news on his daughter Irene's fate.

In 1956, Charlotte, Irene's mother, filed a restitution claim against the German Government based on a "Certificate of incarceration" provided by the Red Cross / ITS (Arolsen). By then it was known from a Gestapo transport list that Irene was deported from Berlin to the Riga ghetto on the 10th Transport to the East on January 25, 1942. It was only in 1968 that ITS confirmed to the German Government Restitution Office that Irene had indeed been sent from Riga to Stutthof concentration camp on August 9, 1944. According to the death certificate from Stutthof she had died on January 13, 1945, due to a "weakness of the heart and body", one day before her 25th birthday.

Irene had survived 3 years in concentration camps, she must have been very strong to endure all the hardships, but she died only days before the concentration camp was evacuated by the SS and not long before the war ended.

Text: David Selig, son of Martin and Eva Selig nee Blumenthal, Irene's younger sister.
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Sources:

Family information

Arolsen Archives

Yad Vashem

Landesarchiv Berlin