

Leora Schaefer

My Paternal Grandparents' German China

Where does one safely store a set of formal china consisting of eighteen place settings and serving pieces that travelled from Nazi Germany to the United States in 1937? This is not an easy puzzle to solve when the set includes serving plates and bowls of varying sizes from large to enormous, two soup tureens, gravy boats, and lids that can interchangeably be used with different pieces. All together, it is probably a set of 150 fragile, irreplaceable dishes that miraculously escaped Nazi Germany. I inherited these dishes from my parents when they moved from Winnipeg to Toronto and downsized into a condominium. My father carefully packed each dish to protect them during the move, and then he rigged up a shelving system in a cupboard above my fridge so that they could be safely stacked to fit into the space. I did not think that I would ever use the dishes. At the time we had young children and it felt like too much of a risk to take the dishes out of their protective cupboard. As our boys got older, it was simply too much work to handwash so many dishes, even if it would have been special to use to them for a holiday like Rosh Hashanah or Pesach. After a kitchen renovation, the family heirloom china was exiled from its cupboard space above the fridge, when we opted instead to create space for our Pesach dishes that had been stored in the basement. Logically, the set of china should have moved downstairs, (never-used dishes can certainly be relegated to the basement), but I feared that the dampness might damage them. After a bit of problem solving the dishes found a new home at the top of our bedroom closet.

There is truth to the saying, “out of sight out of mind”. When the dishes were stored above our fridge, I rarely thought about them. However, seeing the dishes every-



day in my closet has changed my relationship with them. I began thinking about them, trying to remember whether we used the dishes when I was growing up (I don't remember using them though my mother assures me that we did), imagining the many tables that they once adorned in Germany, and thinking about the many times and places that they have traveled between Germany and my bedroom closet in Toronto. I also began to think about when I might use them. Last Pesach, for the first time I set our table with the special china that belonged to my great grandmother. Due to Covid, it

would be the second year that our seder would be held on Zoom, and so I took only four sets of dishes out for my immediate family. It was very meaningful to use the china; the table was beautiful – and we only had to hand wash four settings.

In my role at Facing History and Ourselves, I have spent close to twenty years supporting educators teaching about the Holocaust. Given what I know about Germany in 1937, I am left with many questions about how the dishes and other family heirlooms made it out of Germany. Whether it was luck, the unlikely kindness of individuals in positions of power, bribery, or a combination of all three, it is a miracle that my grandfather and the dishes managed to leave Germany and safely sail to the United States.

I invited my father to help me write this piece as he knows much more about the provenance of the set of dishes that my grandfather rescued from Nazi Germany.

Stephen Schaefer:

My paternal grandparents lived in Augsburg, Bavaria, Germany. For several generations their families had lived in that part of Bavaria. My grandfather was a livestock trader, especially horses and cattle. His family was considered to be fairly wealthy. My father began university at the University of Munich which was not far from Augsburg. When he decided to study medicine, he enrolled in the University of Freiburg in Breisgau. He was to graduate with a medical degree in 1934. However, that was the year in which the National Socialist Party of Germany passed a law which denied Jewish students the right to take exams. My father quickly applied to and was accepted in the medical school of the University of Basel in Switzerland. He had to retake the last year of medical school but was still able to graduate in 1935.

My father assumed that the Nazis would not allow him to practice medicine and therefore decided not to return to live in Germany. He stopped in Augsburg just long enough to say goodbye to his parents before leaving on a ship to the United States, having been sponsored by his uncle who lived in New York City. In



February of 1936, my grandmother died. In February, 1937, one year and one day after she died, my grandfather passed away.

My father had purchased a round trip ticket on a ship to Germany and returned to Augsburg in order to deal with the estate of which he was the only heir. I do not know how long he stayed in Germany, but he packed and shipped many family heirlooms. These included eighteen settings of silverware and the china that is in my daughter Leora's bedroom closet. I do not know how old the china is. There is an identical hand painted number on the underside of most of the dishes that should help identify the manufacturer and the era in which they were made, but unfortunately, I have not yet been able to determine this information. The pattern of the dishes is quite distinctive, with wine and gold-coloured designs around the edges. I have tried to learn more by searching online, but so far, I have been unsuccessful in finding a china set with a similar design.

I wonder whether these dishes belonged to one of my great-grandmothers prior to my paternal grandparents. Since my father's paternal grandmother lived in a small house in a village not far from Augsburg, I doubt that she would have had use for a set of eighteen place settings of fancy delicate china. As would have been the tradition, it is more likely that the dishes were handed down from my father's maternal grandmother to her daughter, my grandmother. Since she also lived in Augsburg, I would guess that the dishes were passed down from her to my paternal grandmother. If that is the case, they could be 175 years old.



The significance of my father having taken other family heirlooms (many Jewish prayer books in Hebrew and German and priceless Meissen porcelain sculptures) out of Germany is significant, because the Nazis either confiscated or destroyed so many of the possessions of Jewish families.

While my father was completing the estate arrangements in Germany, he was arrested, because he was a Jew. However, the authorities released him, informing him that they were doing so only because he had a return ticket to the United States. He was told that he was permanently prohibited from returning to Germany.



As a child, I remember that my mother used the set of china occasionally for adult dinner parties. My family was not observant and therefore did not have specifically kosher dishes, so those beautiful plates were brought out for Pesach seders also. I knew that the dishes were special to my parents even though they never talked about them. I remember how carefully my father packed each of the many dishes and numerous serving pieces each time we had to make long distance moves from one side of the United States to the other. He would never allow the movers to pack those dishes; that was his job alone.

I picture what it might have looked like in my grandparent's upper-class home in Augsburg, Germany, when they would have their dining room table set for eighteen. How grand that might have been. I appreciate the significance those dishes must have had for my father, when he was deciding what to ship to the United States after his parents died. Given that he was arrested while he was arranging to ship family items he had inherited, I strongly suspect that, given it was 1937, he may have smuggled those dishes out of Germany.

This magnificent set of china has survived at least a dozen moves, no less than ten times since escaping the Nazis. My wife and I became the proud owners and protectors of these dishes when my parents gave them to us after we moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1974, after we lived in Israel for two years. I am happy that we passed these valuable china dishes to our daughter.

Leora Schaefer:

With Pesach only a couple of months away, I am hopeful that we will be able to celebrate in person with my extended family. For the second time I will carefully take the dishes and serving platters down from the top of my bedroom closet. If all goes as I hope, this Pesach we will need more than four settings, and I can honestly say that I look forward to having to wash all the dishes by hand.