

## **Book launch: Ruth Landy: “Grandma Mina's Cheesecake”**

11.9.2024 Bookstore Knecht, Landau

An unusual book is being presented today. A cookery and baking book and at the same time a family chronicle. The book is also a work about strong women.

Wilhelmina (“Mina”) is a wife, a mother, a cook and a popular hostess. She was born into a Jewish family in Östringen in 1869 - before the foundation of the German Reich. She marries the Jewish merchant Jakob Weil, born in Lustadt in 1856.

Their daughter Erna is born in Lustadt in 1891. It is therefore in the middle of the period of the German Empire with its bourgeois upheavals. Landau is characterized by this Gründerzeit period, especially after the fortress ramparts have been cut through its ring roads. Erna marries the wine merchant Heinrich Levy.

Their daughter Sue is born in Landau in 1922. It was the turbulent time of the Weimar Republic after the First World War, with all its opportunities and dangers for democracy and Jewish life in Germany. Sue's brother Ernest was born in the middle of the war in 1916. After the second World War Ernst married Cynthia, born in 1928 in the United Kingdom, after fleeing to the USA to escape the Nazis. There, the family name Levy became Landy.

Ernest and Cynthia are the parents of the author Ruth Landy, born in Geneva in 1952. It is the time after the Second World War with its new political orders, tensions and dangers.

Mina, Erna, Sue, Cynthia and Ruth - each woman represents an entire era. At the same time, each woman and the respective era stands for the success and failure of the German-Jewish relationship and thus also of the Christian-Jewish encounter.

Ernest and Sue's mother Erna wants to follow her children into emigration after the death of her husband. The steamer St. Louis sets sail from Hamburg on May 13, 1939, and reaches the port of Havana in Cuba on May 27. However, there is no docking permit and no entry permit for the passengers. After a long odyssey along the coast of the USA and Canada, the St. Louis sails back to Europe on June 6. Erna's fate illustrates the tragedy of many migrants of all times: nobody wants her.

The central figure of the book, however, is Grandma Mina, she is the “rock of the family story”. In May 1940, she and her husband fled to the Netherlands from their home country, which had become a land of oppression and persecution for her and her family. On December 16, 1940, they were able to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary there under the conditions of exile. After the death of her husband Jakob, Mina was arrested in her country of refuge on August 30, 1941. She follows the tragic path of Anne Frank, whose family we commemorate here in Landau in the Frank-Loebschen Haus. After the Westerborg transit camp, she was transported to Auschwitz in cattle wagons with many of her fellow sufferers. Nameless, with no known date of death in Auschwitz, she does not die - no, she is killed and murdered.

Ruth Landy's book commemorates this exemplary family and its strong women. The first major chapter is entitled “History of our German-Jewish heritage”. The second part then deals with “Family treasures and recipes”.

What is striking in the heading “History of our German-Jewish heritage” is the repeated use of the word “our heritage” in the rest of the text. What does “our” mean in this context?

First of all, it is about “our” family, about the people from the author's great-grandmother to herself and her numerous grandnieces and grandnephews.

But “our” also means the history of the Levy/Landy family's home and society. We, today's readers of Landau's urban population, are meant. “We” - the stories told in the book took place in the midst of our ancestors. The history of the Levy family is part of “our” town's history. Remembering this is of central importance in 2024, the year of the 750th anniversary of Landau's elevation to a town.

Terrible things happened to people by people in the middle of this town. It is cynical to talk about “Wiedergutmachung” in the context of the Weil, Levy and Landy families and their many companions. What was done to these people can never be “made good” again.

That is why it is remarkable that young people in Landau are getting involved today. They are reminding themselves and us of the history, they are pausing and making it known to the outside world what happened here.

Students at the Max Slevogt Grammar School are researching biographies of the persecuted, displaced and murdered. They read from them in public at commemorative events. The commitment of their teacher, Dr. Dominique Ehrmantraut, deserves special mention. The “Stolpersteine” laid in front of their school give the anonymous victims a name, a face, the regain their identity.

The pupils incorporate the victims into their own lives, they allow their story to become part of their own history. In this way, after the dark time of Landau's brown history, there are once again signs of hope in the middle of this city. Memories come alive and the hope that a happy and fulfilling life is possible for everyone in this city too.

13 recipes are described in detail in the book. These include typical Jewish recipes such as the one for matzo ball soup or for the German-Jewish ceremonial bread “Berches”.

But why is cheesecake of all things so important in the Levy/Landy family and therefore also in the book? What does cheesecake have to do with Judaism?

The book describes the long tradition of cheesecake production from Greco-Roman times to the present day. But it is also a hallmark of Mina's lifestyle. The “sweetness of life” is palpable in it at all the high and low points of the family's history. Cheesecake accompanies the family in their native Palatinate, in exile in the Netherlands and through to their emigration to the USA.

Cheesecake stands for the little things in life. They carry life, give life and let life live. This is not an external event. Rather, a holistic attitude is required: “Cake is art, but above all it is a daily exercise”. An inner attitude becomes outwardly visible here. In the cheesecake, attention and attentiveness to the little things in life become clear over generations: “In this simple cake, the past is still present in every bite: the taste of family, the taste of home”.

This also shows a connection to the family name Levy / Landy. The Levites of Israel were not the important leaders of the liturgy at the temple, and certainly not the high priests with their important function on Yom Kippur. Rather, their task lay in the small things of the temple service. They were concerned with everyday piety in the temple. For them, religion was not an abstract and theoretical idea, but a practice for body and soul.

The same goes for cheesecake: it celebrates life, a cheesecake-day is a holiday.

Since it was founded in New York and Berlin in 1955, the Leo Beck Institute, which is connected to this presentation today, has also set itself the task of collecting everyday objects that document Jewish life and culture in its research library and archive. These objects were often donated by refugees. In the small things, in the inconspicuous gestures of everyday life and in the seemingly profane actions during everyday life, great things become visible - even in cheesecake. In them, we can see what Leo Beck said on the day of his liberation from the concentration camp: "There should be no revenge in your heart, only love and justice" - concretely, locally, in everyday life.

But this everyday life is always social, communicative. You rarely bake a cheesecake just for yourself and then eat it just for yourself. Baking and eating a cake is a social event. Sharing a cake and eating it together means sharing yourself, sharing yourself with others while being together and talking to them.

A cheesecake contains many ingredients. Including ½ teaspoon of salt and 2 teaspoons of sugar. Isn't that strange? Sweet and salty - two opposites come together in a cake, as they do in many other dishes. How can such opposites go together? On the other hand, if one of these two elements is missing, the whole cake becomes different. The concrete cheesecake is only the way it is because of these two opposing elements. These two give the cake its special taste. They give it its very own "cake identity".

Grandma Mina's identity also includes both: the "sweetness of life" and the bitter end. Without these two opposing elements, it wouldn't be Grandma Mina. Without looking at these two sides, one would not do justice to Grandma Mina's life.

Mina would never have thought, expected, hoped that 155 years after her birth and 83 years after her violent death, people would gather in her homeland to celebrate her legacy - and to celebrate her herself. Celebrating - despite the bitter end of her life, remembering despite - or rather: precisely because of the catastrophe.

Celebrating and yet not forgetting the disasters: that is particularly important today, today is "9/11"

On the one hand, bitterness cannot and must not be ignored and suppressed. On the other hand, death must not have the last word. Perhaps in these days the Landy family can make the experience through our being together and our celebrations: life is stronger than death when the dead take part in the life of the living.

In our celebrations in everyday life, we also go beyond the all-day, the day like every day. In celebrating together, we also experience a vision of how life can succeed and become good. When we eat, remember and talk together, we experience a community to which everyone is invited. Where no one is excluded - not even the victims of history.

Cake thus becomes a means of life, a means for a good life. Hence the wish: bon appétit to the cheesecake, bon appétit to the good life. - Lechaim!

Wolfgang Paul