

CHAMBRÉ AND ELISOFFER FAMILIES PAPERS, 1890-1994 (bulk, 1920-1950) 2004.286.1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives
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Descriptive summary

Title: Chambré and Elsoffer families papers

Dates: 1890-1924 (bulk, 1920-1950)

Accession number: 2004.286.1

Creator: Chambré, Ernest and Ruth.

Extent: 6 boxes (2 oversize) (4.5 linear feet)

Repository: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW,
Washington, DC 20024-2126

Abstract: The Chambré and Elsoffer families papers consist of correspondence, documents, and photographs that recount the history of the Chambré and Elsoffer families in and around Giessen, Germany, including their lives prior to the rise of the Nazis, and their experiences of persecution by the Nazis and resulting emigration from Germany. Much of the collection focuses on the experiences of the family of Ernest Chambré in exile in Belgium, their arrest and deportation following the German invasion of that country, and the experiences of Ernest Chambré as he sought to escape, and was imprisoned repeatedly in Belgium, France, and Spain, prior to his release in 1943 and immigration first to Palestine, and then the United States. Included is extensive document of Ernest Chambré's efforts to obtain restitution following the war, and his contacts with a network of family members and friends as he sought to learn the fate of his immediate family, re-establish his life, and immigrate to the United States. Also documented are the experiences of sisters Ruth and Louise (Luise) Elsoffer, including their flight to France in the mid-1930s, their unsuccessful attempts to help their parents emigrate from Germany after 1938, Ruth's immigration to Palestine in the late 1930s, and their subsequent immigration to the United States. A small collection of papers and photographs from Louise's husband, Ernest Kamins (Ernst Kaminski), a physician originally from Bochum, Germany, who fled to the United States in the 1930s, is also included.

Languages: German, French, English, Spanish, Hebrew

Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open for use, but is stored offsite. Please contact the Reference Desk more than seven days prior to visit in order to request access.

Reproduction and use: Collection is available for use. Material may be protected by copyright. Please contact reference staff for further information.

Preferred citation: (Identification of item), Ernest and Ruth Chambré papers (2004.286.1), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

Acquisition information: Gift of Elly Gross, 2004, with accretions in 2008, 2010, and 2015.

Custodial history: Elly Gross, the neighbor of Ernest and Ruth Chambré in New York, received their papers after the death of Ruth Chambré in 2004, as well as those of Mrs. Chambré's sister and brother-in-law, Louise and Ernest Kamins.

Accruals: Accruals may have been received since this collection was first processed, see archives catalog at collections.ushmm.org for further information.

Processing history: Brad Bauer, October-November 2016.

Biographical note

Ernest Chambré (1909-1996) was born Ernst Ludwig Chambré on 4 November 1909 in the town of Lich, Hessen, Germany to Max (1879-1942?) and Emilie (née Voehl, 1881-1942?). The family's ancestors had lived in the area around Lich since the 1700s, and were descendants of Sephardic Jews who had left Spain, settled in France, and took as their last name the name of the town where they lived for many years, Chambrey-les-Pagny, in the Moselle River valley. Ernst went to secondary school (1919-1929) in nearby Giessen, and then studied law at the universities in Giessen (1929, and 1932-1933), Berlin (1930-1931), and Frankfurt (1931-1932). Both Ernest and his father were politically active in Lich during the 1920s, and their membership in the Social Democratic organization "Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold" ensured that they would be the target of Nazi persecution after the Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933. Ernest narrowly escaped an anti-Jewish pogrom in Lich in March 1933, since he was in Giessen waiting to take an examination at the university. His father was not as fortunate, and was arrested and severely beaten, sustaining injuries from which he never fully recovered. Warned not to return to Lich, Ernest fled to Belgium, living first in Marcinelle, and then settling in the town of Morlanwelz (Hainaut), near Charleroi, in 1934. He began working in various businesses, including a firm that sold motor oil, and also had a home that was large enough to take in boarders as well. In later accounts, he also claimed to have worked for Belgian security forces from 1935 to 1940, providing information about Germany, including plans that he had obtained for the construction of the Siegfried Line. His parents and sister, Anne-Marie, initially fled to Kassel and then Berlin, but subsequently joined Ernest in Belgium. Following Kristallnacht in 1938, he was also able to obtain visas to bring his sister Henriette, her husband Fritz Hahn, and their two daughters to Belgium as well, and they joined him in Morlanwelz.

When German forces attacked Belgium in May 1940, Chambré, along with his brother-in-law Fritz Hahn, and other Jewish emigres, was arrested and detained, first in Charleroi, then Tournai, and then later deported by railway to France. After the French capitulation to the Germans in June 1940, Chambré was

handed over to Vichy authorities and interned, first at St. Cyprien, and then Argeles-sur-Mer. In November 1940 he was released, and he illegally moved to Perpignan, where posing as a Frenchman, he gained employment at a hospital and sought to help other Jewish refugees escape. He lived underground for a period of time, then went to Marseilles, where he sought the help of the American Consulate, hoping to emigrate. In September 1942, members of the French underground helped smuggle him out of France with a false identity, travelling first to Toulouse, then Lourdes, and over the Pyrenées by foot. On the Spanish side of the border he was arrested, and sent for interrogation first to Pamplona, and then in November 1942, to the concentration camp at Miranda de Ebro, where he remained until April 1943. While at Miranda, he became acquainted with many of the Belgian prisoners there, and worked to help improve their conditions. After his release he travelled to Madrid, and then on to Portugal, from which he left for Palestine in April 1944. During this time, he contacted the Belgian consulates in Lisbon and Jerusalem, as he sought to join the Belgian armed forces in Great Britain, but was refused, and also sought to obtain Belgian citizenship, and after the liberation of that country, to return there, but was refused each time.

In 1947, Ernest married Ruth Elsoffer, a native of Giessen who he had met at a dance there prior to emigration, and with whom he renewed his acquaintance after arriving in Palestine. After their wedding, Ernest joined Ruth in the United States, a few months after she had immigrated there, and he began working in a number of different business in import and export trade, based in New York. Later in life, while working for the U.S. Customs Service, he became known as a collector of rare early American documents, and occasionally curated exhibits of such documents. His interest in Jewish genealogy, and in particular the history of his own family and other Jews of Lich and Giessen, led him to renew acquaintance with local historians and with schoolchildren there who were interested in documenting the history of Jewish families prior to the Nazi era. Ernest Chambré died on 20 June 1996. The year following his death, a foundation based in Lich, the Ernst-Ludwig Chambré Stiftung zu Lich, dedicated to preserving the history of the Jewish community there, was founded and named in his honor.

Ruth Edith Chambré (1911-2004) was born in Giessen, Germany on 18 February 1911, the second daughter of Hugo (1878-1942) and Johanna (née Rothenberger, 1887-1917) Elsoffer, and was the younger sister to Louise. Her father had studied law at the University of Giessen, and after graduation, practiced that profession there. Ruth's mother died when she was six, and her father eventually remarried, with his second wife also being named Johanna (née Cohen, 1883-1942). After the rise of the Nazis in Germany, the Elsoffers persuaded their daughters to leave Germany, and both ended up in France. Ruth decided to immigrate to Palestine, but first spent two years at an agricultural training camp (hachscharah) in the Haute-Garonne region in France. Once she arrived in Palestine, she lived and worked on a kibbutz, but eventually trained to become a pediatric nurse. During this time, her father was arrested after Kristallnacht in 1938, and imprisoned at Buchenwald, but released a month later. Both he and Johanna were deported, with other Jews from Giessen, on 30 September 1942, first to a collecting site in Darmstadt, and then eastward, presumably to Treblinka, where they were likely murdered soon after arrival.

Toward the end of World War II, Ruth met a former acquaintance from Giessen who had recently arrived in Palestine, Ernest Chambré, and the two married in 1947, shortly before Ruth immigrated to the United States, where she initially stayed with her aunt and uncle, Eugen and Margot Rothenberger, in New York. When Ernest joined her there, they decided to stay in New York, settling in Queens, and Ruth pursued the medical training that she had earlier interrupted, obtaining a doctor in podiatry degree in 1954. Ruth Chambré died in New York on 17 February 2004.

Luise Elsoffer, later Louise Kamins (1909-1990), was born in Giessen, Germany on 22 May 1909. After completing her secondary school studies in Giessen in 1928, she began studying law at universities in Munich, Geneva, Berlin, Giessen, and Frankfurt, until the time when she fled Germany in 1936, settling in France. She resumed her university studies, but focused on languages and literature instead, teaching German at schools in France from 1938-1941, and obtaining certificates in the study of French as a foreign language in Paris, and obtaining a doctorate in French language and literature at the University of Marseille in 1941. Shortly after that, she managed to emigrate, travelling first to Paraguay, and then from there, to the United States in late 1941. After teaching at a school in rural Maine, she enrolled at the Harvard University School of Education (Radcliffe College), from which obtained a master's degree in teaching in 1944, and taught foreign languages for many years after that in secondary schools in New England, Michigan, and New Jersey. She married fellow émigré Ernest Kamins in the mid-1940s, and after his death, appears to have remarried and took that last name of Scheer. She died in New York in 1990.

Ernest Kamins (1899-1963) was born Ernst Kaminski on 4 December 1899 in Bochum, Germany, the son of Wilhelm and Mathilde (née Gräupner) Kaminski. He interrupted his schooling in Bochum when he was inducted into the Germany Army toward the end of World War I in 1917, but following demobilization in 1919, he returned to complete his secondary schooling. He then studied medicine at the universities of Münster (1919), Würzburg (1919-1920), Breslau (1920-1921), Berlin (1921-1922), Rostock (1922) and Bonn (1922-1923), where he completed his examinations in 1924, and graduated with a doctor of medicine in 1926. After residencies at hospitals in Breslau, Hannover, and Hamburg between 1925 and 1928, Kaminski worked as a physician with a specialization in internal medicine in Hamburg and Berlin. In late 1935 or early 1936, likely when he could no longer practice medicine, he left Germany and immigrated to the United States. He changed his name to Ernest Kamins and married Lee Kraus in New York in 1937, and became a U.S. citizen in 1940. He was able to establish a medical practice, and at some subsequent point, married Louise Elsoffer. Ernest Kamins died in New York on 31 December 1963.

Scope and content of collection

The Chambré and Elsoffer families papers consist of correspondence, documents, and photographs that recount the history of the Chambré and Elsoffer families in and around Giessen, Germany, including their lives prior to the rise of the Nazis, and their experiences of persecution by the Nazis and resulting emigration from Germany. Much of the collection focuses on the experiences of the family of Ernest Chambré in exile in Belgium, their arrest and deportation following the German invasion of that country, and the experiences of Ernest Chambré as he sought to escape, and was imprisoned repeatedly in Belgium, France, and Spain, prior to his release in 1943 and immigration first to Palestine, and then the United States. Included is extensive document of Ernest Chambré's efforts to obtain restitution following the war, and his contacts with a network of family members and friends as he sought to learn the fate of his immediate family, re-establish his life, and immigrate to the United States. Also documented are the experiences of sisters Ruth and Louise (Luise) Elsoffer, including their flight to France in the mid-1930s, their unsuccessful attempts to help their parents emigrate from Germany after 1938, Ruth's immigration to Palestine in the late 1930s, and their subsequent immigration to the United States. A small collection of papers from Louise's husband, Ernest Kamins (Ernst Kaminski), a physician originally from Bochum, Germany, who fled to the United States in the 1930s, is also included.

The Chambré collection is grouped according to the following family members, and then within each one, in sub-series by document type:

Ernest Chambré and family:

- Documents that can help establish biographical data about Chambré and his family, such as birth and marriage certificates, educational records, genealogies and immigration documents, are included in the “Biographical” sub-series.
- The sub-series titled “Flight and Emigration” groups together documents that relate the experiences of Ernest Chambré and his family in exile, including their years in exile in Belgium, the period when Ernest was living in France, both in the underground and as a prisoner, his imprisonment in Spain, and his life in Palestine prior to immigration to the United States. A significant part of this sub-series are the correspondence received by Chambré during his internment at the Miranda de Ebro concentration camp in Spain, and his correspondence with Belgian diplomatic authorities in Spain, Portugal, and Palestine following his release, when he was attempting to either join the Belgian army in exile or return to that country after its liberation. Also included are the few letters Chambré received from his parents after his imprisonment and prior to their deportation, as well as those he wrote for them but which were never received.
- The “Correspondence” subseries dates primarily from the period after Ernest’s liberation in 1943, and relates to his contacts with various family members throughout Europe, the United States, and South America, with whom he sought to re-establish contact, as well as friends and other contacts in Belgium who had aided his family prior to their deportation. Files of note include correspondence with his uncle and aunt, Ernest and Minna Chambré, in San Jose, California, who sought to obtain his release from Miranda de Ebro, and provided affidavits for his immigration to the United States; Regine Hahn, his sister Henriette’s mother-in-law who survived the war in hiding in Belgium, and who moved to Portugal following the war; Otto Heymann, a friend in Brussels who was interned with Ernest at St. Cyprien; Mrs. A. Pourbaix, a widow in Carnières, Belgium who had been a friend of Ernest’s family, and provided shelter to Regine Hahn during the German occupation; and Julius Katten, a cousin living in London, with whom he shared the most detailed accounts of his imprisonment and escapes between 1940 and 1943. Also included is Ernest’s correspondence during the post-war years with contacts in his home town of Lich, especially as Ernest’s interest in the Jewish history of this town and his family’s genealogy increased.
- Photographs: The photographs in this sub-series include pre-war photographs of the Chambré family, childhood photographs of Ernest, as well as post-immigration photographs with his wife, Ruth, and various unidentified friends or relatives in the United States. Also included is an album of family photographs, dating from the 1910s or 1920s.
- Restitution: This sub-series focuses on several aspects of restitution that Ernst pursued. A folder on funds recovered from Spain documents the money that was confiscated from Ernest while imprisoned in Spain, and how he sought to recover those funds in the years following his release. After the war, and his immigration to the United States, Ernest pursued two different paths of restitution, which are documented in this series. He tried to obtain compensation from Belgian authorities and with the help of victim advocacy groups, for the family’s property at their home in Morlanwelz, which was seized by the German occupation forces after the Chambré family had been deported to the camps in 1942. Chambré also pursued compensation through the West German *Bundesentschädigungsgesetz* (BEG) in the 1950s and early 1960s, for losses incurred by the forced bankruptcy of the family’s business in Lich, by the damages caused to the health of Max Chambré by his beating at the hands of Nazis in Lich in 1933, for damages to Chambré’s own health due to beatings he endured while interned at camps in France, for his father’s life insurance policy, and for family belongings, such as collections of porcelain and postage stamps. According to the documentation here, it appears that Chambré’s claims were

mostly denied, or in some cases were approved at amounts much lower than he felt were just. One subset of the German claims is a file of correspondence with an attorney in Paris, Mathieu Muller, documenting the efforts of Chambré to recover a group of documents he had left in safekeeping with a family in Marseille, while he was fleeing the Nazis in 1942, and which were necessary to support his German claims, but which he was never able to obtain.

Elsoffer family papers: These cover the emigration experiences of Ruth Elsoffer Chambré and her sister, Luise Elsoffer, later known as Louise Kamins Scheer, but also contain pre-war documents and photographs related to their parents and stepmother, and other relatives.

- **Biographical:** As with the Chambré biographical documents, these also consist primarily of materials that establish biographical data about the lives of Ruth and Luise Elsoffer and their family, such as birth and marriage certificates, educational records, immigration documents, and in the post-war period, contacts with tracing services trying to determine the fate of their parents.
- **Flight and emigration:** This sub-series consists primarily of immigration and travel documents, as well as some ephemeral documents dating from the period when the sisters lived in either France or Palestine, prior to arrival in the United States.
- **Correspondence:** This sub-series consists primarily of correspondence with immediate family members, including letters between Ruth and Louise (Lulu), letters from Ruth to her aunt and uncle, Eugen and Margot Rothenberger, during the period when they lived in France and Ruth was living and working on a *hachscharah* in southern France; as well as correspondence with family members and friends seeking help in trying to get her parents out of Germany after 1938. The bulk of these materials relate to the efforts of Ruth, living in Palestine, and her sister, Louise, living in France, to help their parents escape Germany in the months after Kristallnacht. Included is extensive correspondence from Hugo and Johanna Elsoffer to Ruth, from 1938 up until the time when they were sent on a transport to the east in September 1942. Most of the correspondence reflects the desperation of the Elsoffers as they sought to leave Germany after Hugo's imprisonment following Kristallnacht. There are related letters from Louise to Ruth, and between Ruth and others seeking help to get her parents out of Germany (see files on Max and Jenny Schoenthal, the cousin and aunt of Ruth, living in London; Hugo and Johanna Cohen, her aunt and uncle in Amsterdam; and Moritz Rokowsky, of Basel, to whom she was advised to turn for help). Correspondence from Louise to Ruth also reflects her own journey from France to the United States, by way of South America, in 1940-1941.
- **Photographs:** This sub-series contains images of Ruth and Louise's family in the pre-war years, albums assembled by Ruth during her adolescent and young adult years in Germany, images from the *hachscharah* in France as well as her time in Palestine, and post-war images of both Ruth and Louise in New York.
- **News clippings:** Also included is a set of partial issues of German-language newspapers for Jewish readers, including the *Jüdisches Nachrichtenblatt* (Berlin) and the *Yedioth Hayom* (Tel Aviv), which were presumably saved by Ruth.

Ernest Kamins (Ernst Kaminski): This series is divided in a similar manner, with most of the materials either consisting of documents related to his education and training as a doctor in Germany, from 1919-1930, and an extensive collection of photographs—some identified but most not—of Kamins, his family, and his extensive circle of friends and classmates in Germany, up to the early 1930s.

Oversize: This series contains mostly photo albums, diplomas, proclamations, and other documents too large to fit in standard-size archival boxes, but otherwise represented in each of the series above.

System of arrangement

The Chambré and Elsoffer families papers are arranged in four series, three by family members and one by format: I. Chambré family papers. II. Elsoffer family papers. III. Ernst Kaminski family papers. IV. Oversize materials. Items grouped into sub-series based on format and document type. At the time of acquisition, there was no original order to the papers, and the current order was devised by the processing archivist at the time of arrangement and description.

Indexing terms

Personal names

Chambré, Max
Chambré, Amalie
Chambré, Annemarie
Hahn, Henriette
Hahn, Fritz
Elsoffer, Hugo
Elsoffer, Johanna

Topical headings

Jews--Germany--Giessen.
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Germany--Giessen (Hesse)
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Belgium.
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--France.
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Reparations.
Jewish refugees--Belgium.
Jewish refugees--France.
Jewish refugees--Palestine.
Jewish refugees--New York (State)--New York.
Miranda de Ebro (Concentration camp)
Germany--Emigration and immigration--History--20th century.

Geographical headings

Giessen (Hesse, Germany)
Lich (Hesse, Germany)

CONTAINER LIST

Box Folder Subseries/folder title

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