

At the stone laying ceremony for Sophie Fischer in 2015, three girls from the Martin Buber School in Heppenheim spoke the following text. They took it in turns to ask and answer questions. To make the text more comprehensible, it's now been put into dialogue form. The text is based on memoirs by Marianne Degginger, Sophie Fischer's granddaughter. Frau Degginger published her memoirs in two autobiographical books entitled "Marianne – eine wahre Geschichte" (Marianne – a true story) und "Schwieriges Überleben" (Difficult survival). The text quotes from the books in various places, and these are all marked in blue.

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Narrator: Sophie Fischer lived here in Heppenheim. Her granddaughter Marianne grew up in far away Berlin. Marianne Degginger, as she's called today, wrote two books of her memories for her grandmother Sophie and we would like to relate some of these.

"If you carry on doing as you are, then I'm not too worried about the future of Germany." wrote a relation on the birth of Marianne in 1932.

Question: *But what was life like for a Jewish person at that time in Germany?*

Narrator: Marianne grew up in Kleinmachnow near Berlin in a happy sheltered family household. And it's Marianne who keeps alive the memory of the life and murder of her beloved grandma Sophie.

Question: *Do you know how Grandma Sophie came to Heppenheim?*

Narrator: Sophia was her real name and she came originally from Würzburg. She was born on 20th November 1872. Presumably in order to assist in house and business, she went to family in Karlsruhe in 1896 at the age of 24 and there married the Hungarian Bela Fischer. He soon returned to Hungary and left Sophia and their young daughter Berta behind. Sophia was sent with the girl—Marianne's mother—again to live with relations. She was forced to live on a modest allowance that was provided by her two elder brothers. She received the money only on condition that she separated from her husband Bela.

Question: *So what did Grandma Sophie do in Heppenheim?*

Narrator: Grandma Sophie worked as a maid for friends and knitted garments for children and adults. She was not allowed any contact to her husband Bela. Sometimes Bela wrote to her and hoped she would follow him to Hungary. He was a sensitive man who suffered greatly from their separation, but he couldn't guarantee her a regular income. However, even the allowance from her brothers meant that she lived in very tight financial circumstances.

Sophia resigned herself to her situation and appears not to have been too unhappy. Her contact to relations was very important to her. She wrote letters for all family events.

Question: *What happened then in 1933?*

Narrator: Her life changed abruptly. The effects of antisemitism were felt acutely here in Heppenheim. Sophia had a good friend, Babette Mayer, who also lived in Darmstädter Strasse. They met daily and gave each other support. They were very worried. Sophia always wore black, and being small and fragile she always feared attacks. She witnessed the abuse suffered by Jewish residents in late March 1933. She wrote regularly to Berlin expressing her fears for herself and her relations. When she was worried the words poured out of her, and that happened more and more as

her fears and worries grew.

“Grandma wrote to me of curious things. I found them curious because they were happening to people I knew so well. Shops were attacked; the people were prevented from visiting certain doctors’ practices. Shops were ransacked and looted, if they were Jewish shops. The non-Jewish shop owners profited because the customers turned to them instead. How frightened were the Mainzers, Mayers, Hirschs, and Frankes in Heppenheim? Grandma was beside herself with fear. What were they all going to live on? In Heppenheim all of our relations were spat at and their property scrawled on.”

Question: *Did you visit your Grandma Sophie in Heppenheim?*

Narrator: We were last in her house in Spring and in Autumn 1933. She had a small garden with apple trees. Sophia had a close relationship to her daughter and the time together with her and me she enjoyed very much.

Question: *Do you remember Grandma’s garden?*

Narrator: Yes, how could I not remember it! It was so beautiful, so beautiful!

Question: *What happened to Sophia in the following years?*

Narrator: From 1933 on almost all of her relations were forced to emigrate including her elder brother Theodor. Since he had always paid her small living allowance, she was worried that the authorities would not permit her to be paid from the frozen account.

She was always very nervous and knitted constantly. For financial reasons she was no longer able to travel to Kleinmachnow. It was a comfort to her to know that her daughter had married an “Aryan”. She believed this meant that Berta and her children would be thus protected.

In 1938 Sophia’s passport had the first name Sara added, which signified Jewesses.

Question: *What happened to Sophia after the Night of the Long Knives on November 9th 1938?*

Narrator: Sophia had to leave her domicile and move to the “Schindersburg”. This was a run-down old house and Sophia was very cramped. Just a note bears witness to this injustice:

“Did they seal your apartment and later sell your furniture?”

Who wrote this note nobody knows.

Question: *Did she stay there for long?*

Narrator: In 1939 she was sent to the Jews house in Frankfurt. Jews from all of the neighbouring towns were forced to live here in inhuman conditions.

Question: *Were you able to visit her there?*

Narrator: It was on July 20th 1941. We were with her yesterday, but I hardly recognised her. What’s worse, I wanted to run away. I could barely contain myself. What did this awful stink have to do with Grandma Sophie? It was so wrong. She didn’t belong here. We had to fight our way through stinking corridors; the people lived above and below each other. But was it really living? It was merely an exisiting—crammed together, grey, bowed, old, sick, dressed in rags, with huge hungry eyes. And in the middle of this I saw my Grandma. Or a shadow of her. She jerked

nervously, twitched, and pulled me anxiously to her. My Grandma!

Question: *What else do you know about this time?*

Narrator: From September 15th 1941 on she had to wear the yellow Jews' star. In the years 1941 and 1942 aerial attacks over Darmstadt and Frankfurt increased. Jews were not allowed in the air-raid shelters. At the most they could go to the basement of the Jews house, but that was most likely not particularly well protected and they sat terrified until the all-clear sounded. The biggest problem for her was financial. After her brothers had emigrated their money was paid into a blocked account and there's no evidence that she ever received any of the money. These money problems compounded hunger, poor clothing, and isolation from her emigrated siblings. Her only solace was knitting.

Question: *And then?*

Narrator: She didn't remember this purgatory. She suffered from high blood pressure and was deported on August 19th 1942 to Theresienstadt. There she was plagued by lice, fleas, cold, too little food and being crammed in with the huge numbers of other people held there. Grandma certainly became even more nervous there, because she could no longer obtain medications to control it. She could only write occasionally, and even that was censored.

“Mama and I took a parcel to the post office today. Mama has been sending them for years. They're always full of homemade sweaters, fresh underwear, soap, flour, sugar, tins of food. They're addressed to Grandma Sophie, now in Theresienstadt. I asked Mama which of those excellent things was actually received by Grandma.”

Grandma Sophie must have been extremely unhappy. She was used to writing her daughter long letters in which she discussed anything and everything. Grandma Sophie died on December 3rd 1943 of a stroke in the camp hospital.

My father said “Your mother is an innocent victim of a brutal time.”

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The name, date of deportation and date of death of Grandma Sophie are included on a memorial on the wall of the Jewish cemetery in Frankfurt.