

# HISTORY OF THE WEIKERSHEIMER FAMILY IN GAUKOENIGSHOFEN

## Preface

In the last few years, I have come into possession of several documents that describe, in German, the history of the Weikersheimer family in Gaukoenigshofen. Some of the information appeared in clear narrative; some was fragmentary and in stilted language. Much of the information was not in chronological order or in topical arrangement. I have previously attempted to translate portions of these documents, and some members of the family have these translations.

This project is an attempt to put together the story into a more easily readable and orderly manner. In contrast to the previous efforts, I have purposely not attempted to use verbatim translation. Instead, I have taken the liberty of liberal paraphrasing and reorganization, while, at the same time, trying to remain faithful to the facts. But, undoubtedly, there are errors in translation and, perhaps, even in meaning. If so, such transgressions are unintentional.

There have been a number of sources for this document. Chief among them are the writings of Thomas Michel:

Die Juden in Gaukoenigshofen/Unterfranken (1550-1942: Beiträe zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1988

“Die Familie Weikersheimer,” in Journal of History, vol. 6, 1989

“Die Familie Weikersheimer,” in 1250 Jahre Gaukoenigshofen, published by the community of Gaukoenigshofen, 1991

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## German-Jewish Historical Background Notes

Before 1791: Jews could not become citizens, own land, hold government office or join a craft or merchant guild. Most Jews had to live in a designated ghetto. Others, the so-called "Schutzjuden" (protected Jews), lived outside the ghetto under the aegis of the local or regional head of government.

### **The Age of Enlightenment**

1787-1789: French Revolution.

1791: National assembly enfranchises French Jews. Beginning of "liberal era."

1803: Napoleon I of France, Alexander I of Russia and Frederick Wilhelm III of Prussia carve up central Europe and create 112 separate states. Some of these later merge, but nonetheless the region that later becomes Germany remains divided.

1806: War breaks out between France and Prussia, and Napoleon overruns Germany. He spreads the teachings of liberalism throughout Western Europe. Although he himself is not particularly sympathetic to the Jews, he imposes laws enabling more rights for the Jews.

1807: Napoleon convenes a Sanhedrin in order to compel Jews to assimilate. He subordinates all religious institutions to himself.

1808: Napoleon's "Infamous Decree" freezes Jewish settlement in Germany and gives him dictatorial supervision over every financial transaction into which German Jews enter.

### **The post-Napoleonic era**

1814: Napoleon is defeated and is compelled to abdicate his throne. The French are forced to abandon all conquests made by him. Most of the Napoleonic gains are lost, and Jews lose most of the few privileges that had been given to them.

1814-1815: Congress of Vienna creates 39 different German states, which form a loose union, the German Confederation.

### **The Kaiserreich**

1870: Otto Bismarck engineers the unification of Germany and the establishment of the Kaiserreich (German empire).

1870-1871: Franco-German War.

1871: Germany is formally unified as an empire. The Jews nominally gain equality.

1914-1919: First World War.

1918: Kaiserreich ends.

### **The Weimar Republic**

1919: Treaty of Versailles.

1919: Weimar Republic is established.

1921: USA imposes restrictions on immigration.

**1920's-early 1930's: Severe inflation in Germany and global depression.**  
**1/30/1933: Weimar Republic ends. Hitler assumes power.**

### **The Third Reich**

**2/4/1933: Nazi administration imposes special laws limiting freedom of speech.**

**3/24/1933: The Enabling Law is passed, giving Hitler the power to make laws without consulting parliament.**

**6/30/1933: "Night of the Long Knives": Hitler kills critics in his own party.**

**1933: Nazis begin building concentration camps for imprisonment of Communists, gypsies, etc.**

**8/2/1934: President Hindenburg dies. Hitler becomes Fuehrer.**

**1935: The Nuernberg Laws: Intermarriage and sexual intercourse between Jews and other Germans are forbidden.**

**1938-1942: Nazis build death camps.**

**3/12/1938: Hitler occupies Austria.**

**9/29/1938: Czechoslovakia cedes Sudentland to Germany.**

**11/9/1938-11/10/1938: Pogrom night (Kristalnacht). Synagogues are destroyed. Many Jewish homes and businesses are looted and destroyed. Many Jews are beaten, arrested and sent to concentration camps. Some are released weeks or months later on their promise to emigrate.**

**1939: Hitler invades Poland. Second World War begins.**

**1939: Jews lose German citizenship. They can no longer attend public school, engage in most business and professional activities, own land, associate with non-Jews or frequent public institutions, such as parks.**

**1939-1945: Second World War.**

**1941: All Jews over age 6 must wear the yellow Star of David.**

**1941: Nazis make plans for extermination of all remaining Jews: "The Final Solution."**

**1943-1945: 6 million Jews are murdered in the death camps.**

In the sixteenth century, after the expulsion of the Jews from the cities of Franken and because of decrees prohibiting them from owning land, they were able to live only in village ghettos or, as "Schutzjuden," under the aegis of the local or regional head of government. As was the case in the rest of that region, the local noblemen enriched their coffers by offering protection to the "Schutzjuden" in exchange for payment. In about 1550, the first Jews arrived in Gaukoenigshofen, a small community of about 600 inhabitants about 25 miles south of Wuerzburg in Unterfranken, and lived under these circumstances. For almost the next four hundred years, there thrived in Gaukoenigshofen a Jewish community, which continued until March 1942, when the last of the Jews were arrested, transported to the death camps and murdered.

### The First Generation: Ensel Levi

The patriarch of the family, Ensel Levi, was born in 1748 in the town of Weikersheim. In 1789 he moved to Gaukoenigshofen and married Terz Braunschild, daughter of one of the Schutzjuden. It was not unusual for Jewish males to marry so late in life, because most did not have the funds to support a family at a younger age. Ensel eked out a living working as "Schmuser"(?). He did not own his own home; instead he rented a tiny house in the ghetto, paying 15 Gulden for rent to the prince-bishop annually. In the year 1810, his entire estate was worth only 50 Gulden, making him one of the poorest Jews in the town. Despite his poverty, Ensel enjoyed a privileged standing in the Jewish community, since his family belonged to the Levite tribe. Also, partly because of the links provided by his marriage, Ensel started a family that was to play an important role in the history of Gaukoenigshofen. Between 1792 and 1810, six children were born to Ensel and Terz. At about this time also, Ensel adopted the name of his hometown and became "Weikersheimer" in compliance with Napoleon's decree that all Jews choose a surname.

### The Second Generation

Ensel's sons were born during the Age of Emancipation and took advantage of those few opportunities available to them at the time. In order to prevent Jews from competing with Christians, residency status and vocational licenses were limited and were awarded only to those Jews who could demonstrate their ability to support their families by engaging in certain, specified occupations. Many of the Jews were merchants. This type of work was familiar to them as one of the few means of support that had been allowed them for centuries.

In 1825, Ensel's first-born son, Faust, applied for residency status and for permission to open a butcher shop, and these were granted to him with the proviso that he would raise no objection should the community later desire a Christian butcher. Indeed, six years later, a Christian applied for this approval, and, in a petition, the townspeople, who prior to that time had been buying their meat from Faust, now cited an aversion to his ritually-slaughtered meat. However, given the

need for kosher meat by the more than 150 adult members of the Jewish community (which constituted more than one-fifth of the entire population), Faust's business did not fail. Indeed, it even appeared to him that there was a need and opportunity for cattle dealing to be in Jewish hands, and he established such a dealership.

Faust's younger brother, Josef, married one of his cousins. This gave him part ownership of the estate of his maternal grandparents, resulting in a preservation of family property. (Such financially opportune marriages were not unusual during this era of the town's history. Once in the third and twice in the fourth generations, Weikersheimers married the only daughters of Jewish out-of-town families, bringing them, with their possessions, into the Weikersheimer tribe.) Josef wanted to establish a farm on property that belonged to his father-in-law, and he presented an application for permission to do this to the government in July 1833. Permission was denied, citing a belief "that the petitioner does not possess the necessary knowledge or aptitude for this." Later on in life, he became a horse trader. This was much more capital intensive than cattle dealing; at the turn of the century, a horse cost the equivalent of an average earner's annual earnings. It was possible for Josef to enter this business only by using funds provided by his father-in-law.

Samuel, another son of Ensel Levi, established the third branch of the family. Although he had served as an apprentice tailor for 12 years, he was denied residency status and a vocational license in 1834, because there were already two Christian master tailors in the town. In 1835, Samuel's second application was also denied. A Christian tailor was awarded residency status a short time later. It was not until 1842 that Samuel was accepted as citizen and master tailor. It did not appear to matter what a petitioner's basic rights or qualifications were; the main determinant was the petitioner's religion.

Of Ensel's sons, Faust and Josef were able to move out of the ghetto to properties that had been farmland. Only Samuel continued to live in his father's house. But eventually his lot in life improved, and he, too, moved onto farmland and became a cattle dealer. Two of Ensel's other children, Hirsch and Regina, chose to escape the restrictions imposed upon German Jews by emigrating to America. They were among the few to do so. Only six percent of the Jews born in Gaukoenigshofen during this period of time emigrated, proportionately fewer than a comparable group of Gaukoenigshofen Christians and fewer also than the Jews in other communities.

### The Third Generation

In 1855, Faust was able to give his son, Bernhard, 1000 Gulden and a parcel of land, indicative of the financial success he had enjoyed over the previous thirty-year period. In turn, Bernhard's two sons, Loeb and Enslein, instead of becoming butchers, were cattle dealers right from the outset and, as will be seen below, laid the groundwork for a major enterprise.

Josef's oldest son, Loeb, took over the horse dealership and was, in 1865, the first of the Jews of Gaukoenigshofen to move to the city of Wuerzburg. Loeb's brother, Isaak, petitioned the government officials for permission to work as a baker, assuring them that it was not his intention to stand in the way of any eventual competition. As in the case of the butcher shop, the non-Jews did not object to this business enterprise by the Jews, as long as it did not threaten Christian interests. Isaak was the last of the Weikersheimers to perform any kind of labor for income. He also sold groceries and later became a cattle dealer.

Thus, in this generation of Weikersheimers, there were two, Isaak and Loeb, who studied a trade (baker and butcher respectively), enabling them to attain residency status, but both of them actually became involved in businesses early on. Indeed, of the five members of this generation, four became cattle dealers, and the fifth was a horse dealer.

The nineteenth century proved to be one of great financial success for the Jewish community in general and for the Weikersheimer family in particular. At the beginning of the century, the family founder had lived in one wretched, tiny house, which he rented. In contrast, at the end of the century, the various members of the family owned eight parcels of land that had formerly been farms. Within the Jewish community, the family came to be held in high regard. In 1870, Jeremias Weikersheimer was the first member of the family to be elected to the governing board of the congregation.

### Anti-Semitism in the Nineteenth Century

The financial success of the Jews raised feelings of jealousy and envy among the townspeople, not only towards the upper and middle classes of Jews, but even towards the poorest Jewish peddlers. There resulted a number of anti-Semitic actions. For example: 1. In 1817, the Jewish community of Gaukoenigshofen built gatehouses at the edge of town. This would allow them to consider the area within the town part of their own home and to carry objects on the Sabbath. The beams were frequently dissembled or pilfered by persons unknown but were then always replaced by the Jews. 2. Despite their parents' fears of loss of identity, Jewish children were required to attend Christian schools. The parents had to pay higher school taxes than the Christians. The children were harassed by such abuses as being forced to sit on benches, segregated from their classmates. Out of spite, the benches were sometimes spread with lard. 3. Although the Jews had to pay exorbitant taxes, the municipal government primarily represented the Christians. The Jews had no say in the affairs of the community, such as those concerning the provision of welfare. At meetings of the citizens of the community, they were allowed to give their opinions, but they were not allowed to sign petitions until after everyone else had done so. 4. They were also segregated from the townspeople in their social life; until 1871, they were not permitted "to obtain food or drink from a

Christian inn-keeper.” But Christians and Jews often were neighbors, and there continued to be some social interaction between them as a result of this proximity.

In about 1865, one of the member of the third generation, Jeremias, who was sixty years old at the time, was among the first of the Jews of Gaukoenigshofen to take advantage of their newly granted freedoms by moving to the city of Wuerzburg. This enabled him to pursue his occupation as cattle dealer in a bigger market, hoping to find better business opportunities than in his hometown.

Jews were permitted to deal in real estate after their liberation in 1871, and several of the Jews of Gaukoenigshofen did so very successfully. They bought up foreclosed land that had belonged to overly indebted farmers and, in turn, parceled it for resale into smaller lots. This so-called “trimming” or “butchering” encouraged the rise of anti-Semitism, because the loans that resulted in bankruptcy had usually been obtained from Jews. The farmers felt that they had lost their properties, not because of their own mismanagement and the area’s general economic problems, but because of the avarice of the Jews.

#### The Establishment of “The Firm”

Following their liberation in 1871, many Jews entered occupations formerly forbidden to them, such as real estate and retail business. Between 1880 and 1900, seven members of the Jewish community had opened general stores, causing competition amongst themselves. In order to have their stores survive, some decided to confine themselves to the sale of specialty goods. Others closed their stores and went elsewhere. The fourth Weikersheimer generation supported themselves entirely in business, thus setting themselves apart from their ancestors. Six lived off cattle dealing, and one maintained a merchandise agency.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, two members of this fourth Weikersheimer generation, the brothers Ignaz and Vitus, attempted a variety of business enterprises, none of which were very successful. But, in 1898, recognizing the fact that agriculture was becoming more mechanized, they established an agricultural machine dealership and repair shop, the “Machinenbau-Anstalt Gaukoenigshofen” (Machine Manufacturing Establishment Of Gaukoenigshofen), known in the town as “The Firm.” It operated virtually without competition, for the Christian smithies had not yet adapted their shops to the changing demands of the agricultural industry. The success of “The Firm” was also made possible by the inclusion of the town into the railroad network in the year 1907, making it easier for the brothers to obtain their agricultural implements from abroad. “The Firm” based its business, in large part, on the reaper and the other new agricultural inventions, which substantially simplified the cultivation of cereals. Most of the machines were imported from the United States, the most successful of them manufactured by McCormick. The brothers bought the parts ready-made and then assembled them for sale. Ahrens describes the development of the German agricultural industry prior to the First World War: “The manufacture of simple

farm machinery and equipment was carried out in small operations with primitive production methods and small sales territories, businesses which often operated repair shops only for machinery built within their own factories and which had to export any machinery not built by them." Herrmann wrote, "The advent of new technology permit centers of production to be established at locations which enable ready access to customers. Crucial for the success of such an establishment are the personalities of the entrepreneurs, their resourcefulness and their energy," criteria which Ignaz and Vitus clearly met. Vitus was the suave "man of the world," who had a mind for business and who was largely responsible for the actual management of the enterprise. Ignaz was the warm, congenial "man of the people," who dealt with the customers, the farmers, and was considered by them to be a kindred spirit.

In 1902, "The Firm" installed a steam engine, the first in Gaukoenigshofen. There were four employees in 1904, already making the firm the biggest employer in town. There were eight in 1907, eleven in 1908 and fourteen in 1909. In February 1908, fire broke out, and the factory burned down almost to the ground. This led to the reconstruction of the factory, with storage and large work areas, in an industrial area at the edge of town. Later there were a variety of other additions, including a carpentry shop and an office building. These buildings were completed in 1913. Following this, the structure of the machinery factory did not change much. By the beginning of the First World War, "The Firm" had grown from a two-man operation into a large undertaking, employing about 20 workers.

#### Jewish Contributions to the Town

By the turn of the century, the Jews had become important contributors to the finances and welfare of their own community and the town in general. The number of votes granted each person corresponded to the amount paid in taxes. For example, in 1904, the biggest Jewish taxpayer, Marx Rosenbusch, paid a tax of 612 Mark, entitling him to 36 votes. Ignaz Weikersheimer paid taxes of 168 Marks for his agricultural machine dealership and repair shop and received, in return, ten votes. Of the 3900 Marks paid in municipal taxes in total, three Jewish taxpayers, Marx Rosenbusch, Hess Mainzer, and Ignaz Weikersheimer, accounted for 1100 Marks. All the farmers together paid only 205 Marks and had only twelve votes.

The Jews were involved in the sports of the town. Bernhard Weikersheimer was goalkeeper for the town's soccer team and, while serving as its chairman in 1920, donated a coat of arms to the team. Ernst and Erwin also played on the team.

The Franco-German War of 1870-1871 enabled the Jews to demonstrate their patriotism through their efforts for the military. For example, Enslein Weikersheimer served in the military for three years. Jews were also represented in the various benevolent societies that arose after 1870. With a single exception, Jews made up the entire Society for the Protection of Property, which provided homes to returning war veterans and their families.



Ignaz and two other members of the Weikersheimer family were among those establishing the first volunteer fire department in Gaukoenigshofen on April 16, 1882. Ignaz was elected its Treasurer. In 1919, after the war, the firemen re-assembled and re-elected him. He also undertook the function of Secretary. He worked hard on behalf of the Fire Department and successfully recruited some of the town's young men, mostly Christians. When a committee was formed to organize a celebration for the 25th anniversary of the founding of this organization, there were two Jewish members: Max Weikersheimer, who made his garden available for the site of celebration; and Ignaz Weikersheimer, who served as treasurer for the celebration. The two of them, Louis Kleeman and nine Christian fire-department comrades made up the musical band for the celebration.

In 1901, the village priest, Ferdinand Alzheimer (who usually started his weekly Sunday sermons by ordering "Heathens and Jews, get out!") suggested the establishment of a kindergarten and of a community hospital. In December, a ten-man committee was elected to undertake these tasks. But not much was heard from this organization until 1904, after further committee membership elections, including that of Enslein Weikersheimer, had taken place. The committee decided that it would raise the necessary funds for the construction of these facilities by issuing stock. A fund-raising commission composed of three citizens, one being Enslein, went house-to-house and collected these funds. Enslein continued to serve as a member of the planning committee. Prior to leaving his hometown in 1922, Enslein donated 5000 Marks to the kindergarten, thereby becoming the priest's biggest donor.

At the end of the First World War, the Weikersheimers owned very successful business enterprises that constituted the major share of the industry of Gaukoenigshofen. However, compared to the well-established, old-moneyed Mainzer family, the Weikersheimers were the nouveau riche "climbers." They did not yet own vast riches but instead appeared to have excellent opportunities for further financial growth, good prospects for their businesses and a high regard within their own religious community, as well as among the Christian inhabitants of the town. The high esteem in which Vitus Weikersheimer was held within the Jewish community is reflected in his election in 1912 to the Second Religious Board and its Treasurer, an office that he held until his emigration in 1930. During the First World War, after some of the First Religious Board members had been drafted into military service, Vitus became the leader of the congregation.

In 1921, Vitus Weikersheimer was thanked by the municipal counsel on behalf of the entire community for responding to the townspeople's appeal for funds to erect, in the town hall, a memorial plaque to honor those who had served in the war. The memorial tablet was inscribed, "Donated by Vitus Weikersheimer."

### The Establishment of "The Company"

Between 1900 and 1918, four of the members of this generation of Weikersheimers moved to the Bavarian cities of Munich, Augsburg and Kempten. This reflected the general trend, among Germany's Jews, to settle in the centers of commerce, so as to take advantage of the opportunities brought about by industrialization and to escape from the hardships of small town minority life. They hoped for even greater success than they had enjoyed in their hometowns. Prior to their exodus from Gaukoenigshofen, they maintained the tradition of keeping assets within the family. They left their properties to two of Bernhard Weikersheimer's cousins, these cousins having recently moved from the declining Jewish community of Acholshausen to Gaukoenigshofen.

The two Weikersheimer cattle dealers still remaining in the town, the brothers Loeb and Enslein, jointly founded a new dealership, thereby enabling them to combine their available capital and to expand their geographical range. This enterprise was registered under the name of "Loeb Weikersheimer OHG" but was simply called "The Company" in the town. The growth of this business was temporarily interrupted by the untimely death of Loeb in 1905 at age 47.

Loeb's son, Bernhard, left Gaukoenigshofen after his elementary education and attended secondary school and then business school in Erlangen. At the beginning of the First World War, he volunteered for military service and was sent to the front lines. In February 1917, he was wounded by grenade fragments, was sent to a military hospital and, from there, to a reserve battalion in Bamberg. After recovering from his wounds, he again volunteered for front line duty and remained there until the end of the war. He then returned to Gaukoenigshofen and went to work in the cattle dealership that had been established by his father and his uncle Enslein.

In the First World War, "The Company" became engaged in the provision of cattle to the whole army. Following Germany's defeat and the imposition of the Treaty of Versailles, it played a large role as cattle supplier in connection with reparation payments to the Allies. After much discussion, Enslein left the business and moved to Wuerzburg in 1922. Bernhard, at age 25, took over the cattle dealership and then entered into partnership with four others, three cousins who had moved from Acholshausen and another cattle dealer who had come from Allersheim and who had obtained one of the Weikersheimer estates. The official name of the firm was "Loeb Weikersheimer Erfolger (*Successor*) OHG," but it continued to be called simply "The Company." Four vehicles, two cars with drivers and two one-horse carriages, made the proprietors of the firm mobile. The five were equal partners. The responsibilities were subdivided approximately as follows: The CEO was Bernhard Weikersheimer, who supervised the firm's entire sales program. He was also primarily responsible for market expansion within the immediate neighborhood and for the acquisition of the cattle. Julius Rothstein used one car and covered the territory of Allersheim/Gutzingen and also

Sonderhofen/Hopferstadt. The Weil brothers traveled mostly in the one-horse carriages and concerned themselves with the regions around their former hometown of Acholshausen and the region around Schwabichen. Sigmund Krebs also occasionally used one of the carriages and dealt primarily with the immediate environs.

Directly after the First World War, a cattle loading ramp was built onto the town's railroad station. Provided with this availability of transportation, "The Company" evolved into a wholesale business that was to serve virtually all of Germany. The town became the major distribution center for calves from Oberpfalz and the Ingolstadt region and for milk-cows from Osfriedland and Altmark. "The Company" provided oxen and meat cows to the Magdeburg and Regensburg regions, as well as to the slaughterhouses of Frankfurt and the Ruhr valley. It began to assume an increasingly important position in the district. It used more advanced methods of conducting business than did the less enterprising Jewish retailers, who now experienced shrinking sales. Thus, in the era of the Weimar republic, Bernhard brought to fruition the dreams his father and uncle had when they established the firm during the Kaiserreich. His competitors paid attention to his successes; his business practices were widely copied; thus, he was responsible for major changes in the methods of operation used by cattle dealers throughout the whole country.

### The Growth of Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism, which had been relatively subtle in the period prior to the First World War, began to have resurgence after the war. The Jews of Gaukoenigshofen had contributed significantly to the war effort. Percentage wise, there were more soldiers among the Jews than among the general public. However, the fact that none of the Jews was killed became reason enough for some of the townsfolk to complain that the Jews had shirked from front-line duty. This despite the fact that three of the Jewish veterans, including one of the Weikersheimers, were awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class, for front line duty.

After the establishment of the Kaiserreich in 1871, there was always at least one Jew elected to the community governing board. In 1919, in the first election after the First World War, two Jews, Enslein and Vitus Weikersheimer, were elected to the eight-man municipal council. This success aroused tension between the Jews and Christians of the town. Further discord between the two groups occurred following the election of 1924. During the campaign prior to this election, there appeared two lists of candidates, the "Christian list" and the "Jewish list." The campaign was a vigorous one, using advertising, including leaflets dropped from planes. The election resulted in the seating of three from the "Jewish list" and five from the "Christian list." Vitus Weikersheimer received 377 votes, compared to 375 for Franz Mark, who was on the "Christian list," giving Weikersheimer the largest vote count of all. However, in February of the following year, the municipal council declared, "Eleven votes were cast by substitutes for eligible voters and one

vote was cast by an ineligible person, which is not legally permitted." In addition, one of the townspeople, the owner of the local quarry, challenged the vote results, claiming that one married couple had voted together in the voting booth, a violation of the rules. The election was declared invalid, and another election was carried out, with the following results: The "Jewish list" actually gained a few additional votes and was given four seats, the same as the "Christian list." Vitus Weikersheimer, with 431 votes, received more than any other candidate. The next in line, who also came from the "Jewish list," received 398 votes. Franz Mark, who led the candidates from the "Christian list," like he had in the earlier election, ended with 309 votes, less than he had received previously.

In 1933, the inscription on the World War I memorial plaque, thanking Vitus for his generosity, was removed. When a second war memorial statue was to be erected in the community, the Christian members of the town council suggested a Pieta motif, the reason given that, after all, there were no Jews among the fallen. On behalf of the Jewish community, Vitus Weikersheimer objected to this proposal. Inflation and the resultant lack of funds once and for all ended the entire plan.

#### The Evolution and End of "The Firm"

The machinery factory grew even more remarkably than did "The Company." During the First World War, Vitus Weikersheimer ran "The Firm" alone while his brother Ignaz was in the army. Wartime was favorable to the development of the agricultural industry, since, on the one hand, there was no longer any foreign competition, and, on the other hand, German demands for farm products continued to rise. Since agrarian production had to be improved to compensate for the diminishing importation of foodstuff and to substitute for the lack of manpower that had been caused by the war, there was an even greater demand for agricultural machines, causing the industry to undergo a marked upswing. "The Firm" continued to grow. By September 1919, there were 80 employees in a state-of-the-art operation. This number climbed to 100 persons by 1923, at the time of the 25th anniversary of the founding, making it the largest employer, not only in the town, but also in the entire Ochsenfurt district. Those former farm laborers who had previously lost their jobs because of mechanization now found new jobs in the factory to provide for their needs.

In addition to its other endeavors, the firm opened an automotive agency in Gaukoenigshofen during its twentieth year of existence. Several of the Weikersheimers became the first in the town to own automobiles. At about this time also, Vitus Weikersheimer flaunted his wealth by erecting the first villa-style home in town. It was very extravagant compared to the ordinary farmhouses of the town. Despite the crisis in the agricultural industry occurring at that time, he began construction, and actually asked for public funds for its construction. In 1924, he wrote to the district government: "My one-family home, which is only partially completed, cannot be finished because I lack the funds. The current poor business conditions do not permit me to borrow the money from my firm. Therefore, I am

looking for funds such as are made available to others, so as to complete and move into my home. I have learned through well-informed sources, that there is available, from property taxes, to anyone building a home, no matter who, 3000 Mark with 3% interest. Since these rights should be available to anyone anywhere in Germany, I hereby respectfully request that I be granted this subsidy." The authorities replied to him simply, "This agency knows nothing of the subsidies described in your letter." Vitus used this refusal as justification for supplying his house with electrical power from the factory installation. Once construction of his home was complete, he strung a power line from the factory to his house. This led to a dispute with the Bavarian Electric Company (BEW). The municipal government sided with Vitus, but nonetheless these events contributed to feelings of jealousy, not only in the rest of the Jewish community, but, more importantly, among the townspeople.

Even before the war, "The Firm" had used advertising. They now no longer limited themselves to the "Ochsenfurter Town and Country Messenger," but also utilized other local newspapers, such as the "Uffenheimer Weekly." In addition, they advertised in nation-wide industrial publications. This increased their geographical base of operations. The machine factory continued to expand until 1923, 25 years after its establishment, when it employed 106 workers. It operated virtually without competition. It supplied the town and the small communities over the neighboring 80 kilometers. Repair work was carried out for customers over about the next 20 kilometers. In addition, the firm maintained branch offices in Berlin and Hamburg for export of machines into communities near them. The equipment was further improved, its supply stream was modernized, and the entire structure of the undertaking was refined. The business was subdivided into various departments, which corresponded to the products. Thus, there was one division for rollers, one for cleaning mills, etc. There were a smithy and a carpentry shop. There was a master craftsman available for each of these areas. A foreman oversaw each department. The factory operated on a two-shift system, and the workers were not only from Gaukoenigshofen but were recruited also from the entire surrounding area as far away as Wuerttemberg and the Main valley. Some reached their workplace by railroad daily, and some lived in Gaukoenigshofen during the workweek. As a result, every available room in the town was rented out. All the townspeople profited from the machine factory, either as a source of their own employment or as a supplier of living facilities and food to the laborers. Neighborhood farmers supplemented their incomes by providing all the transportation of goods to and from the town railroad station with their teams of horses. "The Firm" played a major role in the economic welfare of the area.

"The Firm" did experience difficulties from time to time. In 1919, initially 40, and then eventually 60, of the total workforce of 80, went on strike, as a result of which an eight-hour workday was instituted. In 1922, the 48-hour workweek began. At about this time, market conditions for the agricultural machine industry worsened. While inflation caused a rise in almost all prices, those for agricultural goods and machines climbed slowly or stagnated. The purchasing power of the

products of the fields and of farm machinery declined, and the workers' salaries did likewise. The whole world was going through an economic crisis.

In 1928, Vitus bought ten railroad cars of cultivators from his American suppliers on credit and delivered them to customers in Bulgaria. This delivery, which had been arranged by an export firm in Hamburg, was never paid for. Vitus was now confronted with short-term debts for these goods and had to pay as much as 72% annual interest for loans from the bank in Ochsenfurt. He took out a promissory note for about 120,000 Mark, but the cash flow did not cover these debts, and "The Firm" was unable to survive. In mid-1930, Vitus emigrated to Brazil, and a year later, his wife and son followed him.

Four days after Vitus Weikersheimer left Gaukoenigshofen, the "Ochsenfurter Town and Country Gazette" reported: "The Machine-Manufacturing Establishment of Gaukoenigshofen that was established in 1898 (owners Ignaz and Vitus Weikersheimer) has stopped payments. The representatives of the firm, Attorneys Dr. G. Haas and Dr. Bruno Stern of Wuerzburg, reported that their clients have suffered great losses because of the generally poor economic circumstances. In addition, considerable losses have been experienced because of unpaid customer debts and high interest payments, which the firm has had to bear. Now the firm has no alternative except to stop paying its debts."

The two attorneys wanted to avoid bankruptcy, which by their accounting, under the best of circumstances, would have returned only 15% to the creditors. Instead they proposed a procedure which would not require going through the courts: Some of the mortgage holders would sharply reduce their mortgages, and none of the creditors would raise interest rates in the first year and would, in the next 4 years, settle for an interest rate equivalent to that of the Reichsbank discount rate. The three sons of the founders, Erwin, Kurt, and Ernst Weikersheimer, would take over the stock on hand and would assume approximately 20% of the debts for those goods. The creditors were urged to agree to this proposal "not only because the Weikersheimer sons, who were in no way responsible for the downfall of the firm or for the existing debts, now provide a means for continuing the business in the best interest of the creditors. In the event of rejection of this proposal, the establishment of a competitor is inevitable, and in that case, the creditors will not be able to count on any significant return on their investment." A meeting of the creditors was convened in the Wuerzburger Hotel on Nov. 4, 1939, for a consideration of the proposal. This meeting did not produce the desired results. On Nov. 10, one of the creditors, the Sueddeutschen Eisengesellschaft A.G. (Nuernberg) (*The South-German Railroad Association*) petitioned the district court to start bankruptcy proceedings, and the court did so on that day.

After Vitus' departure, Ignaz Weikersheimer, who reportedly had not been aware of the "The Firm's" precarious financial situation, remained behind in the

town and, by decree of the district court, was not allowed to leave. He was left "holding the bag."

In November 1930, Ignaz's son, Kurt, opened an entirely new machine dealership and repair shop, and 18 months later, acquired two more partners. He bought, for resale, about 2900 Marks' worth of merchandise from that made available by the bankruptcy of "The Firm." But, because of a vicious smear campaign launched by the Nazis against him and his brother, Erwin, in the local press (see below), they fled to Palestine. Thus, the era of the Weikersheimer machine factories in Gaukoenigshofen ended.

#### The Fifth Generation: Changes in the Lifestyles of the Jews and in their Relationships with the Christians

The other major family enterprise, "The Company," which provided meat to the German people, fared better during the periods of inflation and depression than did those businesses whose products were not as essential to human existence. It continued to grow into the late 1920's and early 1930's. Its head, Bernhard, was the most important figure in this generation of the Jewish community. Unlike his forebears, he was not involved much in community affairs because of business obligations and limitations of time.

As was common among many Jewish families, who prized learning and sophistication, all seven male Weikersheimers born between 1900 and 1909 left town at the end of three years of elementary school and attended secondary school in one of the cities, living in boarding houses. This generation came into contact with a cosmopolitan way early in life, and there began a process of detachment, not only from their Christian peers, most of whom did not get such schooling, but also from their own Jewish community.

The Jewish middle and upper classes led a different life style than did the farmers and the townspeople. The Jews lived in a cosmopolitan manner. Their clothes were stylish, and they owned jewelry. The homes of the Jewish upper class contained a "salon" instead of a "good room." They were decorated with oil paintings and statues, and the rooms were carpeted. They vacationed at spas, such as Bad Kissingen, or in Switzerland, Austria, or Italy. Of the 56 passports issued in Gaukoenigshofen between 1920 and 1933, 31 went to Jews and 25 to Christians and, of the latter, 5 were issued to cattle transporters, who were traveling as agents for the Jewish contractors. The Jewish inhabitants of Gaukoenigshofen often had guests in their homes. For this purpose, Bernhard Weikersheimer maintained a large wine cellar containing about 600 bottles. The Jews owned the first radios and record players in town. After the construction of the village water system in the 1920's, many of the Christians of Gaukoenigshofen envied the indoor bathroom facilities in most of the Jewish homes. Not even the richest Christian farmers had such facilities.

Jewish family structure was different than the Christian, particularly in regards to the role of women. Jewish wives were more highly respected by their husbands and were given more independence by them than was the case for their Christian counterparts. For example, the wives of the owners of "The Company" did not have a limited amount of household money doled out to them ahead of time but would, instead, get money, as needed, from the bookkeeper, without needing permission from their husbands. The Jewish women also tended to be given more authority. According to Jeggle, "The woman was silent at religious services, but she set the tone at home." With the exception of the poor lower class, all Jewish households employed maids for maintenance of their households.

Until the post-war period, the Jewish community of Gaukoenigshofen remained a very orthodox one, and many of the older traditions continued. All business activities had to be completed or interrupted before the setting of the sun on Friday evenings. All cattle cars belonging to "The Company" had to be unloaded by this time. However, some members of the fourth generation became less staunch adherents to Orthodoxy. Bernhard, in his travels, would eat non-kosher food and could not always return from his business travels on Fridays in time for the Sabbath. Kurt and Erwin would, on some Saturdays, drive a car for pure enjoyment or for visits to friends in Wuerzburg.

The hotels served as social centers for the Christian townspeople. Erwin and Kurt Weikersheimer would occasionally go there for gin rummy games, but the Jews usually tended to socialize amongst themselves in their homes or at the synagogue. Except to conduct business, the five partners of "The Company" rarely visited the hotels, but when Bernhard Weikersheimer did so, he was described by the townspeople as being "quite affable" and not prone to "turn down a slice of ham late in the evening."

The more affluent of the Jews were quite popular at the time of public holidays or the occasional community dances, for they were generous and would often buy rounds of beer for all. The press reported that the Jews "did not isolate themselves, but were instead part of the crowd and participated in everything." However, they did not celebrate in the same manner as the townspeople. "They did not stay as long and did not drink as much as the Christians." At public affairs, close contact between Jewish and Christian youths was rare, "although they would occasionally dance with each other."

Max Weikersheimer organized occasional gatherings of the younger Jews for dancing in one of the town's hotels until about 1924, when he ended his medical studies and set up a practice. The Christian town youths, as well as the sons of the poorer Jews, were usually excluded. "Young ladies, mostly from Ochsenfurt," attended.



### The Third Reich: The Exodus from Germany

Ignaz Weikersheimer remained Treasurer of the fire department until Hitler came into power. On Oct. 23, 1932, he wrote the minutes of a Board of Directors meeting for the last time, noting with satisfaction that Hindenburg had been re-elected President of the Weimar Republic. After that the man who had been the staunchest supporter of the fire department was no longer mentioned in its log, because he was a Jew. The names of all Jewish members of this department were now entered in its log with the appendage "Jude." But the Jewish members were not yet officially excluded from the fire department. They continued to go into action as usual in case of fire. The car belonging to "The Company" continued to serve as the conveyor of personnel. But, in May 1934, the insurer of the community refused to pay for damages that had been done to the car while it was being used to fight a fire in a neighboring town, claiming that the insurance policy covered only horse-drawn fire equipment. After 1935, the Jews were simply no longer notified of training exercises.

The Nazis pursued the doctrine of "righteous oppression." They passed laws that gradually deprived Jews of all their rights and isolated the Jews from the rest of the people. In 1935, the solicitor of Gaukoenigshofen issued an ordinance that stated, "1. The immigration of Jews into this town is forbidden. 2. The purchase of homes and real estate from Jews is forbidden. 3. Visitors to Jews have to report to the police within three days." Even donations from the Jews were no longer accepted. Before offers could be tendered to buy the bankrupt "Firm," which was now no longer in Jewish hands, the solicitor decreed "in order for such an offer to be accepted, the potential buyer has to be an Aryan."

The Nazi government, in its first few months of operation, brought about changes in the lives of the Jews that affected the Weikersheimer family deeply. Several members of the family left town permanently shortly after completing their education. Kurt and Erwin initially felt bound to the town because of their ties to the machine factory. Walter, Ignaz's third son, had already left Germany and arrived in New York in 1928 at age 19.

The "Frankische Volk" newspaper printed several inflammatory articles as part of a smear campaign aimed at the Weikersheimer family. The following article appeared on Sep. 4, 1933: "Clerk X. Y., (*Christian*) who comes from here, is an undignified young maiden. For years she has been carrying on an affair with the Jew Kurt Weikersheimer, who also lives here. The two of them walk arm-in-arm on the green, mostly in the evenings, without regard to their openness. She is alone with him in his house for hours at a time every day. Thus, he and she openly exhibit their impudence. Recently, in one of the pubs, he boasted that he is unable to manage without three or four lovers concurrently. His brother has already been jailed twice because of his love for 'Christian flesh.' With the exception of the Jews, all of Gaukoenigshofen is indignant over the activities of this pair. The cup is full and is about to overflow because of the pain being caused by them. It will not be

endured much longer!" On the occasion of an official passport review carried out by the district court in Ochsenfurt, the police commissioner wrote that Erwin Weikersheimer "was placed in custody for a few months in the spring of 1933 because he is known to have conquered a large number of Christian girls." One of the reasons given by the Gestapo for the incarceration of Erwin Weikersheimer was: "The Weikersheimer brothers have been recruited as Communists." Kurt and Erwin were the first Jews of the town that were forced to leave because of such harassment, fleeing to Paris and, from there, to Palestine. Kurt opened a machine repair shop in Jaffa, while Erwin drove a moving truck in Haifa. Gaukoenigshofen's machinery factories and repair shops, which had been the area's largest employers, had come to an end.

Despite the above events, severe panic did not yet spread among the Jews of Gaukoenigshofen. They believed that only the Protestants were aligned behind Hitler and that the Catholics, who constituted a majority in the town, would come to their senses and re-establish relationships with the Jews. They also felt bound to the Catholics through their common strong feelings of religiosity. They did not think they were going to lose their positions or professions and instead thought "life will continue in a normal fashion." It is possible that this interpretation of the situation by the Jews was partially justified, because the government sent them conflicting messages. For example, even as late as Oct. 1935, President Hindenburg awarded to Jewish World War veterans the Medal of Honor for Front-fighters. Josef Thalheimer, Julius Katz, Louis Kleeman, and Bernhard Weikersheimer were all awarded this medal. This despite the fact that it had been the law since April of that year that "those Jews who were killed in the war will no longer be memorialized." Furthermore, the Jews of Gaukoenigshofen were able to continue living fairly comfortably, since most were still able to support themselves in their businesses and since they found strong support within their intact religious community. Even the precipitous fall of the Weikersheimer brothers was not considered particularly alarming, because Kurt and Erwin Weikersheimer had strayed outside the bounds of the tenets of the orthodox Jewish town community. For example, their Saturday afternoon car-trips to Wuerzburg were frowned upon. Additionally, they had broken the unwritten law that a Jew never can enter into a formal business arrangement with a Christian townsman. By so doing, they had drawn the antipathy of both the Jews and the non-Jews.

In 1933, following the exodus of his own sons and of his brother and family, Ignaz applied for an exit permit for himself and his wife. His first request was turned down, and there was no response to several others. In 1935, in response to his application for emigration to "Palestine or America," the authorities indicated that this also was denied because the rules required the listing of only one, not two, specific designation. Thereupon, Ignaz designated Palestine as the destination for his emigration. However, the federal Finance Agency in Wuerzburg, in response to a Sep. 29, 1935, inquiry from the district court, reported that "Ignaz Weikersheimer and his wife have considerable unsettled dealings, partly in foreign countries," and this agency suggested that the court not issue a passport until these had been

worked out. The district court thereupon again denied Ignaz his request and set forth two prerequisites. Permission would be granted: "1. When you have freed yourself of your debts (including those in foreign countries), and 2. When you provide absolute proof that you will actually leave the country, including an entry permit from the destination country, verification of dissolution of your business from the agency handling this matter, and proof of the sale of your belongings." Having satisfied these requirements, exit permits were finally issued to Ignaz and his wife in 1939, and they left Germany almost immediately.

After 1933, especially toward the end of that decade, it should have become obvious, simply from the small events of everyday life, that the non-Jews would never again accept the Jews as equals. For the most part, the Protestants were now aligned with or members of the Nazi Party. The Catholic townsfolk remained passive onlookers while the Jews were being oppressed. The Catholics themselves took part personally in actions against the Jews on only a few occasions, including Kristalnacht. Neighborly assistance was given on only a few occasions, but otherwise the Catholics did not put themselves out for the Jews. However, even after all that had happened, many of the Jews were unable to accurately foresee what the future held in store for. Some even resisted attempts by the Nazis to force them to emigrate.

The Jewish children of the town were able to attend the local school in relative comfort only until 1936, after which they were forced to switch to a Jewish school in one of the cities. But even before 1936, times were difficult. The teacher, who also happened to be chairman of the local Nazi party, made unfavorable remarks about Jews and forced the Jewish children to sit separated from the others, just as had been the case in the previous century. The other students taunted the Jewish children with the epithet "stinking Jews." Only a few of the non-Jewish children would still talk to the Jews.

"The Company" continued to carry on business until the end of 1937, and Bernhard optimistically even bought himself a new Mercedes limousine for business use during that year. He was the oldest member of the fifth generation. It was not until the middle of 1938 that he sought his own exodus. His brother Max, who was a physician, had already left Germany in 1937. Bernhard was the only Weikersheimer still in Gaukoenigshofen on Pogrom-night, November 9, 1938.

On Pogrom-night, those Jews still remaining in town painfully discovered that there was no longer a future for them in Germany. A large mob of SA-troops and ordinary citizens plundered and destroyed the Jewish properties. In front of the "Company" office, they started a fire in which they burned the ark from the synagogue after two of the farmers' sons had already split it with axes. The offices of the company were destroyed. Some of the Jews, including Bernhard, were brutally beaten and taken to the jail in Ochsenfurt, where they were held in "protective custody." From there, they were taken to the concentration camp at Dachau, to be released a few weeks or months later, only after pledging to leave the country and to

dispose of their real estate holdings. After Pogrom-night, Jews were no longer allowed to carry on their businesses.

"The Company" was disbanded, the mayor was named trustee, and the facility was turned over to some of the townspeople. The Christian successors operated it, not as a wholesale business, but as a retail operation, much like it had started out. The business did not survive, and thus began the end of cattle dealing in Gaukoenigshofen. Only a year later, after having experienced additional persecution, including a period of internment in a concentration camp, Bernhard, with his mother, escaped to America by way of England. Two of his partners did likewise.

In July 1938, the Nazis passed a law, according to which all Jews had to carry an identification card, imprinted with the letter "J" inside and out and bearing the carrier's fingerprints. Thus, they were dealt with like criminals. In addition, all Jews had to add to their names the "Jewish first name" Sarah or Israel. Most of the Jewish townspeople by now realized what was in store for them and, with heavy heart, sought to emigrate. But those who were financially not well off and those who had no relatives abroad had difficulty finding a sponsor, which was a requisite for getting a visa. In July 1941, Heinrich Mainzer and his wife were the last Jews to leave Gaukoenigshofen. The two former partners in "The Company" who remained in town, Sigmund Krebs and Ferdinand Weil, still were unable to convince themselves to leave Germany, despite the fact that they had in hand exit passes for England. Two years later, they and their families were deported to the death camps and were murdered.

With a single exception, the Weikersheimer family was able to reach safe haven. At age 65, Meta Sichel, daughter of Jeremias Weikersheimer, was taken to Theresienstadt and died there. All the other members of the family escaped because of the efforts of those who had already done so. The latter became sponsors, enabling those remaining behind to obtain exit permits from Germany and entry visas into the United States, Palestine, or Brazil.