

My Affair with Rheda

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No, Rheda is not a woman. She is a rural town in Westphalia, Germany. My capricious affair with her began at birth and has not ended even now, although I left her forty years ago.

How so at birth? On the day I was born, May 30, 1915, a contingent of British POW's was brought into Rheda. This was seen as an omen that the war would soon be over and that *unsere Krieger* (our warriors) would be home for Christmas. For years I was nicknamed *der kleine Engländer* (the little Englishman).

How so even now? Because there are connections and commitments that require my continued attention, that necessitate correspondence and even an occasional visit to Rheda. In fact, I am to be engaged with Rheda affairs for years to come.

A Jewish childhood such as mine, so harmoniously spent in a German milieu, without the slightest wish or compulsion to assimilate, was possible only in small towns. Rheda then had five thousand inhabitants, one church and school for its Catholics, the same for its Protestants, and also a Synagogue and school for its Jews. There was no separation of church and state and nobody missed it.

It is true that there were two or three *resho'im* (evil-doers) in town (in our Judeo-German *roshe* and its derivative, *rishes*, referred to anti-Semitism in particular rather than to evil-doers and evil in general). They would shout invectives at me and the other Jewish youngsters, *Stinkjude* (smelly Jew) being their favorite. But I saw this in the light of the intolerance of each of the three reli-

gions against the other two, which was mostly verbalized on the children's level. Some of my Catholic and Protestant contemporaries called each other considerably worse names and told weird stories about their comrades' religious beliefs and practices.

Within my group of friends my Jewishness was a matter of course, mixed with some curiosity which abated after they had tasted matza, a gift which my mother had sent to our Christian neighbors in exchange for their Easter eggs; it abated even further after I explained to their satisfaction why Hebrew was read the wrong way and people wore hats in our church. On Chanukah my best friends also received a *Teller voll*, the Rheda term for nuts, apples, and home-baked cookies arranged on a plate. I, in turn, enjoyed exactly the same delicacies under the Christmas trees in my friends' homes. Further parallels, such as fasting on Yom Kippur and Lentenfast (though I considered the Jewish idea of fasting superior), decorating the Synagogue with young birch trees on Shavuot and the Catholic church on Pentecost, our Lulav and their palm branch, allowed us to see more common than separating features in our respective religions. Each one of us must have considered his religion just superior enough to judge the other two with magnanimity and benevolence.

The first mild case of estrangement between Rheda and me occurred when, after completing four of the eight grades of grammar school, I went on to high-school in the city of Bielefeld. High-school began with Grade Five, and Rheda had no high-school. This meant commuting to school by train and spending the majority of the day in the big city. This time factor was one of the reasons that Rheda began to lose some of its hold on me; the second was the formation of a new circle of friends in Bielefeld; and the third, a beginning awareness of the social gap between most of my Rheda friends and young children like me who learned foreign languages and took piano lessons.

The second phase of drifting apart from my Rheda friends set in when many of them became apprentices after finishing their eight years of grammar school and were busy all day. However, it did not really mean a break. We still spent evenings and weekends together, and the one overriding concern of the next few years—the topic of girls—was distributed equally between my Bielefeld and Rheda circles.



Courtesy of Werner Weinberg

The Rheda Synagogue and
Jewish school in 1930

It was not really the advent of Nazism that estranged me from Rheda. Together my friends and I looked at the flags and uniforms, listened to the songs, slogans and threats, witnessed the initial acts of violence as something utterly alien to the spirit of Rheda. No, my estrangement came about when I had left both Rheda and Bielefeld after the *Abitur* (graduation from high-school) and continued my studies at the Hebrew Teachers Seminary in Würzburg, from which I graduated in 1936.

There were enough job openings for my graduating class because Jewish children had to leave Christian schools and because Jewish teachers were beginning to emigrate. One of these openings was in Rheda. I shall not try to analyze this, but I was the only one of the twenty-six graduates of my class who accepted a position in his home town.

Thus I became *jüdischer Lehrer*—an officer which encompassed rabbinical, cantorial and educational functions—at the synagogue where my forefathers had worshipped and at the school where several of the children were my relatives. Three things had changed my attitude to Rheda as I returned to it: I had become a committed and reasonably knowledgeable Jew; together with the teachers and clergy of the Christian schools and churches I found myself in the class of notables; and the Nazi grip on Rheda had tightened, as it had on the rest of Germany.

The Rheda Nazis were basically our old *resho'im*, augmented by a strange coalition of the scions of arch-conservative families, a few renegade communists and—the low-lives of the town. Together they amounted to no more than a few dozen, but they were backed by a mighty power; they were unconstrained, and the streets belonged to them.

In 1936 some stalwarts of the old order had not yet caved in to Nazi terror and Nazi mentality. Among socialists and Catholics, among clergymen, teachers, police officers (Rheda had three), town and county officials, merchants and professionals there were still what we called *anständige Leut'* (decent people) which, in context, means the opposite of *resho'im*. These people were not so much resisters (though some of them were), but they lived under the illusion that, even in a totalitarian political situation, they could preserve respectability in private and civil life.

The total destruction of this vestigial decency occurred only af-

terwards. The "unreliables" among the Christians were boycotted, terrorized, and some were taken to concentration camps. Jews could no longer expect protection from the police or from the mayor, and even though some of my old friends were still around and *anständig*, I made it a point of not becoming an embarrassment and danger to them.

I turned entirely to my task of ministering to the dwindling congregation, trying to numb myself to the hostility around us. I continued holding services in the Synagogue after its stained glass windows had been broken; I walked to synagogue and school in spite of flying stones and toughs who pushed me from the sidewalk. At night the Nazis sang blood-curdling songs in front of our house, banging on the window shutters and shouting obscenities in chorus. When they were drunk enough, they would force their way into a Jewish house, drag out the inhabitants, push them around and harass them, chase them through the streets, into the woods and into the shallow river. The Nuremberg laws saved our women from rape.

Late one night I returned by train from a place where I had conducted a Purim service. In my briefcase I carried the Esther-scroll and a small one-volume *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (code of Jewish laws). The station was empty, except for two of the most violent Nazis who had been waiting for me. I started running, but they caught up with me and beat me unconscious. Later, I was summoned to the town hall, where my briefcase was returned to me. Its contents were entered on the receipt:

Antike Pergamentrolle 1
Hebräischer Talmud 1

I signed the receipt.

The Jews of Rheda could no longer earn a livelihood. By 1937 half of them had left town. Some could save themselves by emigrating; others moved to larger cities in Germany, where the terror was less personalized. As for myself, I accepted a position at the Jewish school of Hannover, which was still quite large. On weekends I commuted to Rheda.

November 10, 1938, *Kristallnacht*, found me in Hannover. Having escaped that horror personally unharmed, I was naive enough to telephone Rheda, announcing that there would be services as usual the coming Friday night and Shabbat, and school for the

children on Sunday. I learned that there was no more synagogue, no more congregation, no more school. All Jewish men had been taken away; my name had topped the list.

I did not return to Rheda until 27 years later.

Our wedding in December, 1938, took place in Hannover under a half-burned *chuppah* and all preparations for our emigration were made there. When we went to Holland in March, 1939, my belongings were packed in Rheda and shipped from there. When I opened a wooden crate I found in it, among my books, a Torah Scroll that had been saved from the destruction. By coincidence it was a scroll which my great-grandfather had donated to the Rheda Synagogue. The names of the donor, his wife, as well as the scribe, and the date—1845—were inscribed on the scroll.

My last connection with Rheda was broken when all attempts failed to get my mother out to join us in Holland. She moved to the large city of Cologne and was deported from there. We in Holland had a one-year breathing spell, then the Germans invaded the country. We hid our baby daughter with Dutch Christians who were willing to take the awesome risk. Neighbors kept some of our books, valuables, and furniture. As for the Torah Scroll, we managed to get it to one of the Amsterdam synagogues that had been declared a national monument.

Then came the five darkest years: hiding in barns and hay stacks, raids on Jews in Amsterdam, and finally capture and concentration camps. Rheda was as far from my mind as was anything belonging to my former life. One thing only mattered: still being alive tomorrow.

I mentioned that I did not see Rheda for 27 years after the *Kristallnacht*. That is true, but not entirely. There was an encounter shortly after the war's end. We had been liberated by the Russian army while on transport from Bergen-Belsen to an unknown destination in the East. Because of a typhus epidemic among us, the Russians had kept us quarantined, but eventually we were put on a train back to Holland. I realized that—as the crow flies and the railroad lines ran—we would pass through Rheda, and I braced myself against an onslaught of emotions that came from depths I could not fathom.

The train did pass through Rheda and, to add to my perplexity, it stopped there. Perhaps the engine had to take in water or coal.

People of our transport started to venture out on the platform. Suddenly a familiar sound wafted through the window into the train. It was Saturday evening, and the bells of both churches were ringing to announce the Christian Sabbath. Being an ardent Goethe lover, like most German Jews, I could only think of the line, when, after the night's despair, the peeling Easter bells make Faust remove the cup of poison from his lips: "My tears gush forth, the Earth takes back her child."

I stepped out onto the platform and caught a glimpse of the red roof of my father's house between the chestnut trees. Almost immediately a uniformed man rushed toward me, and my heart skipped a beat. But it was only the station master, and he exclaimed, "Is it you?—Mensch, Werner, are you back?" It was a former classmate of mine, one of the *anständige*. The address *Mensch* was in Rheda dialect an expression of great emotion. "You can be anything you want in Rheda," he went on, "even mayor!" I shook my head: "Auf Wiedersehn, Rudolf, I must move on." Then the whistle of our locomotive blew.

In Holland our little family was reunited. Susie, now four years old, was well adjusted. The possessions we had given into our neighbors' care were returned. Later I also received back the Torah Scroll which had been on an Odyssey as amazing as our own.

It took three more years after the war until we could emigrate to the United States. There we moved five times in pursuit of better jobs and academic degrees. The Torah from Rheda moved with us. In 1959 I received a fellowship from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, two years later my appointment to its faculty.

For a long time after the war German Jews would not think of stepping onto German soil although a new generation of Germans was trying to make amends. The land was anathema and off limits. But after ten or fifteen years, time had performed its patient, ant-like work of gnawing bit by bit at memories, reality and truth. Nothing had changed, but by 1960 German Jews began to visit Germany. The reason most often given was that they wanted to look after the graves of family and friends.

As life around us became secure, even pleasant, as normal pursuits became once again our happy lot, I found myself occasionally musing about Rheda. Childhood and family scenes would well up

in my memory, and Rheda assumed an ever more prominent place in my dreams. One dream especially kept coming back: I was in Rheda, amazed at how precisely I remembered every detail. Suddenly it dawned on me, in my dream, that I was not dreaming at all, but that I was actually in Rheda.

Curiosity about the town and some of its people plagued me. I heard that Rheda had grown to over 20,000 people in the post-war boom. That was hard to imagine. I would have liked to know which of my boyhood friends had survived the war. And I tried to imagine the expression on the faces of certain townspeople, good ones and bad ones, when they saw that I was alive. Slowly, the curiosity became mixed with longing, unrecognized at first, then suppressed, but eventually unfolding into a full-blown case of homesickness.

Because it was so utterly irrational, I fought it quite successfully. Even when I learned that our former loyal housekeeper-nurse-maid-salesgirl, Anna, was still alive in Rheda. I wrote to this beloved person, but I did not consider visiting her.

But when the University of Münster expressed an interest in publishing my study on the language of German Jews and invited me in 1965 to use Münster as a home base from which to interview Jewish old-timers, I felt that I had to accept in the interest of scholarship (even though I had interviewed a sufficient number of old-timers in the U.S. and in Israel).

Thus I would spend the summer in Münster. And since Münster is only an hour's drive from Rheda, I decided to use that opportunity to have the tombstone on my father's grave replaced, for I had heard that it was missing. This idea, quite of its own accord, spawned three or four follow-up ideas: to include on the stone the names of my mother and my oldest sister, victims of the Holocaust; to organize a meeting of the three surviving siblings at the unveiling of the new stone; to expand this occasion into a wider memorial service, the first Jewish worship meeting in Rheda since 1938, and to gather for this purpose all survivors and returnees from the neighboring places.

Once in Münster I avoided taking the short train trip to Rheda, even though the Hebrew lettering on the new stone made meetings with the stonemason in Rheda almost imperative. But one day a member of the tiny new Jewish congregation of Münster invited

me on short notice to accompany him on an automobile trip to Rheda, where he had to conduct some business. Caught off guard, I agreed.

As we approached Rheda, each tree and house, each field and meadow were uncannily familiar. It was the reverse of that dream: this could not be reality; I was having a dream! When we passed the country road that leads to the Jewish cemetery, I asked my acquaintance to be let out there; he could pick me up on his way home.

The cemetery was in reasonably good shape. The wall needed repair, weeds and fallen branches had not been cleared recently. Yet there were also signs of maintenance, apparently provided at irregular intervals by the city, at the request of Jewish visitors to the cemetery. I found my father's grave without the stone. He had died in 1934, and I remembered how my predecessor in the Rheda pulpit had formulated the thought that was to become the refrain in all the eulogies I delivered in the following years: thank God that the departed died a natural death and was being interred in sacred ground with a quorum for the *kaddish*—because nobody could say what was in store for us, the living.

I could not concentrate on prayer or meditation. I was restless, conscious of the proximity of the town, scolding myself for my cowardice in avoiding the confrontation with it. When my traveling companion returned, he again took me by surprise, announcing that he had some time left for a drive around the town. I could only nod.

The nucleus of Rheda, then as now, can be circumnavigated by car in five minutes. My parents' house stands along that route. The place of the synagogue is outside the nucleus and requires another five minutes. The Münster businessman was not the sentimental type. He whisked by my parents' home and did not stop at the synagogue lot. I just had time enough to see that it had been added to the neighbor's vegetable garden. For me this tourist approach to Rheda meant a severe strain. I was glad when we turned back onto the highway.

At that moment the wish became unequivocal in me to spend a few hours in Rheda, soon and by myself, with no other purpose than walking slowly and unnoticed through its streets. Yet when I carried out that plan a few weeks later, I had added structure and

purpose to it: going over the inscription with the stonecutter and visiting Anna. Only after I had attended to this task did I start my walk. I recognized a number of people, but I did not make myself known. I remember that I was secretly enjoying a feeling of superiority, as though I had achieved that cabalistic aspiration of "seeing without being seen." I leaned dreamily against the fence of a certain vegetable garden, and I watched the house of my birth and childhood from a safe distance. Many of my acquaintances who had revisited their hometowns, on coming back, described how they had talked to the new inhabitants of their former home and how the present owners had given them a tour of the house. Such an idea was abhorrent to me. I returned to Münster on the same slow train on which our whole family, in the 1920's, had traveled on Sunday afternoons, journeying to a garden café for cake and lemonade.

The unveiling of the new tombstone, which took place on August 11, 1965, was a remarkable event. A fairly large number of Jews had come together from as far as Holland and, of course, my sisters from England and Israel were present. As part of the service, I translated a section of the Union Prayer Book, the lines about the Holocaust victims whose "resting places in far-off forests and lonely fields are lost to the eyes of revering kin." Every person in that gathering must have felt the weight of history resting upon him or her. For me it was as though time had stood still, and I was only now performing the last act of my ministry in Rheda. The event had not been publicized. Only one non-Jew was present, the stonecutter who accepted his well-deserved compliments after the service. Strangely, this memorial service gave me the strength to visit Bergen-Belsen, the place where my wife and I had suffered so.

Four years later, in 1969, the Institutum Judaicum at the University of Münster invited me to lecture. This time the side trip to Rheda was already taken for granted. Also, my program there was established: the cemetery, old Anna, passing by the house and standing still at the synagogue plot. However, a significant item was added: my wife and I stayed overnight in Rheda. We slept in the elegant old hotel, which I had never seen from the inside in all my years in Rheda. This was the fourth visit, and I still remained incognito.

Summer, 1973: On our way to the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem we stopped "in Europe," a routine which by now included as a matter of course England, Holland, Münster, Rheda and Bergen-Belsen. The elegant old hotel in Rheda had closed for good, but the other hotel had been modernized and we checked in. The owner recognized my name, and then me. On our stroll I noticed a new store front with a large sign. I told my wife that this man had belonged to my old gang. The family had been devout Catholics, and my friend's older brother had perished in a concentration camp.

There ensued a short discussion: should I enter or not? It was at that moment that I abandoned my anonymity. I went into the store, and my friend and I embraced joyfully. That evening he brought a group of companions to the hotel. The theme of the conversation was "*Mensch, Werner!*" Yet I remained constrained; I did not know all of them well enough to exonerate them in my heart of the great guilt. The evening was sobering. We had planned to stay a few days, but we left Rheda the next morning.

In the course of festivities for the Hebrew Union College Centennial, in an unforgettable ceremony on October 13, 1975, I presented the Rheda Torah to the Chapel of the Cincinnati Campus. In 1976, my booklet, *Tale of a Torah Scroll*, came out, in which I described not only the remarkable story of this scroll but outlined the history and the fate of the congregation to which it had belonged. In preparing the historical part of the booklet I had turned to the city archives of Rheda for assistance, and in recognition of their cooperation I sent them a copy of the booklet.

There then followed an interesting chain of events.

First, I received newspaper clippings about the American professor (myself) who had saved a precious Rheda Torah and bore his home town no grudge. Next, an English teacher at the Rheda *Gymnasium* (my God, there was now a high-school in Rheda!) asked for copies in order to read the booklet with his class. Then the city manager (Rheda even had a manager now!) asked for permission to have the booklet translated into German and published by the city. This was followed by an invitation from the Director of the *Gymnasium* to address the students about the Holocaust from a local point of view.

I was overwhelmed by all this, but most of all by the fact that the name of the new Rheda high-school turned out to be the *Albert Einstein Gymnasium*.

There was a great soul-searching at the Weinberg residence in Cincinnati. Should I accept the invitation? Could I talk effectively to this new German youth? But most important: could I stand the stress of being in Rheda, unprotected by invisibility and anonymity but, on the contrary, in the very limelight of publicity? I weighed all the answers. I would probably still be weighing them (was it a *mitzvah* or a lack of principles, was it an act of courage or one of personal aggrandizement?) if events had not taken the decision out of my hands. It was the routine, the established cycle that made the decision for me. The summer of 1977 signified the next Jerusalem Congress, which, in turn, suggested the prescribed route: England, Holland, Münster, Rheda. . . .

However, I would not be at their beck and call. I had my price. And so I wrote to the city manager that I could in good conscience accept the invitation only if the city erected a memorial on the place where the synagogue had once stood, thereby removing the offense of the vegetable garden. This the city had been considering anyway, and the gentleman answered affirmatively; they were also planning a new wall around the cemetery. He went on to state further in his letter that the students were eagerly looking forward to meeting me; that the English teacher needed to discuss his translation of the Torah story; and that a conference at City Hall was scheduled followed by coffee and cake to be served by the city manager's wife.

Seldom in my life have I ever felt so elated as during my presentation and the question-and-answer period in the great hall of the Albert Einstein Gymnasium. Five hundred young Germans—no, *Rheda* youngsters, as I had once been—were listening in rapt attention and then opening up with questions, the quality and urgency of which proved that this was indeed a new generation—free, bright, involved and untainted to such an extent that they knew Albert Einstein only as a German scientist who had resisted the Nazis. When I revealed the news of his Jewishness, it did not add or detract anything from their idea about the man after whom their school was named.

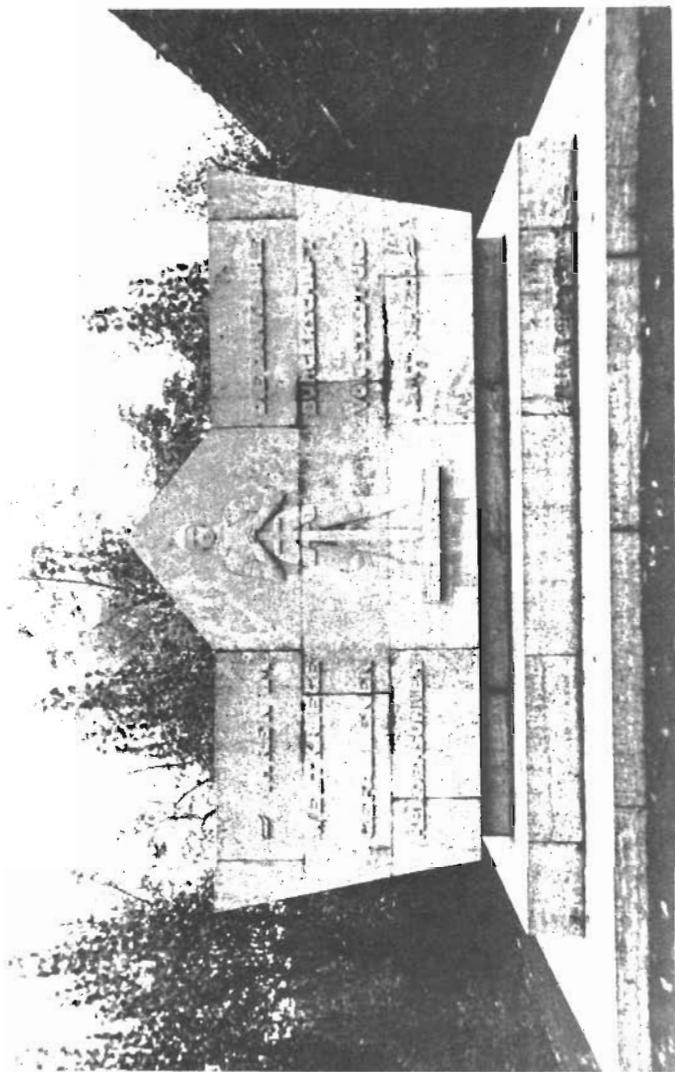
During the question-and-answer period a young Protestant minister, a teacher of religion at the school, asked whether the Rheda clergy had not assisted the Jews in their plight. I felt sorry for him when I had to answer that the Catholic priest had occasionally, and only in private, expressed sympathy for his Jewish neighbors but that the Protestant minister had remained aloof and that we had considered him a *roshe*.

The day after my talk at the Einstein Gymnasium I was called to Anna's deathbed. Her last smile was for me. We stayed for the funeral and I gave a eulogy in which I alluded to the Hebrew origin of her name: bestowed with grace. All things considered, I decided that my sixth visit to Rheda had indeed been a *mitzvah*.

The Jewish cemetery had a brand new wall. The graves and paths were well groomed. What was needed now, I thought, was an inventory of all tombstones, cleaning the inscriptions and photographing them for a book, a *pinkas* of the *Kehillah Kedoshah* [Holy Community of] Rheda—a historical mission that would take weeks. A monument with plaque for the synagogue, in a dignified setting, was promised in a major city renewal project, two or three years hence.

A seventh visit was now inevitable: I had to be there for the dedication of the synagogue marker. For this occasion I would try to reach all Rheda Jews still alive in the countries of their emigration.

An unexpected correspondence developed with the young clergyman who had asked that conscience-laden question about his colleagues of a generation ago. Once I mentioned to him the matter of the inventory of tombstones in the Jewish cemetery, and he decided to make this a project for the combined Protestant and Catholic confirmation classes: getting official land registry maps of the cemetery, entering on them every grave and devising a numbering system, cleaning the tombstones and photographing them. After a few months I received a package with professionally drawn plans and hundreds of photographs. I was awed, especially about one result of my initiative: Protestant and Catholic youth working closely together; that would not have been possible in my youth. At the same time, I felt a trace of resentment: my excuse for a two- or even three-week stay in Rheda on that "historical mission" had been preempted.



The Rheda war-memorial
by a Jewish sculptor

Courtesy of Werner Weinberg

In the summer of 1978, this same minister wrote me about elaborate plans for a whole series of events to memorialize the 40th anniversary of the *Kristallnacht* of November 10, 1938. He asked me to write an eyewitness report for the local press. I complied, ending the essay with a plea for a picture of the synagogue "before, during or after the burning," for there was no picture, not even in the city archives. I did receive pictures from three different readers. They all stemmed from the same photograph, showing the synagogue and the schoolhouse. One man, however, sent me a whole album with sights of Rheda taken in 1930: the medieval castle, the city hall, railroad station and post office, the Catholic and Protestant churches, schools and hospitals, and the synagogue. The man wrote that he wanted me to see the picture in context; there had been a time when the synagogue was counted among the important sights in Rheda, just as the Jews had been considered respected citizens. Well, I knew this. Nevertheless I appreciated the gesture.

In the album there were also photographs of the two *Kriegerdenkmals*, war memorials. The "old" one erected in the 1870's and memorializing summarily the fallen of three wars: the Dano-Prussian war of 1864, the Austro-Prussian one of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian one of 1870-71. The "new" monument had only been a few years old in 1930; it memorialized the fallen of World War I, and it was the work of a Rheda Jewish sculptor not unknown in Germany, Wolfgang Meyer-Michael. This monument had been hauled away. The Nazis had been saying all along that Meyer-Michael had devilishly designed it to present half a Star of David. At my last visit I had asked the city archivist what had actually happened to the new *Kriegerdenkmal*. He answered that he had unsuccessfully traced rumors which maintained that it had been hidden away or buried somewhere.

I shall soon return to my affair with Rheda once more. I must trace the inscriptions on some of the tombstones that are illegible on the photographs; I must find a sponsor and a publisher for the *pinkas* of the Jewish cemetery; I must confer with the authorities about the landscaping for and the inscription on the marker of the synagogue. Really, I ought to press for a serious search after the "new" *Kriegerdenkmal*; I ought to initiate a movement to have it

returned to its place quite near the synagogue . . . in fact, it could be reerected *on* the place of the synagogue . . . it could be combined with the memorial for the synagogue . . . the *Kriegerdenkmal*, created by a Rheda Jewish artist could itself be the memorial . . . the respected Jewish citizens who had been martyred could be inscribed on it . . . perhaps . . . really, there is still so much for me to do in Rheda! My affair with her continues.

The American Jewish Archives announces the addition of a new poster to its multicolor series on the American Jewish experience. The poster is the latest addition to the set on American Jewish philanthropists.

The subject of the poster is Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932), the head of Sears, Roebuck and Company and a philanthropic giant of his time, who donated over \$63 million dollars to charitable causes, the most important being the education of Black children and young adults in the South.

The above poster as well as the first two in this set, on Jacob H. Schiff and Judah Touro, are available without charge for display by all schools, libraries, congregations and organizations interested in American Jewish history. Requests from these groups must be made on official stationery bearing the organization's name and address. Individuals may request these posters at the cost of \$3.00 each.

Inquiries concerning the entire poster series should be addressed to Ms. Wanda Reis, American Jewish Archives, 3101 Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.