

“Commemorative Book for the Jews of Karlsruhe”

Josef Altmann

From the photo album  
(Picture)

Josef Altmann, 1939, portrait for a passport application to Australia.

Personal Data

Josef Altmann

Surname:	Altmann
First Name:	Josef
Date of Birth:	6 <sup>th</sup> April 1891
Place of Birth:	Karlsruhe (Germany)
Family Status:	Married
Parents:	Maier (1853 –23.2. 1932) and Mina A.
Family Relationship:	Husband of Jenny A.; Father of Margot

Address:	10, Zirkel (Circle) 1931 –1935: 18a, Adlerstrasse 1935 – 1938: 16, Waldhornstrasse 1939: 31, Kriegstrasse
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School/Education:	Heimholtz High School (Karlsruhe), (?)
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Profession:	Businessman, liquor merchant (Partner in the wine-store Maier Altmann, General Partnership, Zirkel 10)
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Deportation:	10.11. – 2.12.1938 Dachau (Germany) 22.10.1940 to Gurs (France) 11.3.1941 to Rivesaltes (France) 31.8.1942 from Drancy to Auschwitz (Poland)
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Place of Death:	Auschwitz (Poland), missing
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Biography

(see also in addition to Josef and Jenny Altmann, the biography of other Altmann family members.)

Josef and Jenny Altmann

“I am left all alone,”

...says Margot Altmann, the only survivor of a large Jewish family of merchants, in a report from 1948.

Within the framework of an end-of-year school project, we, four pupils in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade of the Karlsruhe-Neureut Grammar School, are occupied with the history of this family. Animated by literature about National-Socialism in our German lessons and a report in the BNN, we wanted to know more exactly what became of the Jews who had lived in Karlsruhe. We were offered the possibility of researching more exactly a family from Karlsruhe in the town archives. The archive material in the town archives and in the general regional archives was put at our disposal.

“We would like you to remember us every day. We shall never see each other again! Stay observant. We are traveling a long way away.”

These sentences are the last signs of life that Margot, who was eight years old in 1942, ever received in a letter from her parents, Jenny and Josef Altmann.

The beginning of the Altmann family in Karlsruhe goes back to the year 1877, when the 24 year old merchant, Maier Altmann, purchased a house in Circle 10 and established a wine and liquor store there. He succeeded quickly in establishing himself and building up a network of clients mainly throughout Germany and supplying both Jewish and non-Jewish wine shops, restaurants and facilities. For this purpose it was also necessary to travel extensively, which he presumably partly undertook himself in the early years, and later his sons Josef and Jakob helped him in this. Perhaps he got to know his future wife through these extensive contacts? However, we don't exactly know this. In any case, Maier married the two-years-younger Mina Eldod, who was originally from Fürth, in Karlsruhe in 1886. It was certainly a great joy for the family, when in 1891 the first son, Josef, was born, with Jakob following seven years later. Josef, like his brother, grew up in a deeply religious family. His parents, Maier and Mina belonged to the Orthodox Jewish community in the town, which had its synagogue and community center at 16 Karl-Friedrich-Street. The father, Maier, played an outstanding role in the life of the community where he was chairman of the Jewish Religious Society of the Orthodox Jewish Community in Karlsruhe from

1911 to 1931. Connected to this was his keen activity in different Jewish charity organizations. Mina Altmann was also involved in an outstanding way in Jewish social services for women.

Maier and Mina strived for a high level of education for their sons. While Jakob finished the 12<sup>th</sup> grade of Grammar School, Josef attended High School. However, both of them were to take over their father's business by stepping early into the business. After the father's death in 1932, Josef and Jakob continued the wine and spirits company as joint owners under the well-established name: Maier Altmann, General Partnership.

While after his marriage and the establishment of his own family with six children, Jakob continued living in his parents' house, occupying the floor of his parents, who moved into the top floor, Josef moved out after his marriage to Jenny Spitz in 1929. Jenny was the daughter of Dr. Josef and Minna Spitz, born Eichenberg, from Gallingen. How the two of them got to know each other is not understandable. Was it perhaps during one of Josef's visits to a customer, or was the acquaintance made via the parents who were members of the "Friedrichsheim Gallingen" society? Josef and Jenny set up home in the immediate vicinity of the business in No. 18a Adlerstrasse, where they lived until 1935. A year before, their only daughter, Margot, was born, and the family moved to a home at 16 Waldhornstrasse, later at 31 Kriegstrasse. It happened that Josef and Jenny were married when they were relatively advanced in years (Josef was 38 and Jenny was 33 years old) and when Margot was born they were already 43 and 37 years old respectively. Josef does not seem to have been as socially or religiously active as his father and his younger brother, Jakob, since he was not involved in any Jewish charity organisations, while Jakob was active in the Orthodox Jewish Kindergarden organisation and in the numerically very small Dover Tov?? (an orthodox organisation for religious contracts and the support of needy Jews. When in 1937 the family house in the Circle was expropriated, the mother, Mina, lived with her son Jakob's family before she died in 1939.

With the coming to power of the National Socialists the Altmann wine business had suffered a major business collapse. They were not able to keep up the high profits which they had enjoyed until 1933 through the supply of Jewish facilities with kosher wine only. The living standards of the family fell quickly, yet the all-time low had not yet been reached: in 1937 the family lost the business and the house in Circle 10 through arianisation. The regional tax authorities had laid claim to the property, along with neighboring properties, on which was to be built the extension

to the Baden finance ministry. During the night of the Reich's Pogrom on 9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> November 1938 Josef and Jakob, along with most of the Jewish men, were arrested and deported for two weeks to the Dachau concentration camp. "Two weeks later uncle and father arrived, unshaven, with stubble. I didn't have a good feeling! I was four years old," Margot reports, speaking about this later. The family understood that life would not be possible or bearable any more in Germany. "I remember that one day I came home and father was standing there and had broken all the glass and porcelain. He had thrown everything onto the floor and broken it and he was stepping on the shards", Margot relates concerning the time when the family were in despair and no longer saw a future for themselves. That is why immediately at the beginning of 1939 they applied to travel to Australia. It was above all Jenny who wanted emphatically to travel there, as her involvement in the matter shows. Why to this distant continent and not as was the case with many other Jewish families to Great Britain or the U.S.A. we are not able to clarify, since no explanation is apparent. It never got to the point of emigration. Even if the files give no hint, why it never got as far as departure, the reason may well be that the time was always delayed because the quota for people traveling to Australia was limited.

During this difficult time the family came back closer and closer together in terms of space. Margot Altmann remembers later concerning this time when her family and that of her uncle and aunt, Jakob and Ruth Deborah, with their six children Bella, Benjamin, Maier, Meta, Paula and Sara lived in the end in the same house at 35 Adlerstrasse: "My uncle and aunt's family lived also in our house. They had six children. Out of the whole family, ten people in all, only I remained!"

The 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1940 caught the family unexpectedly, like everyone else. "On the last but one day of Succot there was a knock at our door, policemen came and informed us that we had to be ready to leave from the train station in one hour. Each one had to decide what he could take in his hand. We traveled for days and nights through bombarded France; it was the first year of the war. It was terrible! In the end we came to a camp in the Pyrenees in Southern France."

There, in the Gurs Camp, the family was separated. Josef Altmann had to go to the men's barracks while Margot with her mother, Jenny, went to one of the women's barracks. In addition to the unbearable living conditions was added the worry about relatives, who one could no longer see, and, in addition, Margot became very ill with dysentery. In March 1941 the family was transferred from Gurs to the Riversaltes Camp.

During this time Jenny's detention camp number is still known: 5196. Presumably Jenny and Josef no longer cherished any hope that fortune could grant them the opportunity of traveling and they set everything upon getting Margot out of the camp at least. This was to succeed with the help of a Jewish, French relief organisation. "Every day we walked around the camp during our walk", Margot describes later. "One day it was explained to me that mother was not coming on that day's walk because she didn't feel well. I didn't think anything of this and went alone with father. During this walk we came to the train station. Then came my uncle, holding a small packet in his hand which he gave to me, explaining: "You are going to travel now to a children's home!" I was put onto a train. From then on, I was alone...

Apparently, mother could not bear this farewell, therefore she did not say goodbye to me. Father said goodbye with a kiss. Since then I never saw my parents again!"

Josef and Jenny Altmann were deported on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1942 from Paris-Drancy to Auschwitz. It seems that on arrival Josef was selected as not being capable of work and was immediately taken to the gas chambers. For Jenny Altmann her date of death was listed as 15<sup>th</sup> September 1942.

Margot was brought by helpers to safety in Switzerland from otherwise certain murder in Auschwitz, and at the age of 16 she arrived in Israel. The whole family of her uncle, her father's brother Jakob, perished. So Margot remained alone.

(Sarah Heger, Iris Raabe, Daniela Kallfass, Relinda Prinz – pupils of the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade of the Karlsruhe-Neureut Grammar School, 2001/2002 school year, July 2002.)

The memories of Margot Altmann were written down and transmitted by Professor Meier Schwarz from Jerusalem.