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Liesbeth Lenneberg

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This is an English translation (by Lorenzo Maccone) of an Italian translation (by Gian Paolo Maccone) of the podcast on Liesbeth Lenneberg that can be found here: <https://erinnerungszeichen-rki.de/liesbeth-lenneberg>

Spring 1933- A few weeks have gone by since the Nazi have taken power. At the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) of Berlin at least 12 Jewish workers have lost their job. This podcast is dedicated to them and their families.

Welcome to the second episode of “Sign of remembrance”, the podcast of the RKI museum. My name is Benjamin Kuntz, I’m a healthcare researcher, and a historian of medicine. I’ve been working at RKI for about ten years. In this episode I’d like to tell you the story of the life of Liesbeth Lenneberg. She was one of the three women among the twelve Jewish workers of the RKI that lost their jobs in 1933. In contrast to the other eleven, she didn’t study or graduate, but she worked as an Assistant Technician in the laboratory of a department of RKI.

In this episode you will find out how tuberculosis forged her professional life, what was her connection to Albert Einstein, and where her many descendants live today.

The maiden name of Liesbeth Lenneberg was Loewenstein. She was born on May 15 1904 in Stuttgart. She was the daughter of Verlag’s director Adolf Loewenstein and of her wife Anna, born Kauffmann, both parents were Jewish. Liesbeth, whose second name was Judith, had a sister, older by four years, called Gertrud. It’s not clear when the Loewenstein family moved from Stuttgart to Berlin, but for sure the reason was the job of the father, who was nominated director of the Berlin branch of the, still existent, Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt (DVA). When Liesbeth was seventeen, her sister Gertrud married the businessman Karl Lenneberg, from Reidth. Only two years later, on July 25, 1923, Liesbeth married in Berlin the brother of her sister’s husband, the books and antiques seller Paul Lenneberg. At that time, the Loewenstein family lived in Helmstedter Strasse 4, in Berlin Wilmersdorf. The witnesses at her marriage were her father Adolf Loewenstein and Karl Lenneberg. But her young joy didn’t last long. That same October Paul Lenneberg died, probably as a consequence of tuberculosis that he presumably caught when, as a soldier, he participated to the first world war. Liesbeth Lenneberg looked for and found comfort in music. As she herself wrote in her diary, she went between October 24 and November 5, 1924, i.e. in only two weeks!, to eight concerts and operas in Berlin: she heard the famous Rose’ quartet playing Beethoven at the Song Academy (now

music hall of the Maxim Gorky theater), she heard Wagner’s Nurberg Song Masters at the state Opera, and she could enjoy the director Wilhelm Furtwaengler at the Philharmonic. On October 26, 1924 she went to the Opera in Unter den Linden to hear the musical opera of the Austrian composer Ernst Krenek “Die Zwingburg”, whose first execution was held there a few days earlier. Who did she go with? She herself tells us in her diary: her parents and Margot Einstein.

Margot Einstein was one of the stepdaughters of the famous physicist Einstein, who married his cousin Elsa, and who was living in Berlin since 1914. From Liesbeth’s mother Anna’s side there was a distant relationship with Einstein’s family. Moreover, the two families lived at less than a hundred meters from one another, in the Bavarian neighborhood, at the border between Wilmersdorf and Schoeneberg.

Among the family documents we also find a picture of Albert Einstein with a dedication: “To Liesbeth Lenneberg, in remembrance. Albert Einstein, December 1928”.

Another document lets us suppose that on March 14, 1929, Liesbeth Lenneberg and her mother Anna took part to a fun celebration for the fiftieth birthday of the famous Nobel prize. To thank them, he wrote them a poem that ends with the dedication: “*Thanks from my heart to the strong Swabian and her delightful daughter. A. Einstein*”.

Liesbeth Lenneberg was twentyfour at the time, and had been already working at RKI for two years. After her husband’s death of tuberculosis, she had obtained a diploma as Laboratory Biologist. The illness, that Robert Koch had surely identified and described already in 1882, shaped the professional life of the young widow: in March 1927 she had a contract as Assistant Technician in the Laboratory of the RKI division headed by Bruno Lange. As we can read in a recommendation letter written by Bruno Lange in May 1933, Liesbeth Lenneberg worked for him for six years. He wrote: “*in this period she has assisted mainly in the most varied researches on tuberculosis, but also to many other questions regarding the field of the research of similar illnesses, such as, for example typhus, pneumococcal, streptococcal, anthrax infections, research on disinfection and others. Mrs. Lenneberg has executed her tasks with great diligence, good technical competence, and has shown a good*

comprehension for each of the problems on which she laid hand. For these reasons, but also because of her round personality, I consider Mrs. Lenneberg absolutely suited to her job of Assistant Technician."

As many of her Jewish colleagues, on March 31, 1933, Liesbeth Lenneberg received a termination letter. Since she was on the verge of departing, her boss Bruno Lange wrote her a letter:

Berlin, March 31, 1933

Dear Mrs. Lenneberg, the letter from RKI you received today will have surprised you, just as the ministry decision has surprised all of us here at the institute; my personal point of view is that this is a temporary measure on the part of the regime. A similar letter was received by Kaufmann. I shouldn't really even mention that I am deeply sorry to lose your collaboration, and will do what I can to keep you here at the Institute. As long as Ms. Thorbeik will still be in Germany, we will manage to cope in the Laboratory. I suggest you use all your holidays in the nice Alps and to get back in good health. If your wallet permits, stay there for a few weeks. Perhaps in the next weeks the situation might get better.

Thank you for your nice farewell; if you should come back to Berlin, please let me know. My wife and I bid you farewell many times. Yours,

Bruno Lange

Probably Liese Lenneberg never returned to RKI. Soon she left Berlin and went to Paris, where she worked for some time at the famous Institute Pasteur. There in 1934 she met the Italian doctor Giuseppe Daddi, who offered her a job in the new institute in Roma, named after the famous tuberculosis researcher Carlo Forlanini. Her acceptance is also certainly due to the fact that for a long time she had developed an interest for the Italian culture, and had already started learning Italian in Berlin some years earlier. At the end of February 1935 she arrived in Roma.

At the Forlanini Institute she met the Italian doctor Virgilio Maccone. They married in 1937, after Liesbeth converted to the Catholic religion. She became Italian citizen and, between 1939 and 1947 she became mother of five. Few months before the start of the second world war, Liese managed to get her mother to come from Berlin. Her father, after an operation in a hospital in Coira, died in 1936 at seventyone years of age.

During the German occupation of Roma, which lasted nine months between September 1943 and June 1944, Liese had to hide with her sons in the Forlanini hospital. Her mother found refuge in the premises of the Trasfigurazione church nearby.

After the war, Liese Maccone never worked again. She dedicated herself to her family: her five sons and daughters and her mother, who died in 1971 at ninetyfive.

Her sister Gertrud and her husband Karl Lenneberg did not survive the Nazi persecution. In 1934 they left Aachen, the city where they had lived with their son and

daughter and they moved to Belgium. In May 1944 the two parents were deported from Mechelen in Belgium to Auschwitz where Gertrud, nicknamed Trude, died. Her husband Karl was first deported from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen, then to Buchenwald and at the end of January 1945 to Bergen Belsen, where he died soon after. On December 17, 2012 two commemorative stones were placed in front of the family house at Mozart Strasse 21 in Aachen in remembrance of the Lenneberg couple. The son and daughter, Kurt and Ruth survived the holocaust.

Today four of the five sons of Liesbeth Maccone live in Italy and their ages range between seventythree and eightyone. Her daughter Dora died a few years ago. There are sixteen grandsons and a large number of great-grandsons. I spoke at the phone with the youngest son, Gian Paolo Maccone, who has worked in Germany for some time and hence speaks German.

Dear Mr. Maccone, thanks for having found the time to talk to me. What kind of person was your mother Liese, and what are your memories of her?

** Dear Dr. Kuntz, it's really nice to be able to talk to you and say something about my mother, because it's very important to be able to offer a memory (even if after a long time) of a lady that was extremely intelligent, and was always available for us sons, but also for many other people, not only family. A well balanced person, discrete, loving and reserved. She was totally involved in the family, and she has always respected her sons, each with his/her own individuality. She took almost the full responsibility of the formation of the sons, since our father, who was a good doctor, was very busy with his patients, and spent little time at home. Such couple has built an extraordinary family (by Italian standards), and I offer a small example: it is known that German sing together while Italians sing by themselves. Well, in our family, for example in the trips we took on dad's car, and also during Christmas, we always sung together, also German songs and canons.. At home, each of us would play an instrument, also together: there was a violin, piano, guitar... And so we were happy together and we had lots of fun. Listening to and playing classical music is, still today, something completely atypical in Italy.*

Does this mean that your mother spoke German and not only Italian? How about your grandmother Anna who was already old when she arrived in Roma?

** Liese spoke Italian rather fluently, and she was always fascinated by this language: since when she lived in Berlin she studied Italian. In any case, our parents spoke very little German with us: they believed that, given the times and the period, we could have had difficulties with Italian. Anyhow, us smallest sons, i.e. my sister Cristina and I, we went for three years to the German school in Roma.*

Grandmother Anna came to visit in Roma in 1939, just in time for the birth of Lucia, the long awaited first

daughter. Luckily she remained in Roma and did not return to Bruxelles to the other daughter Trude, who would be later deported and killed in Auschwitz. We never met grandfather Adolf, since he died in Coira, Switzerland in 1936. We only spoke German with grandmother Anna who lived in another house, not far from ours. During the week she would often come to visit us at our house and Liese visited her almost daily.

Did your mother Liese talk to you about her Berlin life, or was this a forbidden topic?

* Absolutely not! Liese talked to us a lot about the cultural life she lived in Berlin. She would go almost weekly to classical music concerts. She would go to the theater, to the cinema, she visited painting and sculpture exhibitions... She and, naturally, her parents, often received at their house good guests, such as, for example, the Einsteins, Sigried Ochs (the famous conductor), and also other artists, painters, writers and more...

Liese always painted a beautiful picture of Berlin: for instance, she cut and pasted on pieces of cardboard some pictures of art pieces for us to play quartet games, so that we could learn German culture without effort.

In one of the pictures you sent me, a part of which we put on our web site as remembrance, you see your mother as a young lady working in a lab. It seems that that smiling person finds satisfaction in her work. What do you know about her passion for her job?

* Liese told us very little about that. When she had her long awaited first daughter, my mother has almost completely stopped working at the Forlanini Institute. However, whenever our father would have to leave Roma for business trips, our mother would often go to the Forlanini to check on her husband's work.

Ah, yes, this means that what she learned at RKI allowed her to supervise the work in Roma's laboratory.

* It's natural: they've always worked together.

They met on the job, right?

* Yes, here in Roma, in Italy.

Did your mother, after the war, ever go back to Berlin? Did she have a compensation from Germany?

* You see, it was really impossible to come to Berlin from Italy, and I don't know if Liese came to Germany... However, already in 1951, Oma sent all our family for a whole month of vacation in Freudenstadt. There we met Anna and Liese's friends who still lived in Stuttgart. Also in the following years, Oma spent her German holidays in Freudenstadt. There she found some of her childhood friends... And again, all together, in 1955 we spent a nice month of vacation in Roethenbach. My father and my mother always enjoyed traveling and visiting other cities and countries... Naturally they came to Germany also as tourists.

Do you know how the compensation worked? Was it easy to obtain or she didn't even try?

* Yes, I know she did try to obtain it but, you see, we never spoke and knew very little about money matters.

For this reason we discovered only after our mother's death that she had obtained a sort of pension from Germany.

Is it only after her death that you learned about the documents that refer to RKI, the letters and other?

* Certainly! An official letter by her boss, Bruno Lange, and also another letter, very personal and affectionate... I must say it, she really made herself be loved.

Nice. Your family is catholic. When and how did you learn your Jewish roots of your mother?

* Yes, ours is a catholic family. Liese met catholic religion and was baptized in 1937, before her marriage to Virgilio, her husband and my father. We learned about her Jewish roots much later - when we were thirteen or sixteen. For example we were told only that my mother's sister Trude, and her husband Karl, had died in a bombardment in Belgium. Only later we learned that the couple with their two sons had moved in 1934 from Aachen to Bruxelles, and that later Trude was deported and killed in Auschwitz in 1944 and Karl in Bergen Belsen in 1945.

And this couple's sons survived, right?

* Right! The male, Kurt, lived in Bruxelles, while Ruth came to Roma in 1947, lived in our house and worked in Roma for a few years. Then she married and started a family that, still now lives in Bologna.

If I'm not mistaken, Ruth died in 2004, while her husband still lives in Bologna, right?

* Right. Her husband, their four sons and their families.

One last question. You know why we're talking about this. Namely, for our podcast "Sign of remembrance", that tells the stories of the Jewish workers that, in 1933, were forced to leave RKI. What did you think when I contacted you, and your family for the first time?

* Our family really appreciated that RKI remembered, after ninety years, our mother, because, in our opinion, it is very important to honor those people who, without any blame, were marginalized. And to recognize, even if posthumously, their rights. This is essential for new generations: our sons and nephews were very glad about the research done by RKI about their grandmother and great-grandmother. They've also reflected on the courage of a German public body that acknowledges its errors.

Thanks for talking to me. Many best wishes to Italy.

* Thanks! Heartfelt greetings from Milan, Roma, Siena. I am very grateful to you for this interview.

Liesbeth Lenneberg died at seventytwo. She died on December 8, 1976 in Roma. Her husband, Virgilio Maccone died two years later.

I hope you enjoyed the podcast episode about Liese Lenneberg, and I would be glad if you could follow also the next episodes of the podcast "Sign of remembrance". A special thanks to Italy, to the family of Liesbeth Maccone who provided a lot of information and has placed at my disposal documents like pictures and letters. Next time, I'll tell the story of Ulrich Friedemann. Bye.