Ruth Weiss: a life dedicated to justice and peace

CHRISTINA STUCKY

The three girls put on their camera smiles for the newspaper photographer, cheeks glowing like polished red apples on the summer evening. They are pupils at the Ruth Weiss High School, named after the diminutive woman sitting beside them, who has just finished a two-hour talk. One of the girls is about 12, the same age Weiss was when she fled Nazi persecution to South Africa. In 1936, Ruth Weiss was a shy child. Last month, the author, journalist, and activist turned 95.

In 1936, the notion that a school in the southern German town of Aschaffenburg would one day be named after a Jewess would have been preposterous. The 11½-year-old could not have guessed that she would be meet people like Nelson Mandela, or become friends with Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer. She also could never have imagined that the apartheid government would bar her, and that she would contribute to bringing about the end of apartheid.

All that was unimaginable for a Jewish child in Germany in the 1930s. The department store founded by her uncle in Aschaffenburg was seized under Nazi “aryanisation” laws. Relatives were murdered, persecuted, or escaped in time. Among them her father, Richard Löwenthal, who fled to South Africa in 1933, after losing his job and following an invitation from relatives in Johannesburg. Her mother had a job, so she and Ruth stayed.

Three years later, the Nuremberg race laws were in force, and her father urged them to join him. They made it out just in time.

Between 1933 and 1936, about 6 000 refugees from Nazi Germany arrived in South Africa before the ruling National Party barred Jews from entering the country. “The Nazis at the time were pro-Hitler and close to Nazi ideology,” Ruth Weiss recalls. At first welcomed, the party eventually decided that Jews “had the right skin colour, but the wrong religion”.

Having attended a Jewish school in Fürth, and living there with her religious maternal grandparents during her last years in Germany, she grew up as a “conscious Jewess” in South Africa. “Partly because I had been made very aware of being one in the few Jews in Nazi Germany, partly because of the South African situation in the 30s and 40s. It was natural for me that my parents joined in South Africa. Many of her public talks included the children’s book My Sister Sara, set in South Africa. Many of her public talks return to the roots of her activism. Audiences often ask her about Nazi Germany or her thoughts as a Jewess about anti-Semitism in Germany. “The old prejudice against and lies about Jews, nurtured during centuries and engulfed to the extremes in the 30s, have never gone away. An old man said to me at a lecture, ‘They filled our heads with certain notions that are impossible to get rid of.” That the Aschaffenburg school carries her name has less to do with her than with Germany’s history, she asserts. “It’s an honour for me, but I know my name was chosen as a symbol of something that no longer exists. It’s a reminder of the once-thriving Jewish community that was completely eradicated.”

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Today this nonagenarian uses her formidable memory and myriad experiences to speak out against prejudice. She has written 35 books and 46 unpublished manuscripts, including the children’s book My Sister Sara, set in South Africa. Many of her public talks return to the roots of her activism. Audiences often ask her about Nazi Germany or her thoughts as a Jewess about anti-Semitism in Germany. “The old prejudice against and lies about Jews, nurtured during centuries and engulfed to the extremes in the 30s, have never gone away. An old man said to me at a lecture, ‘They filled our heads with certain notions that are impossible to get rid of.” That the Aschaffenburg school carries her name has less to do with her than with Germany’s history, she asserts. “It’s an honour for me, but I know my name was chosen as a symbol of something that no longer exists. It’s a reminder of the once-thriving Jewish community that was completely eradicated.”

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