

Marco Jandl | Birgit Roth (Hg.)

# AND IF THE WHOLE WORLD WERE ON FIRE...

Irene Ransburg and Gisela Kaufmann –  
Two blind women between self-  
determination, poetry and Nazi  
persecution



English translation

Graz University  
Library Publishing



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This publication accompanies the re-setting of the Braille *Stolperstein* for Irene Ransburg and the unveiling of a memorial plaque for Gisela Kaufmann at the Odilien Institute in Graz. The laying of the *Stolpersteine* and this publication are part of a long-standing co-operation between the Verein für Gedenkkultur (Association for Remembrance Culture) in Graz, the University of Graz and the Odilien Institute for the Blind.

This text is an informal translation of a German-language publication and was originally printed as a gift to the Kaufman family. The German publication was also produced in an accessible print-version and in Braille.

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## Forewords

### Foreword by the Odilien Institute

Under the Nazi reign of terror, millions of men, women and children were murdered in concentration camps. The murderous hatred of this criminal regime was directed above all at their Jewish fellow citizens. Six million Jews were victims of this hatred, 65,000 of whom were Austrian Jews.

Gisela Kaufmann and Irene Ransburg were two of them. Both spent parts of their lives at the Odilien Institute in Graz, which has been dedicated to supporting blind and visually impaired people since its foundation, but has also been catering for people with other disabilities.

Even more than 80 years later, these crimes must not be forgotten. It is thus our great honour and our mission as the Odilien Institute to draw attention to the fate of Gisela Kaufmann and Irene Ransburg by dedicating a monument to them in front of our building. May it also draw attention to millions of injustices.

*Bettina Schifko*

*Managing Director, Odilien Institute*

### Foreword by the University of Graz

The University of Graz has been examining its history during the rule of the National Socialist regime for many years. Most recently, the biographies of Jewish university members expelled from the university in 1938 were systematically researched in a separate project at the Centre for Jewish Studies. In October 2023, based on this research, we were able to lay 15 *Stolpersteine* on our campus.

I am particularly pleased that further fruit of this work is a university publication about two blind women in Graz who were persecuted by the Nazi regime. The valuable cooperation of the Centre for Integrated Studies and the Braille production of the Digitisation Office are important signs of our ongoing commitment to supporting people with disabilities at our university.

*Peter Riedler*

*Rector, University of Graz*

## ■ Introduction by the editors

This volume is a commemorative publication for the deaf-blind writer Irene Ransburg (1898-1944) and the blind German philology student Gisela Kaufmann (1907-1941). Our aim is to remember the extraordinary biographies, work and fates of these two women. Although it is unclear whether Irene Ransburg and Gisela Kaufmann knew each other personally, there are remarkable connections between the two, which prompted us to take a joint approach: both were born in Graz at the turn of the century and went blind as young women, with Irene Ransburg having lost her hearing shortly beforehand. Both women were subsequently sent to the Odilien Institute for the Blind in Graz, where they learnt to communicate with their environment using various communication techniques and to share their love of literature and language. Irene Ransburg became known as a deaf-blind poet in Styria and beyond. Gisela Kaufmann enrolled as a blind student at the University of Graz and graduated in 1938 with a dissertation on the poetry of Eduard Mörike. Despite all the hurdles and crises, the two continued on their impressive paths which did however, come to a tragic end after the National Socialists came to power in Austria and the so-called “Anschluss” in March 1938. The two blind women were persecuted as Jews. Irene Ransburg, who had converted to Catholicism at the age of 14, remained undiscovered at the Odilien Institute for years, but was eventually picked up by the Gestapo in 1944 and later murdered in Auschwitz. Gisela Kaufmann died in Vienna in 1941, forcibly resettled and separated from her family.

The memory of the two women, their remarkable journey and their tragic fate remained an important part of the memory of the families in which they grew up after 1945. After decades of being forgotten, their stories have also become part of public remembrance in the city of Graz in recent years. In 2016, the world's first *Stolperstein* in Braille was laid for Irene Ransburg at the Odilien Institute, where she had lived for many years. In October 2023, a *Stolperstein* was laid for Gisela Kaufmann in front of the main building of the University of Graz to commemorate her expulsion from the university in 1938. As an extension and adaptation of the memorial, the existing Braille *Stolperstein* for Irene Ransburg will be placed in a raised granite block. In addition, memorial plaques in regular font and in Braille will be added for Gisela Kaufmann at the Odilien Institute in autumn 2024. This cooperation project between the Verein für Gedenkkultur in Graz, the Odilien Institute and the Centre for Integrated Studies at the University of Graz gave rise to the idea for an accompanying publication. It also represents an extension of the project to research the expelled members of the University of Graz, which is currently underway at the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Graz.

The authors approach the two biographies of these remarkable women and the associated topics of inclusion and remembrance work from different perspectives. Daniela Grabe, long-time chairwoman of the Verein für Gedenkkultur, reflects on the creation of the *Stolperstein* in Braille for blind victims of National Socialism as an approach to an inclusive culture of remembrance. She also discusses the problems of the first installation, which are now being solved by raising the stone. Historian Marco Jandl and historian Gabriela Stieber trace the lives of Gisela Kaufmann and Irene Ransburg respectively. German philology and cultural studies scholar Sebastian Meißl discusses Kaufmann's literary dissertation and her portrait photo as a doctoral candidate from 1938, while blind German studies student Tim Peters uses Gisela Kaufmann's story

as a starting point to provide insights into inclusion and the everyday life of blind students at the University of Graz today. Furthermore, a message from the Kaufman family from Canada are also included; this text was sent to Graz on the occasion of the laying of the *Stolperstein* for Gisela Kaufmann in October 2023.

This volume also contains a poem by Irene Ransburg (working translation by the editors). It contains the line “And if the whole world were on fire”, which we have chosen as the title for this publication. In her poem, Irene Ransburg describes her initial despair caused by the onset of deafblindness, a despair which later gave way to a new courage to face life, as she writes in her “Life Portrait”, excerpts of which are also printed here. Today, the line inevitably evokes associations with the global firestorm of the Second World War, the horror of National Socialism and its crimes.

For the joint commemoration of Irene Ransburg and Gisela Kaufmann, a format that is as inclusive and accessible as possible was developed in analogy to the Braille *Stolperstein*. Barbara Levc from the Centre for Integrated Studies (University of Graz) was on hand to provide advice. The texts are printed in regular typeface and Braille. We would like to thank Manfred Anabith and the digitisation service of the University of Graz for the transcription and printing of the Braille version.

With this publication, we hope to make a contribution to inclusive and active remembrance work and to preserve the memory of these two remarkable women in the long term.

*Graz, August 2024*

*Marco Jandl and Birgit Roth*





## **A *Stolperstein* in Braille in Graz: how it came about**

Daniela Grabe

*“Stolpersteine”* are a memorial project based on the concept of the German artist Gunter Demnig; they commemorate the fate of people who were murdered, deported, expelled, driven to suicide or affected by “aryanisation” expropriations under National Socialism. Jewish victims are commemorated as well as those who were victims of political, religious or ethnic persecution, who were murdered because of their sexual orientation, because they refused to do military service or because their lives were deemed “unworthy” (so-called “euthanasia”).

The brass tops of the *Stolpersteine* bear the names and dates of life of the victims and inscriptions such as: “lived here”, “worked here” or “studied here”. They are usually set into the pavement in front of the victims' last voluntary places of residence or work.

In 2013, 75 years after the so-called “Anschluss”, Daniela Grabe (the author), then a local councillor in Graz, brought the project to Graz and, together with Sabine Maurer from the Graz Committee for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, founded the Verein für Gedenkkultur (Association for the Culture of Remembrance) in Graz. Since then, the remembrance work has been continuously expanded and, with the help of committed association members and supporters, *Stolpersteine* were also installed in other Styrian municipalities. There are now over 350 *Stolpersteine* in 10 municipalities in Styria (the stones in Ramsau and Schladming were laid by a sister project). Throughout Europe, over 100,000 memorial stones can be found in over 30 countries thanks to many regional initiatives (as of July 2024).

In addition to laying the *Stolpersteine*, the association also carries out historical biographical research into long “forgotten” victims and intensive educational work, especially aimed at young people.

Since our project began in 2013, we have always endeavoured to make commemoration as accessible and low-threshold as possible – without cost barriers, without location barriers and ideally without educational barriers.

From the very beginning, our main focus was to honour those who fell victim to Nazi terror on a personal level and not just as an inconceivably large group.

This was also one of the main reasons why we decided in favour of *Stolpersteine* based on Gunter Demnig's concept: small stones that can be placed in public spaces, spread out wherever people live, learn and work today, wherever people lived, learnt and worked back then. Accessible without an entrance fee, in places that you might pass every day anyway, with a clear and unambiguous message which we also try to promote through an extensive educational programme.

When planning the first *Stolperstein* for a blind member of the Odilien Institute in Graz in 2016, I realised that we had reached a limit with our goal of low-threshold and accessibility: A *Stolperstein* for a blind woman in a

place that is also a place of learning and work for many visually impaired and blind people today, but the memorial does not remain visible and legible for those who come and go here?

It just didn't make sense, seemed absurd or at least incorrect. And so, I asked Michael Friedrichs-Friedlaender, the sculptor who produces the *Stolpersteine*, whether it would be possible to produce a *Stolperstein* in Braille to solve this accessibility issue and thus also honour Irene Ransburg, the blind poet, in a special individual way.

I don't remember exactly what Michael answered back then, but I'm sure his reaction was similar to my question today: "What do *Stolpersteine* mean to you?" – "I can tell you in a few words: a lot of work." And then he adds regarding the *Stolpersteine* in Braille: "A challenge. But it's something I enjoy doing." In addition to remembering Irene Ransburg, he is also concerned about those who live and work where the stone is placed today: "I think it's important that people can read it. In a way, they are often marginalised anyway, they often can't read things. And in that respect, it's important to make these special *Stolpersteine*." Even if it takes a lot longer.

Because the production of *Stolpersteine* in Braille is quite challenging. It was only after several attempts that the artist succeeded in getting the Braille onto the sheet metal in such a way that it was actually legible. Michael Friedrichs-Friedlaender emphasises: "It's all done by hand, without the use of a machine, except for the mounting holes, which were punched with a drill." The difficulty was: how do you get the lettering dots to stand out and be clear enough to be read by touch, unlike the letters in normal print?

Unlike punching stones for sighted people, you need two metal sheets. The dots have to be struck from behind in one of the sheets in such a way that they can be felt, but it took numerous test runs to experiment and improve them until the pins were "sharp-edged" enough that they could actually be read by touch and not just appear as vague dots.

In order to ensure legibility, the artist had the "prototypes" proofread several times by members of the Berlin Institute for the Blind, as the writing was simply not legible for the first attempts and the dots were not clear enough. Finally, the size of the stone also had to be determined through trial and error until the perfect solution was found: significantly larger than the regular stones, but not too large, so that it would still be perceived as a *Stolperstein*, a kind of "big sister".

In August 2016, this first *Stolperstein* was laid in close cooperation with the Odilien Institute and with the active participation of clients at the time, who carried the Braille stone and its "little sister" in regular writing to their destination and placed them in the hole prepared by Gunter Demnig and Holding Graz. Dignified, respectful and unique in Europe, carried by the idea of being inclusive in remembrance. This ceremony was also met with great interest by the media.



*Photo 1: Gunter Demnig laying the Stolpersteine in front of the Odilien Institute. The artist kneels in front of two bronze stones embedded in the pavement, cleaning the Braille stone. In the background, a red bucket and some onlookers.*

© J.-J. Kucek

However, there was one important element that we had all overlooked and, fortunately, it was precisely the media presence that led to us being made aware of the central error that we had incomprehensibly failed to consider when focussing on point sizes:

Sighted people sometimes have to bend down slightly to read a regular *Stolperstein* (“bowing respectfully”, as Gunter Demnig calls it), but the stones are usually easy to read in an upright posture. This does not apply to a Braille stone; it cannot be made out from a distance. After our “classic” installation on the pavement, we required our recipients to bend their knees almost completely in order to read and to feel around directly on the asphalt pavement, in total contradiction to our good intentions.

Over the years, this shortcoming has been discussed time and again and a new design has now been conceived together with the Odilien Institute and the Centre for Integrated Studies: While the regular stone for Irene Ransburg remained in the pavement, the Braille stone was lifted into a raised granite plinth. This new installation was taken as an opportunity to also dedicate a memorial plaque to Gisela Kaufmann, for whom a stone was laid at the university campus. We see this as an expression of living and dynamic remembrance work. The raised stone block now realises our heartfelt concern mentioned at the beginning, the tangible commemoration, in a more suitable form and presents the *Stolperstein* in such a way that it is easily accessible for local people: low-threshold in the symbolic sense of the word, without barriers (therefore now also on a plinth), without reading barriers (therefore in Braille) and with an individual form for blind people who were victims of Nazi terror.



*Photo 2: The Stolpersteine for Irene Ransburg. Above the larger Braille stone, below the regular stone with the inscription (here translated): Here lived / Irene Ransburg / born 1898 / arrested 21 Sept. 1944 / deported 1944 / Theresienstadt / murdered 23 Oct. 1944 / Auschwitz-Birkenau  
© Verein für Gedenkkultur in Graz*

**Daniela Grabe** is a business information scientist and historian. In 2013, she brought the Stolperstein project based on the concept of artist Gunter Demnig to Graz and has since organised and supervised the laying of over 300 stones in several Styrian municipalities.

## Excerpt from the biographical text “Life portrait” by Irene Ransburg

[...] Deaf-blind, then! This word, which used to be so foreign to me, so distant, dug itself into my soul like red-hot ore and made me unspeakably unhappy. Oh, I suffered then, mentally and physically, much and heavily, I thought I would never be able to smile again in my life – I quarrelled with God, with the world and with myself! O night, night – you silent, dreadful night – why are you so desolate, so empty?

And now many a year has passed,  
Since my little ship drifted on wild waves,  
On an abysmal, unworldly path.  
Time has widened the view of my soul.  
Now sail in peace, guided by God,  
With a slight wave, my boat moves along.

In the new world of deaf-blindness, into which I was called by fate, I initially felt like a newborn child who first had to learn to look, think and feel in the world. When I entered the home for the blind in Graz in November 1915, I was released from the deep imprisonment of my mind. The endless desolation, darkness and silence gradually gave way to the realisation that my world was not without good, beauty and joy. I had irretrievably lost two of my most important senses, but the three that remained showed that they were somewhat capable of replacing sight and hearing. They opened their doors wide, and a new zest for life and love returned to me! [...]



*Photo 3: Black and white image of Irene Ransburg sitting on a wooden bench by a spring. She is wearing a chequered dress, a pearl necklace and white shoes.  
© Brix family*



## Hopeless longing (June 1917) by Irene Ransburg

Times pass swiftly, and moons come, moons go,  
Summer glow and autumn rush, And winter snows and spring blows.

And like times, like men, how quickly they come and pass.  
He who is still young today, a hopeful life, tomorrow will already be in the pangs of death.

A heart that has experienced heavy suffering in its deepest abyss,  
How good it would be if this heart slept in cool earth forever.

It would also be better for me to rest in a cool grave, freed from sorrow.  
My chest glows with hot longing, I long for the eternal slumber of spring.

For empty night wherever I look, And nothing but pain and longing.  
Merciless goddess of fate, your arrow struck well, deep in my heart.

The wound was bleeding, black parca! Oh, silent night, so desolate, so dreadful!  
All my happiness destroyed! So desolate and so sad - sad!

O light, light, light - back to the light! Back to happiness and the sun!  
Back to melody, back to sound, back to the joy of life, back to bliss!

You tears, just flow, be my comforter. I am lonely and alone!  
I do not see the beauty of the earth, I do not hear the finch in the grove.

And even if a thousand flowers sprout, if a thousand throats shout with joy,  
I would not see it and never hear it, Not the rumble of thunder, not the wild weather.

And if the whole world were in flames, and if stars were to topple and fall,  
I would not see it, I would never hear it, even if trumpets were to roar.

Who measures his fate against mine? I, who am dead, and yet alive.  
A human countenance, God, what would I give for a single glance!

O could I hear but one word, but one sound. How I would listen! Even if it were only a soft whisper, like the  
wind blowing and the forest rustling!

Even if I wrestle in wild pain, even if despair rages through my chest,  
it will not fall, the dark veil that covers my paradise!



*Photo 4: Irene Ransburg at her typewriter. She is sitting at a table, with a houseplant in the background. She is typing on the machine which holds a sheet of paper.*

*© Rein Abbey Archive*





## **Irene Ransburg (1898-1944) - The life of a deaf-blind woman**

Gabriela Stieber

### **Family and childhood**

Irene Ransburg was born on 20 November 1898 as the fifth child of Ludwig and Viktoria-Dora Ransburg. Her father was a Jewish wine merchant and traveller from Veszprem in Hungary, who had been registered in Heinrichstraße in Graz since October 1896. Her mother came from Körmend in Hungary.

The eldest child was Luise, who later called herself Dora and was an accountant. The only son was Carl, born in 1893, of whom it is only known that he had a daughter named Margaret, who was born in Budapest in 1917. She was married to Eugene Steiner and lived in Tuscon, Arizona, USA after the end of the Second World War. In 1946, she made enquiries about her aunt Irene Ransburg via the Yad Vashem memorial. It is safe to assume that Irene's family, or at least her brother, knew of her fate. However, there is no indication of this anywhere in the documents handed down by and about Irene.

There were two daughters between Carl and Irene and another daughter was stillborn after her. After 1900, her parents divorced and her father moved back to Hungary. Her mother lived in Rechbauerstrasse in Graz, where she committed suicide in October 1916.

The family's financial circumstances were probably very difficult and this must have been the reason why Irene was taken in as a newborn by a foster family in St. Ruprecht an der Raab, a small town northeast of Graz. She herself wrote in a letter to her foster mother at the beginning of November 1916: "I didn't even know that you had found me, my only, best mother, in a box, probably a poor cradle, I would be the poorest person in the world today if I hadn't come to you."

The Brix family in St. Ruprecht an der Raab had already raised 13 children of their own and, in Irene's words, "they took the youngest child, a girl, an unworldly orphan, to their hearts, lovingly and warmly and gently".

Irene attended the convent school of the School Sisters in St Ruprecht. She was a good and orderly pupil, as can be seen from a school exercise book preserved in the Brix family. At the age of 14, she converted to the Catholic faith, was baptised and confirmed at the same time. After completing her compulsory education, she was given the opportunity to attend a one-year commercial course at the School Sisters in Graz-Eggenberg so that she could later become a civil servant.



## **Suddenly deaf and blind**

Irene finished school in the summer of 1914, although she had increasingly severe hearing problems in the last few months. It must have been a heavy blow for the young, cheerful girl when she went completely deaf in September of the same year. The doctors diagnosed “neural atrophy” and knew of no cure. However, her eyesight also deteriorated over the next few weeks and by Christmas, she could barely recognise the candles on the Christmas tree. By the spring of 1915, she had finally lost her hearing and sight completely.

This disease, known as Usher syndrome, can be triggered if both parents are carriers of the same defective genes. There are several variants, depending on how early the disease breaks out. Even today, medicine still has no cure for it. If one of a person's senses fails, another sense can usually partially replace it. Irene herself was able to make herself understood verbally. However, she could only use her sense of touch to understand the other person.

One such means of communication was the finger alphabet, which was developed by a deafblind man in the 19th century. This so-called “Lorm alphabet” is used for communication between deafblind people and non-deafblind people, but also between deafblind people themselves. It works by the “speaker” touching the palm of the hand of the “reader”. Certain letters are assigned to the individual fingers and parts of the hand. This method is particularly successful with people who only became deafblind later in life, meaning that they had already completed their language acquisition, as was the case with Irene Ransburg. In her case, the hand was the only and most reliable means of personal contact with the outside world.



*Photo 5: Irene Ransburg, seated, with her left hand outstretched, next to her sits a spiritual sister wearing a habit with a large white collar and headdress “writing” in her hand.*

*© Odilien Institute*

Fifteen years later, Irene described the first period of deafblindness in harrowing words: “I crept into the cellar of my father's house, crawled into its farthest corner, raving there for hours, brooding there, hating God, the world, myself – a plaything of the wildest despair. ... So, I was deaf-blind, walled in alive and constantly pondering redemption through death. ... the urge of my spirit was unspeakable, for confirmation, for liberation from this imprisonment.”

## **At the Odilien Institute**

Over the course of the year, the family contacted the Odilien Institute in Graz. It had been founded in 1880 by the Odilien Association for the Care of the Blind in Styria. Initially, only children and young people were admitted to the house in Leonhardstrasse, who were trained in singing and music as well as in some trades, such as brush-making and basket-weaving, in addition to their regular school education.

Irene was invited to spend a few weeks at the Odilien Institute. She initially resisted this proposal because she didn't want to live among people who were just as unhappy as she was. After weeks of fighting with herself, she finally gave in and experienced a new world full of optimism. After just a few days, she was able to read a text in Braille and was moved to tears of joy.

At the Odilien Institute, Irene learnt various activities such as weaving armchairs, tying brushes and she was able to knot, knit and crochet. In a letter to a friend in 1930, she describes how important it was for her to pursue a meaningful activity. It reads: "And many storms and battles lie behind me ... But now, at last, I have finally surrendered, I have become very quiet, very peaceful. I can work! I always think that things could be even worse for me if I were ill, unable to work, unfit! ... My favourite thing is my typewriter, which I can use so well and confidently that I could earn my living if I could dictate by ear."

## **Contacts around the world**

Irene used her typewriter to establish far-reaching contacts with the world outside the Odilien Institute. For example, she corresponded with the Austrian sculptor and poet Gustinus Ambrosi, who had lost his hearing as a child after contracting meningitis. She received various magazines from Germany in order to keep up to date. According to her own statement, this gave her knowledge of many discoveries, research and events around the world. She probably also read about the American Helen Keller, who, like her, was deaf-blind, had completed a degree, gave lectures and was known worldwide. From then on, Helen Keller was also one of her correspondents.

Irene was well-informed, interested and linguistically gifted. Over the years, she became known beyond the borders of the Odilien Institute as a poet. She was repeatedly approached with requests to write poems for specific occasions.

In 1919, for example, she wrote a poem that read: "Dear Sister Superior, please accept our wishes and greetings, which are warmly conveyed to you by your grateful blind people."

The humorous, long text for a provincial accountant on his retirement reads: "So, dearest Councillor, please listen to me with grace! ... Because after all the worries you like to look for a place, quietly hidden - and swallow the day's woe with a good cup of coffee."

Her poems were also repeatedly recited at events at the Odilien Institute. RAVAG, the first Austrian radio station, organised a radio play competition in 1933 to mark the 250th anniversary of the successful defence against the siege of Vienna by a large Ottoman army. Of the 118 entries, 7 were awarded prizes, including the essay "I am deaf-blind" by Irene Ransburg. In September 1933, the radio play "Liberated Vienna. A radio play from the great Turkish emergency 250 years ago" was broadcast. A Salzburg newspaper then introduced the author Irene Ransburg in an imaginative story. It said that she spoke perfect German, Hungarian, English,

French and Esperanto and did marvellous crochet work. She is a second Helen Keller. She also came from a Hungarian Jewish banking family who no longer cared for her after she converted to Catholicism.

Thanks to the many contacts that Irene Ransburg cultivated, some of her poems and texts have been preserved. The descendants of her foster family Brix in St. Ruprecht an der Raab have preserved some, and even more can be found in the archives of the Cistercian monastery in Rein. So how did this connection come about? Father Ernest Kortschak had entered Rein in 1898 and was elected abbot in 1931. He had been working at the Odilien Institute since 1914 and was appointed director in 1925, a position he held until 1945.

The Odilien Institute was financed in such a way that the pupils' home communities were obliged to bear their catering costs. Additional funds came from the products of the workshops, such as brooms and baskets. In the interwar period, however, the economic situation of the institute was so worrying that Director Kortschak decided to take a "begging trip" to the United States. His brother lived as a music professor in New York and helped him to make contacts in order to raise funds. His goal was to collect 60,000 schillings in donations, but he didn't quite succeed. He had an information sheet with him in which Irene Ransburg, "the blind and deaf orphan child of Austria", was depicted in a photo. The donors were promised that the blind and orphans at the Odilien Institute would pray for them.

Numerous poems by Irene Ransburg have been preserved in the archive of Rein Abbey in the collection relating to Abbot Kortschak. The existing texts range from 1916 to 1925 and are mostly characterised by great despair about her condition. However, there are also more humorous texts, fairy tales and poems in dialect.

### **Nazi era and persecution**

Despite all the economic problems, life at the Odilien Institute continued for the time being without any particular restrictions after the "Anschluss" of Austria to the German Reich in 1938. The Odilien Association and the economic management of the institution were placed under the control of the Styrian National Socialist People's Welfare Organisation ("Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt", short NSV), although Jews and people with disabilities were excluded from the care provided by the NSV.

In a letter to the new director of the Institute for the Blind in 1949, Ernst Kortschak described the Odilien Institute during the Nazi era from his point of view and also defended himself against the accusation of having been a supporter of National Socialism. He also mentioned Irene Ransburg in this context. He had obviously succeeded in "hiding" her from the authorities during the first years of Nazi rule. Although she was baptised, the National Socialists still considered her to be Jewish and she was also deaf-blind. Furthermore, she was not an unknown person due to her texts. In 1943, the District Welfare Association of the town of Weiz, which was responsible for her, became aware of her and demanded that she be transferred to the Jewish Council of Elders in Vienna. According to Kortschak himself, he ignored this letter, which initially had no consequences.

In September 1944, Irene spent a few weeks with a friend on a mountain pasture in Upper Styria. Director Kortschak had allegedly advised her not to return to Graz afterwards, but she did not heed his advice.

Soon afterwards, however, the Gestapo became aware of Irene Ransburg through a report and demanded that she be handed over to the police. Allegedly, a flatmate from the Odilien Institute had complained to her

family that she had to live under the same roof as Jews. This statement was then “received” by the Gestapo. It is no longer possible to reconstruct exactly what happened. However, it does not change anything about Irene's fate. She was picked up by the Gestapo at the Odilien Institute and transported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Research after the end of the war revealed that she was there until October 1944. The blind people in this concentration camp were apparently looked after by a sighted Jewish woman. She described Irene Ransburg as a “dear and patient human child who bore her difficult fate with the greatest resignation”.

On 23 October 1944, she was transported to the Auschwitz extermination camp, where she was killed in the gas chambers.

### **Never forget**

The memory of Irene Ransburg remained alive for many years, especially in her foster family Brix in St. Ruprecht an der Raab. A few years ago, the Odilien Institute also began to research Irene's life. After all, she had lived and worked there for almost 30 years. On 11 May 2015, a memorial plaque to her was ceremoniously unveiled in front of the Odilien Institute in Leonhardstrasse in Graz. Two *Stolpersteine* on the street in front of the building, one of them in Braille, commemorate her life and her terrible death in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

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## ■ Message from the Kaufman family

The Kaufman family is honored to be asked to share some words with you about our aunt and great-aunt, Dr. Gisela Zeckendorf (Kaufman). How to say only a few words about a remarkable woman whom none of us had the opportunity to meet? A difficult task.

While we did not know her, there is no doubt that Gisela was a bright, resilient, and tenacious woman. She was a Jew, a woman, and a blind person, and each of these alone could have been insurmountable obstacles at that time. Against all odds, she accomplished an extraordinary amount in her short life.

Tragically, Gisela died with no family by her side. They had all emigrated to Canada prior to the war and because of her blindness, Gisela was denied entry into Canada. Like many others at the time, there was no grave marker, no ceremony, and her family was left with few details about the circumstances surrounding her death. We understand that up until his death, her father was burdened with the guilt of leaving her behind.

It brings us peace knowing that a *Stolperstein* is being placed with her name on it, to forever commemorate her and to ensure that she will never be forgotten. Our family wishes to express our sincerest gratitude to Marco Jandl and Barbara Hoffman for researching her life and for letting us learn more about Gisela alongside of them.

Thank you also to the University of Graz, Verein für Gedenkkultur, the local ‘godfather’ of Gisela’s *Stolperstein*, and to everyone else who has played a part in keeping her memory alive.

This text was read out at the laying of the *Stolperstein* on the campus of the University of Graz.



*Photo 6: Laying of three Stolpersteine including a headstone in front of the main entrance to the University of Graz in October 2023. The middle Stolperstein for Irene Kaufmann is being tapped into place with a hammer. In the foreground, a basket with pebbles that will be placed during the ceremony.*  
© Helmut Lunghammer



## **Gisela Kaufmann (1907-1941) - A life in the face of adversity**

Marco Jandl

### **Family and school education**

Gisela Kaufmann was born in Graz on 12 February 1907 as one of six children in the Jewish Kaufmann family. Her father Nathan came from the Galician village of Spas. Her mother Netti (née Springer) originally came from Rajka/Ragendorf in western Hungary. The couple moved to Graz together in 1905, where Nathan worked as a religious official (“Kultusbeamter”) for the local Jewish community. The family lived at Raubergasse 13 in the centre of Graz and in 1916 were granted the local citizenship (“Heimatrecht”) in the city of Graz.

From autumn 1918, Gisela attended the lower cycle of the state grammar school in Graz (now BG/BRG Lichtenfels). As this was a boys' school at the time, she was only able to attend classes as a “guest student”. Her school days were characterised by the general hardship of the post-war period. Lessons were sometimes severely restricted due to the lack of coal for heating and gas for lighting. In 1922, Gisela transferred to the then public municipal girls' reform grammar school at Sackstrasse 18 to complete the upper cycle. This historically significant institution was founded in 1873 as the first six-year girls' grammar school in the Habsburg Empire. At the time Gisela joined the school, it was being converted into a purely two-tier reform grammar school for girls. One of the religious teachers for the Jewish pupils was the famous rabbi David Herzog. As far as grades were concerned, Gisela was a rather average pupil with varying performance in the individual subjects.

### **Severe strokes of fate and the siblings' emigration to Canada**

At the age of 18, when Gisela was in her final year of school, two tragic events occurred for the family. On 17 September 1925, her mother Netti died of kidney failure. Just three months later, 17-year-old brother Wilhelm was killed when he fell from the roof of a house in Schmiedgasse while helping a colleague install a radio antenna. Despite the difficult circumstances, Gisela successfully passed her A-levels in the spring of 1926. She had written her final thesis in Latin on the subject of “The astronomical world view of antiquity and the Somnium Scipionis”. After graduating from school, Gisela's next stroke of fate came when she went blind, presumably due to a tumour.

During this time, three of Gisela's siblings emigrated to Canada. Due to the difficult economic situation, there was a modest emigration movement from regions such as Styria and Burgenland to Canada from the mid-1920s onwards. At the same time, the Canadian government pursued an extremely restrictive and openly anti-Semitic immigration policy. Jews from “non-preferred countries” such as Austria represented a decidedly undesirable group of migrants who were only allowed to immigrate with a special permit. With the support of relatives already living in Canada, their aunt Anni Stein and her husband Herman Stein, the siblings were allowed to enter the country. The eldest brother Josef Kaufmann (later Kaufman) reached the eastern Canadian harbour city of Halifax by ship at the beginning of May 1926. Siblings Julie and Emil

followed in April 1927. Like the Stein family, the three of them initially lived in Montreal, an important centre of Jewish culture in Canada. It was not possible for Gisela to emigrate to Canada as a blind person, partly because “good health” was an important requirement for the Canadian authorities. She remained in Graz together with her father Nathan and younger brother Herbert.

### **As an apprentice at the Odilien Institute for the Blind in Graz**

From October 1927, Gisela Kaufmann lived in the Odilien Institute for the Blind in Leonhardstrasse. The institution for the blind and visually impaired, which still exists today, was divided into an “employment and care centre” for blind adults and an “educational institution”. The latter offered a three-class primary school education for blind children as well as an apprenticeship department, which Gisela Kaufmann also attended from then on. At least in the yearbooks for 1927 and 1928, Gisela Kaufmann appears as the only Jewish woman at the institution for the blind. It is not known whether Gisela and the deaf-blind poet Irene Ransburg, who lived there at the same time, knew each other personally.

In the apprenticeship department, young people and adults were trained in traditional blind crafts such as brush making or basket and armchair weaving. “Apprentice girls” were specially taught in “female handicrafts” and were given domestic tasks. Gisela also learnt how to read and write Braille and how to use a Braille typewriter. She spent a total of four years at the Odilien Institute for the Blind. Instead of pursuing her apprenticeship and following social expectations in a “typical” trade for the blind, Gisela then began to study at the University of Graz.

### **Studies at the University of Graz and “silent” doctorate in July 1938**

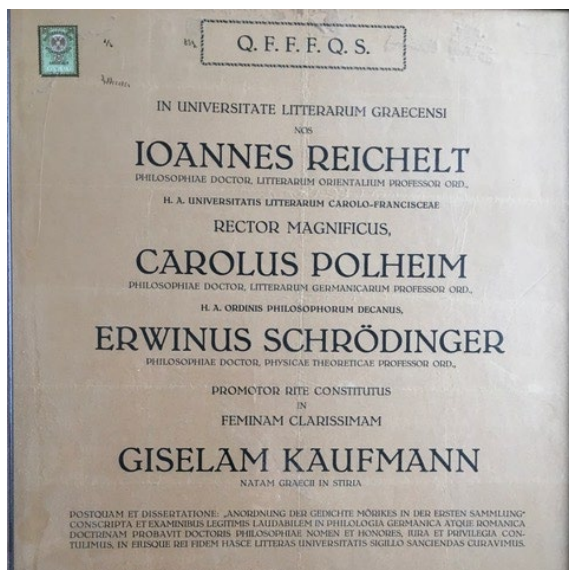
In autumn 1931, Gisela Kaufmann enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Graz. Here she studied German and Romance philology as a regular student. She also occasionally attended philosophy courses. After her apprenticeship at the Institute for the Blind, Gisela continued her grammar school education and her interest in language, literature and philosophy. During her studies, she lived in the then newly opened branch of the municipal old people's home in Ziegelstadelgasse (now Rosenhaingasse).

As a blind Jewish woman, Gisela Kaufmann was an absolute exception at university and faced multiple obstacles. Only a few blind people had the opportunity to study; in Gisela's case, this was possible thanks to the devoted support of her father Nathan. For example, he helped Gisela to write down the contents of her lectures and translate them into Braille. The family's financial situation at this time was probably extremely difficult; various documents refer to Nathan Kaufmann as “unemployed”.

As a student, Gisela, like other female members of the university, was exposed to misogynistic prejudice from professors and male students. Some professors at the University of Graz actively fought against the habilitation of female academics in the interwar period. Furthermore, as a Jewish woman, Gisela had to study in Graz in a deeply anti-Semitic environment. During this time, there was hostility and even physical attacks against Jewish students and lecturers. Contact with anti-Semitic, German nationalist and National Socialist professors was unavoidable due to the widespread prevalence of these ideologies among university members and the small size of the university. Both the head of the Department of German Philology, Karl Polheim, and the head of the Department of Romance Philology, Adolf Zauner, later emerged as pronounced National Socialists. However, Gisela Kaufmann attended most of her courses with these two professors during her time as a student.

Despite these difficult circumstances, Gisela Kaufmann completed her courses by the summer semester of 1935 and worked for several years on her dissertation in literary studies. In her thesis, she examined the work of the German Biedermeier poet Eduard Mörike, analysing over 200 of his poems according to a set scheme. While Gisela was working on her dissertation, the University of Graz became the scene of the political terror of the National Socialist students. After the NSDAP and its sub-organisations were banned in June 1933, they acted from the underground and smeared swastikas, disrupted lectures and also took violent action against political opponents at the university. When there were numerous rallies and marches by National Socialists in Graz at the end of February 1938, the National Socialist students briefly occupied the university, which had to be temporarily closed on 25 February due to the events. When German troops marched into Austria on 12 March 1938 and the National Socialists carried-out the “Anschluss” of the country to the “German Reich”, Gisela Kaufmann was about to finish her studies. On 10 March 1938, she had already taken the one-hour doctoral viva, the first final oral examination of her doctoral studies.

When the National Socialists seized power, the University of Graz was immediately brought into line with the active support of many members of the university. The dismissal of teaching staff who were categorised as political opponents or considered Jewish according to the Nuremberg Laws was swift. Jews were banned from enrolment. Jewish students who had already enrolled were not immediately expelled from the university, but were tolerated on a conditional basis during the current semester. After the November pogrom, all Jews were barred from attending the university.



*Photo 8: Latin doctoral certificate of Gisela Kaufmann. Also named are Rector Johannes Reichelt, Dean Karl Polheim and promoter Erwin Schrödinger.  
© Kaufman family*

Like several other Jewish students who were about to graduate, Gisela Kaufmann managed to complete her degree in the summer semester of 1938 under enormous time pressure and in an environment that was hostile to her. On 25 June 1938, Gisela submitted her completed dissertation to her supervisor Karl Polheim for assessment. After the positive assessment of the thesis, she was admitted to the two-hour doctoral viva, which she passed on 4 July 1938. She was awarded her doctorate on 6 July 1938. As a Jewish woman, her doctorate had to be awarded “silently”, i.e. without an academic ceremony, without invited guests and in camera. Despite this shameful treatment, she received an honour in the person of her promoter. None other than the world-famous physicist and Nobel Prize winner Erwin Schrödinger administered the academic oath



to her. Schrödinger, who had come to Graz as a professor in 1936, was dismissed only a short time later due to “political unreliability” and fled in September 1938.

### **Persecution by the National Socialists and death “**

After completing her doctorate, Gisela Kaufmann came to Vienna on 1 October 1938 to the “Israelite Institute for the Blind” at Hohe Warte 32. The previously internationally renowned institution was converted by the National Socialists into a meagre “reservation” for blind, infirm and otherwise impaired Jews. From autumn 1938, all blind Jews from the “Ostmark” were to be housed here. Gisela Kaufmann was also relocated as part of this forced measure.

Her father Nathan moved to Vienna at the same time, where he lived very close to the home. He had already begun preparing to flee the country immediately after the “Anschluss” and was waiting for an entry permit from the Canadian authorities. Canada did not actively offer asylum to people fleeing the Nazi threat from Europe, but treated their applications indiscriminately from other immigration applications. Nathan Kaufmann finally obtained an entry permit through his son Josef, as he was a direct relative already living in Canada.

A letter from the “Emigration Office” of the Vienna Jewish Community described Nathan Kaufmann's difficult situation and referred to his devoted relationship with his daughter:

“Very poor man - without the slightest means ever possessed - helpless, dedicated his life to the blind child, wrote her lectures in Braille so that she could still do her doctorate in Graz after the upheaval [on] 4.7.38.”

He was faced with the difficult decision of leaving the country without his daughter. Only a few blind Jews managed to flee the “German Reich”, as they had little chance of obtaining the necessary visas. Their disability was considered a reason for refusal by immigration authorities, as it was assumed that blind people were barely able to support themselves. In the summer of 1939, Nathan Kaufmann finally reached Canada completely destitute. He had a photo of Gisela with him, which had been taken on the occasion of her doctorate, her doctoral certificate, a handwritten version of her doctoral thesis and a copy of it in Braille. Nathan struggled with the fact that he had had to leave his daughter behind and died in Montreal in January 1945 without knowing her fate.

The conditions at the Hohe Warte facility became increasingly oppressive for the residents due to overcrowding and inadequate care. Despite her plight, however, Gisela Kaufmann did not lose the courage to face life. It was in the home that she met Oskar Zeckendorf, another blind Jew, whom she married in Vienna on 7 May 1941. Only a short time later, on 3 October 1941, Gisela Kaufmann died at the age of 34 in Vienna General Hospital as a result of a tumour. She was buried at the New Jewish Cemetery at Vienna's Central Cemetery. At the time of Gisela's death, the systematic deportation and murder of the home's residents by the National Socialists began. Gisela's husband Oskar was taken to the Theresienstadt ghetto on 24 September 1942, where he died on 28 April 1943.

### **Remembrance and commemoration**

For a long time, the Kaufmann family was unsure what had happened to Gisela. The youngest brother Herbert, who had not emigrated to Canada like the rest of the family but lived in Casablanca, Morocco, in the

post-war period, made enquiries about his sister's whereabouts. He and the other siblings learnt of Gisela's death from an acquaintance living in Vienna. The memory of her life, her promotion as a blind Jew during the Nazi era and her denied escape from the clutches of the National Socialists are still very important in the family's memory today. The family subsequently had a gravestone erected for her at the New Jewish Cemetery at Vienna's Central Cemetery.



*Photo 9: Gravestone at the New Jewish Cemetery in Vienna, a plain grey-white marble block with a Star of David and the inscription: "Dr. Gisela Zeckendorf, née Kaufmann, 12.2.1907-3.10.1941". Next to it a metal marker with the inscription "Row 30" in the background, next to it a footpath, in the background further graves. © Kaufman family*

The fate of Gisela Kaufmann, like that of the other Jewish students who were expelled from the university after March 1938 or who were still able to complete their doctorates, was forgotten at the University of Graz for decades after 1945. Only in recent years have their stories been systematically researched. On 24 October 2023, *Stolpersteine* were laid on the university campus in memory of the expelled students of the Faculty of Philosophy and Law. The stone for Gisela Kaufmann was laid in front of the main university building. In autumn 2024, further *Stolpersteine* will be laid on the grounds of the Graz University Hospital for the Jewish students of the former Faculty of Medicine.

**Marco Jandl** is a historian and research associate at the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Graz. He is researching the biographies of Jewish students at the University of Graz in the academic year 1937/1938.

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*Photo 7: Portrait photo of Gisela Kaufmann on the occasion of her “silent” graduation. A classic studio picture. The doctoral candidate is dressed in dark clothes, holding the graduation scroll in her hand and facing the camera.  
© Kaufman family*



## A photo as biography - On the dissertation of the blind Germanist

### Gisela Kaufmann from Graz

Sebastian Meißl

The soul flies as far as heaven can reach,  
And genius exults within me! But tell me,  
Why does the look of melancholy dampen now?  
Is it happiness lost that moves me?  
Is it something yet to come that I bear within my heart?

- Go forth, spirit! Here, there can be no idle pause;  
It is a moment and everything will pass!  
*(Eduard Mörike: On a winter morning, before sunrise;  
translation by David Paley)*

The lines from Eduard Mörike's poem "On a winter morning, before sunrise" quoted in the introduction are significant in many respects for the biography of a personality whose fate, like that of many other contemporaries, threatens to "fade away" within the collective memory. Had the historian Barbara Hoffmann not discovered traces of this personality during the research for her dissertation „Between Integration, Co-operation and Destruction: Blind People in the 'Ostmark', Mörike's aforementioned fading would probably occur at this moment. The person we are talking about here is the blind German scholar Gisela Kaufmann from Graz, who, despite her Jewish faith, was able to complete her doctorate after Austria's "Anschluss" to Nazi-ruled Germany. Gisela Kaufmann's achievement was absolutely exceptional for her time, and in two respects: she was not only one of the first women to complete a doctorate in German Studies at the University of Graz; she also successfully completed her doctorate despite the fact that the National Socialist regime of terror systematically excluded or expelled Jewish teachers and students from the university.

In addition to the dissertation and the associated doctoral files, a photograph showing Gisela Kaufmann with her doctoral certificate also testifies to her special merit. However, the photo, which was taken after Gisela Kaufmann's "silent graduation", appears rigid, the doctoral graduate neither proud nor happy about her achievement. With reference to Mörike's verses, one could also speak of a look that is dampened with melancholy; even of a "idle pause" that, despite "her victory over the hardened conventions of a society that has long since taken the first steps towards complete collapse", is symptomatic of the paralysis of intellectual history during the Nazi era. The question "Is it happiness lost that moves me?", which Mörike places at the centre of the verse as the fourth of seven verses and which thus marks a caesura between the ambivalences created in the poem, such as earthly existence and a flying soul or the joy of existence and sadness, could be added to the photo as a signature. It shows a premonition of the political and social conditions that were already emerging in 1938: a "moment" of "happiness lost" becomes recognisable. A good three years after the photo was taken, Gisela Kaufmann died in Vienna General Hospital on 3 October 1941 as a result of a tumour. She was buried in the new Jewish burial ground of Vienna's Central Cemetery.

The French literary critic and language theorist Roland Barthes reflects on the expressiveness and symbolic nature of photographs in his famous memoir essay "The Bright Chamber". "The photograph must be silent [...]: this is not a question of discretion, but of music. Absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence)", he writes with regard to the receptive effect of photographs. The voice of a subject also seems to emerge from the silence of the photograph showing the graduated Gisela Kaufmann. Roland Barthes points out in his essay that it is always the depicted, i.e. the photographed subject or object, that comes before the photograph as a medium: "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see." Certainly, it is not the photograph that we see, but a subject: the person Gisela Kaufmann with her own biography, which is inscribed in the stillness of the image. The doctoral certificate, the dispassionate gaze, the outwardly noticeable blindness and a symptomatic "stillness" already anticipate important biographical stages. The composition of the picture looks like an arrangement of symbols, allowing the subject to emerge as a narrator.

It is thanks to Marco Jandl and Barbara Hoffmann that it has been possible to reconstruct the main aspects of Gisela Kaufmann's biography. The silent narrator in the photograph was given an audible voice - metaphorically speaking - that can be heard in both historical and cultural memory: from 1931 to 1935, Gisela Kaufmann studied at the Faculty of Philosophy at Graz University and worked on her dissertation in German philology. During this phase of her life, Eduard Mörike and the poem mentioned at the beginning are particularly significant, as Gisela Kaufmann completed her studies at the University of Graz with a doctoral thesis on the "Arrangement of Mörike's poems in the first collection". Mörike's poem "On a winter morning, before sunrise" is the first text that Gisela Kaufmann dealt with in her study. In the one-and-a-half-page introduction to the dissertation, she describes her thesis, which is explicitly directed against the commentary by Mörike's editor Rudolf Krauß: In contrast to Krauß, who claims that the poems in the first collection (Volume II of the "Sämtliche Werke") were strung together by Mörike arbitrarily and without „a coherent overarching principle“, Gisela Kaufmann examines both formal and content-related aspects that suggest a well-considered and coherent ordering of the individual poems. "Krauß seems to have overlooked the fact that Mörike wanted to create a work that could not appear monotonous in any direction precisely through the colourful arrangement of the sequences of his poems," is the introductory diagnosis of the dissertation. Gisela Kaufmann then continues: "His [Mörike's] collection has the effect of a book that is a whole and shows great variety. This is precisely what makes it so that, no matter how often one re-reads it, one never gets bored."

Contrary to the positivist German studies that were influential in Gisela Kaufmann's time - a German studies orientated towards scientific methods and evaluating literature on the basis of measurable criteria - she makes her own reading impressions the basis of her hermeneutic investigation. While Krauß failed in his attempt to sort Mörike's poems on the basis of clear and structure-defining features or a "grouping according to the character of the poems", the doctoral candidate pursues an approach according to which the significance of the poems and their arrangement in the volume cannot be exhausted even with repeated readings. Especially in the context of the late 1930s, this reception-orientated approach, which takes into account the practice of reading and the effect of the poems on the readers in the analysis, appears to be very modern and progressive.

Despite her blindness, Gisela Kaufmann was able to successfully complete her dissertation. This achievement seems all the more remarkable when one considers the difficult conditions for Jewish students after the National Socialists came to power in Austria. The supervisor of the thesis, Karl Polheim, who was also Rector of the University of Graz during the Nazi dictatorship (1939-1945), emphasised in his review: "The blind candidate worked with total immersion in the material; I can see this in the knowledge of the many approaches, revisions and improvements that have tirelessly transformed the thesis over the course of several years." Despite these words of praise, the conclusion of the work is relatively restrained: "So far, the results are good and useful. The author has not understood how to derive the meaning, the poet's view, the regularity from these groupings. In its paucity, the final sentence cannot replace the lack of a summarising and definitive result." In these lines, however, an ignorance of the method chosen by Gisela Kaufmann can be heard. With an indirect reference to the positivist approach prevalent at the time, which sought "regularity" based on the "poet's view", Polheim emphasises the inadequate results of the work. It was certainly the precarious socio-political and personal circumstances that demanded a quick conclusion. The „paucity“ of the short conclusion of the dissertation, which comprises only five sentences, clearly indicates this. Despite criticism, Gisela Kaufmann was admitted to the two-hour doctoral viva, which she passed on 4 July 1938. Two days later, she was awarded her doctorate, whereby the doctorate for Jewish students was awarded "silently", i.e. without a ceremony. The portrait photo mentioned several times captures this moment.

In the same year, Gisela Kaufmann and her father Nathan tried to flee from the National Socialists to Canada to join their emigrated family. The visa was refused due to Gisela's blindness. On 1 October 1938, Gisela Kaufmann finally arrived in Vienna at the Israelite Institute for the Blind on the Hohe Warte, which was transformed by the National Socialists after the "Anschluss" into a mere "reservation" for blind and infirm Jews.

The last traces of a happiness yet to come, to use Mörike's words, can be recognised in the marriage between Gisela Kaufmann and the blind Jew Oskar Zeckendorf. The two met during their stay at the Hohe Warte and married on 7 May 1941. Before the residents of the Institute for the Blind were systematically deported and murdered by the National Socialists, Gisela Kaufmann finally died on 3 October 1941.

Against the backdrop of this eventful biography, Mörike's lines of verse take on a very personal meaning. Lost and happiness yet to come, but also a jubilant genius and a life characterised by melancholy are characteristic of the fate of the blind Germanist Gisela Kaufmann. Although her photograph cannot tell the entire biography, let alone the entire story, it does give the subject a voice: a voice against forgetting, but also a voice against "idle pause". It captures a moment in time, protects it from "passing away" through history and bears witness to an admirable academic who achieved extraordinary things despite the difficult personal, health, political and social circumstances.

Reading Mörike's introductory lines of verse against the backdrop of Gisela Kaufmann's biography almost echoes a sentence by the Jewish religious historian Gershom Scholem, which the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin prefaces his famous ninth thesis from his 1940 essay "On the Concept of History": "My wing is ready to flight, I would like to turn back. If I stayed timeless time, I would have little luck." Like an angel of history, an "Angelus Novus" - the title of the painting by the painter Paul Klee that accompanied Walter Benjamin for a long time - we look at a personal history when we see Gisela Kaufmann's portrait painting. But in the spirit of Mörike's verse, "Go forth, spirit! Here, there can be no idle pause;

It is a moment and everything will pass!” we are swept along by progress, by the storm of the future, as Benjamin's ninth thesis puts it. Like the angel, we cannot “stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed“, but we can stretch out our wings, let ourselves be carried along by progress, ensure that we learn from the past and preserve the image from “fading away” in our memories.

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## ■ Studying in an unimaginable world

Tim Peters

When I was asked to contribute a text to this publication as a blind student of German studies, I spontaneously accepted without thinking twice. I began to look into the biography of Gisela Kaufmann and quickly realised that what little has been passed down about her student days leaves me speechless. The dystopia in which Gisela Kaufmann completed her studies, the uncertainties she had to overcome, the hostility she must have faced - all this is difficult for me to imagine. All the more impressive for me is the fact that she didn't give up despite all the opposition. That shows how enthusiastic she must have been about literary studies.

From today's perspective, the section about Gisela Kaufmann's time as a student reads like a report from a completely different world. I would have to lie if I said that the University of Graz no longer has any catching up to do in terms of inclusion, but the topic is at least on the agenda. While blind and visually impaired people used to rely heavily on the support of their relatives, today the Centre for Integrated Studies is working to make everyday university life as barrier-free as possible. Today, taking lecture notes or accessibility of literature is no longer a question of social background.

People with disabilities have become more visible at the University of Graz, be it at the level of employees in administration, at the institutes etc. or among the students. Lecturers are very keen to ensure that students can study smoothly. As a blind person, for example, you can take an exam orally or you can have the exam printed out in Braille. The support options, also due to the digitalisation of our society, cannot be compared with the conditions 90 years ago. Today, laptops are a constant companion for blind students. Smartphones and tablets make it possible to quickly scan a text and read it on a Braille display. The crucial thing, however, is that we as affected people fortunately live in a time in which we can make our voices heard. There are support organisations, counselling services and much more. Nevertheless, we should not let up in our efforts to promote inclusion. This requires committed students and university staff who talk to each other rather than about each other and work together to find solutions.

The story of Gisela Kaufmann, which is representative of so many fates in this cruel time, should remind us that a society that strives for inclusion and cohesion cannot be taken for granted. We are all called upon to defend and stand up for democracy and tolerance time and time again. On the one hand, Gisela Kaufmann's journey is a cautionary tale of what happens when authoritarian regimes take over. On the other hand, it is also proof that a disability does not have to hinder people and that you can achieve your goals with perseverance, hard work and incredible vitality. This makes it all the more important to keep the memories of such strong personalities alive and prevent them from being forgotten.

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