

# Tempo

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## The house at 10 Stuhmer Allee

A door in Berlin opens onto a dark chapter of a family's past

By Howard Witt  
Chicago Tribune

**WEST BERLIN—** There is not much left of the privileged and comfortable world into which my father was born in Berlin in 1932.

We have an antique silver tea service, which is now displayed in my parents' dining room.

There is a set of sterling silverware, in which the monogram on the handle of each piece has been rather crudely scratched out. That's stored in my parents' basement.

And there are half a dozen old black and white photographs of a grand and stately house in Berlin—my grandfather's house.

For a long time, my grandmother kept those photographs hidden.

They had something to do with Nazis and concentration camps and a distant former life she never talked much about.

My father was born in that house, but he didn't live there long. In 1933, my grandmother sensed something worrisome about Germany, and she packed up a few things, took her infant son and moved to the United States, later divorcing my grandfather and marrying a man whose last name, Witt, is now mine.

My grandfather, owner of a successful Berlin publishing firm, had refused to leave Germany. For him, as for so many other German Jews, it was a fatal decision.

Last month, after years of wondering about it, I set foot in my grandfather's house. The Tribune had sent me to Berlin to write about the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and I took the opportunity to go looking for the house.

In the broadest sense, the upheaval in communist-dominated Europe was the coming-full-circle of political events set into motion about the time my father was born.

On the most personal level, finding the house was a coda for me. It was the closest I will ever come to a reunion with the part of my family destroyed by the Nazis.

There are, of course, many millions of families in the world, and not just Jews, who have similar chunks missing from their family trees, branches hacked away by war or disaster or crime. Centuries of ethnic tur-



The Rothgiesser house as it appears today (top), and the grand dining room in the 1930s, furnished with dark mahogany tables and chairs.

moil in Eastern Europe have peopled Chicago in particular with many thousands of such wounded families.

This is a story of an attempt to fill in one family's gap.

### Something unspeakable

It was the thin blue airmail envelopes with German writing all over them that first alerted me to the fact that there was something unspeakable in my family's history.

Nearly every month when I was a child growing up in suburban Chicago in the 1960s, the envelopes would arrive at our house, seemingly addressed to my father, Frank Witt, but always referring to him as "Frank Rothgiesser-Witt."

I knew nothing of my grandfather or his house, beyond the fact that my father had been born in some place called Berlin. But I had heard something about the Nazis. In my haze of youthful half-comprehension, I thought the letters meant the Nazis were coming to get my father.

Many years later, I learned that the letters were part of what would become a 15-year-long restitution case brought by various distant relations of my grandfather, Heinrich Rothgiesser, against the German gov-

ernment, seeking compensation for the Nazis' seizure of the family business and other properties.

My father did not read or speak German. He usually just gave the letters to my grandmother, when he didn't throw them away. He showed not the slightest appearance of interest in this father, and this family, that he was much too young ever to have known.

My late grandmother, Edith Witt, didn't talk about the letters either. She was so reluctant to recall her life in Berlin that she had had her married initials, E.R., scratched out of the silver set, which she had received at her wedding.

So the letters served primarily to pique my interest in learning German when I got to high school. I wanted to figure out what they said.

It was only when I was 16, and interviewing her one day for a high school genealogy project, that my grandmother finally took from an old shoebox her photographs of the house in Berlin and began to explain what they were.

Heinrich Rothgiesser appears to have been exactly the kind of Jew Adolph Hitler had in mind when he ranted on about world

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"Jewish conspiracies." He fit Hitler's stereotype. He was the co-owner of a printing and publishing company, Rothgiesser & Diesing, and he had a lot of money, to judge from his house.

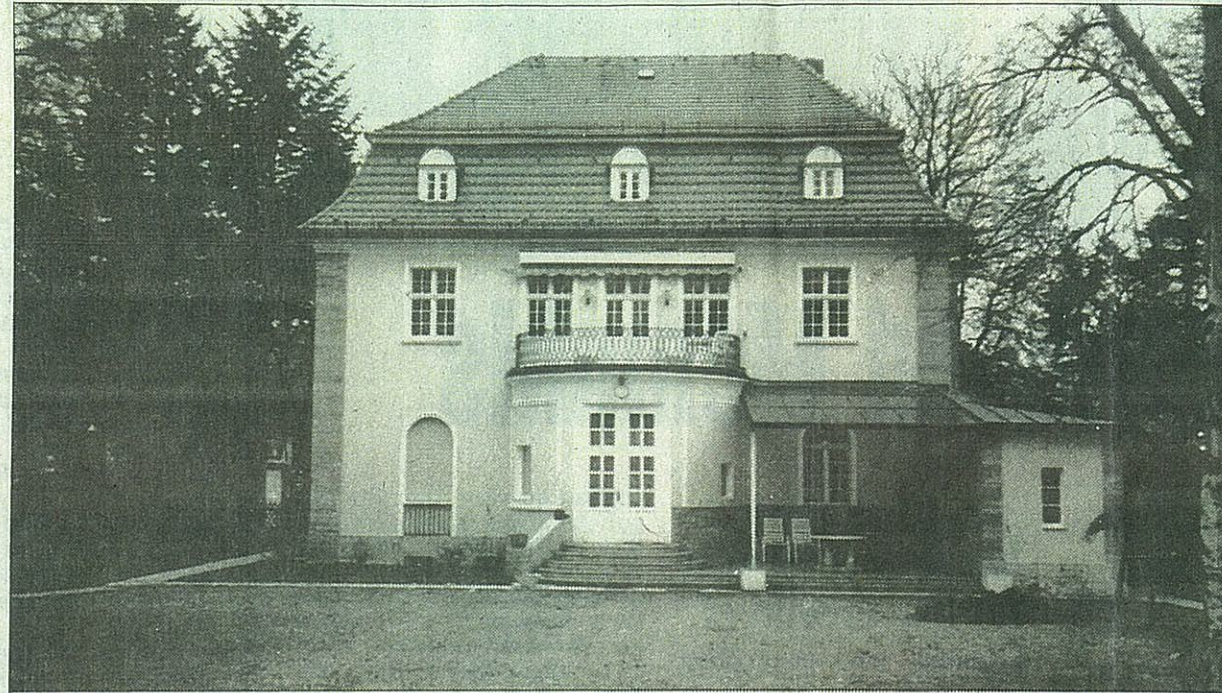
My grandmother met him in the 1920s on one of her frequent trips to Berlin—her parents had emigrated to the United States but still kept a house in the German capital. Truth to tell, my grandmother, something of the consummate '20s flapper, had an affair with Rothgiesser. He divorced his first wife to marry her in 1927.

The next year, Rothgiesser built a new house for my grandmother, at Number 9 Stuhmallee, in the posh Charlottenburg district of Berlin, and, by her own fond account, she began to live a life of carefree luxury.

The house had 8 bedrooms and sat on an acre of land. The photos showed a grand dining room furnished with dark mahogany tables and chairs, a master bedroom so well-decorated with art deco furniture that it would be in style today, sterling silver brushes and combs laid out neatly on a dressing table, a bathroom with a steam-heated towel rack.

This was not a house one would give up casually, and Heinrich Rothgiesser was sadly typical of many German Jews at the time: He persuaded himself that the Nazis and their anti-Semitism couldn't really be taken seriously. He chose to pursue his business as he always had, and hoped the Nazis would go away.

My grandmother made a different decision. Feeling a growing unease at the situation in Ger-



Tribune photo by Howard Witt

The Heinrich Rothgiesser house: "There was no mistaking it."

many, she left in 1933, when my father was just 7 months old, against my grandfather's wishes. It was an extraordinary decision, something women at the time just didn't do.

When Rothgiesser could not be persuaded to join her in America, my grandmother obtained a divorce in Chicago, eventually marrying Louis Witt.

I asked my father once why he never showed much curiosity about his natural father. Louis Witt, he replied, was the only father he ever knew. Louis Witt, too, died before I was born.

No one knows exactly what became of Heinrich Rothgiesser, other than that he died at the hands of the Nazis. The restitution documents indicate that the Ger-

man government seized his business in the mid-1930s, and other records show that in 1936, the house became the property of a man named Kurt Berthold. Whether it was stolen outright or my grandfather was forced to sell it is not known.

It is believed that Rothgiesser was shipped off to a concentration camp in the Pyrenees, where he perished, while his parents—my great-grandparents—met their end at the Theresienstadt death camp in Czechoslovakia.

## The search begins

The years passed, and my father received a few periodic payments from the German government as settlement of the restitution case. The total was not more than a few

thousand dollars.

I learned German, but never enough to completely decipher the legalese of the little blue letters.

Our family started corresponding with one of my father's half-sisters—a daughter of Heinrich Rothgiesser by his first marriage—who lives in Santiago, Chile. She furnished us with most of the scant information we have on his fate.

Gradually, my interest in our family history waned. But when the Tribune sent me to Berlin, I determined to find the Rothgiesser house, if it was still standing, although I had no idea where it might be.

What I found was that there was not much evidence left in Berlin that my family had ever existed.

On the third floor of the German state library, hidden way at the back of a seldom-opened file drawer, I found a thin sliver of microfilm containing the Berlin telephone directory for 1932.

I felt a strange sadness and loneliness as I scanned the listings under Rothgiesser. There were 15 names, including the family printing company; Georg Rothgiesser, my great-grandfather; and Heinrich Rothgiesser, at Number 9 Stuhmallee. The rest may also have been my relatives; I'm not sure. The phone books today list no Rothgiessers.

Looking at a modern streetmap of Berlin, I found no Stuhmallee, but there was a street with a similar name, Stuhmer Allee, in the western half of the city.

I drove there. As I neared the street, I began to feel the same way I do when I have taken an antihistamine, simultaneously alert and tired, not quite able to concentrate.

## A kind of emptiness

I turned the corner onto the tree-lined street, and the house in my grandmother's photographs rose immediately into view. There was no mistaking it, even though the name of the street had changed slightly and the house number had changed from 9 to 10.

The street, about the length of a city block, seemed little changed from what it must have been in 1932. There were many large old houses that appeared to have survived the Allied bombings; there were tall trees that in the pictures had been saplings.

Until this moment I had thought that I might experience some sort of *deja vu* on entering this street, that I might be swept up in imaginings of growing up here if history had taken a different turn. I felt only a kind of emptiness, as if

I were visiting somewhere I really didn't belong.

I knocked on the door and was greeted by the current occupants, a Western diplomat and his family, who kindly invited me inside for a look.

The house was warm and inviting, tastefully furnished in an English country style—much as my mother might have furnished it had she lived there. The family had heard of my grandfather: his name appeared in some documents they had, describing the history of the house.

There was nothing those documents, however, to indicate that my grandfather was Jewish, nothing to indicate that anything amiss had ever happened to any of its occupants.

As I stood on the front steps to leave, another image flashed before me. It was of one of the old photographs, one that showed a tiny, blurry image of my grandfather, difficult to make out even with a magnifying glass, standing on the same steps.

We had no other pictures of my grandfather, because my grandmother, in her zeal to erase a part of her past, had long ago taken a scissors to every photograph in which he was visible. She tried literally to cut him out of her life.

I never will understand exactly why she did that, or why she was so reluctant to talk about Berlin. She died two years ago, and as so often happens when a grandparent dies, I realized too late that I never had asked her enough questions.

We now have, however, one good photograph of Heinrich Rothgiesser that we got from my father's half-sister in Chile. Everyone in my family insists that I look like him.

Howard Witt is the Tribune's Africa correspondent, based in Johannesburg.