

**HESS AND SPIER FAMILIES PAPERS, circa 1903-2010**  
**2016.461.1**

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives  
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW  
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**Descriptive summary**

Title: Hess and Spier families papers

Dates: circa 1903-2010.

Accession number: 2016.461.1

Creator: Hess, Hannah Spier; and Hess, Walter.

Extent: 10 folders.

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

Abstract: Consists of two typescript memoirs of Walter Hess, originally of Ruppichterth, Germany, and his wife, Hannah Spier Hess, originally of Wolfenbüttel, Germany, relating the experiences of their families who fled Germany in 1939 due to anti-Semitic persecution, and who settled in New York: "Refugee's Journey: A Memoir" (365 pages), by Walter Hess, and "An Extraordinary Woman," by Hannah S. Hess (421 pages, undated, circa 2007), as well as pre-war photographs of the family of Hannah Spier Hess, taken in Germany.

Languages: English, German.

**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), Hess and Spier families papers (2016.461.1), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

Acquisition information: Gift of Hannah S. Hess and Walter Hess, 2016.

Related materials: Walter and Hannah Hess also donated a menorah that had belong to Mrs. Hess's father, Alfred Spier, and which was carried by her mother to Ecuador when she immigrated in 1939. The menorah is cataloged separately from the archival collection. In addition, a copy of the memoir of Hannah Spier Hess, as well as assorted family documents of the family of Walter Hess, are also held at the archive of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York (<https://www.lbi.org/>). Included in the Walter Hess family collection is a letter sent to Walter Hess's parents by Moses and Henrietta Hess prior to their deportation to Theresienstadt.

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

Processing history: Processed by Brad Bauer, November 2016.

### **Biographical note**

Hannah Spier Hess was born on 12 February 1934 in Hannover, Germany, the daughter of Alfred Spier (1900-1937), a teacher, and Ruth (née Steinberg, 1903-1981) Spier. Alfred, who grew up on a farm in Zwesten (Hessen), met Ruth, a native of Wolfenbüttel, while he was studying to be a teacher, and working at the Jewish school where Ruth's father taught. The two married in 1928, settled in Frankfurt am Main, where Alfred found a position as a teacher, but a year later, moved to Hannover, where they had two daughters, Elisabeth (born 1930) and Hannah. In July 1937, while visiting Alfred's family on their farm, Alfred suffered a heart attack and died. Concerned with the rising anti-Semitism in Germany for some time, Ruth decided the best plan was to leave Germany with her two young daughters. In March 1939, the three of them left Germany for the Netherlands, and from there to Ecuador, where they remained for one year, before being permitted to immigrate to the United States. They settled in New York, where some of their relatives and friends already lived, and Ruth eventually found work in the garment industry. Hannah later studied at Hunter College, and met and married a fellow emigre from Germany, Walter Hess, in the early 1950s. After obtaining a master's degree at the University of California, Los Angeles, Hannah and Walter returned to New York, where she became a teacher.

Walter Hess was born Wolfgang Hess on 26 May 1931 in Siegburg, Germany, but grew up in the village of Ruppichteroth, near Bonn, the son of Oscar and Melitta (nee Krämer) Hess. His father was a cattle dealer, as was his father, Moses Hess. In addition to Walter, there were three other siblings: Karl (born 1932), Peter (born 1937) and Franklin (born 1941). Following Kristallnacht in November 1938, Oskar Hess was arrested and sent to Dachau, where he was imprisoned for a month and then released. After his return home, the family made plans to emigrate, and were able to leave Germany the following year, arriving in Guayaquil, Ecuador on 1 September 1939, the day when Germany invaded Poland. The Hess family settled in Quito, living there until June 1940, when they were able to immigrate to the United States, where they arrived in New York and settled in the neighborhood of Washington Heights. Walter attended George Washington High School, followed by City College (now City University) of New York. Following his graduation in 1952, he was inducted into the U.S. Army, and deployed to Germany, where he was stationed with American forces in Bavaria. During one of his leaves while stationed there, he travelled back to Ruppichteroth, visiting his hometown for the first time since 1939. Following his release from the Army, he studied for a master's degree in film at the University of California, Los Angeles, but after those studies, returned to New York and pursued a career as a film editor.

Although Walter's immediate family survived via emigration, his grandparents, Moses and Henrietta Hess, were taken in June 1941 from their home in Ruppichterorth to an internment camp in Much (near Cologne), and in July 1942 were deported to Theresienstadt, where Moses died in October 1942, and Henrietta died in 1944.

### **Scope and content of collection**

The Hess and Spier families papers consist of two typescript memoirs: "Refugee's Journey: A Memoir" (365 pages), by Walter Hess, and "An Extraordinary Woman," by Hannah S. Hess (421 pages, undated, circa 2007), as well as pre-war photographs of the family of Hannah Spier Hess, taken in Germany. The memoir of Hannah Hess focuses on the life of her mother, Ruth, describing her childhood in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, the history of her parents, Siegfried and Fanni Steinberg, her marriage to Alfred Spier, the birth and childhood of their two daughters, her immigration to the United States with her daughters following her husband's death, and their life in New York, primarily in Washington Heights, from the 1940s through the end of Ruth's life. The memoir of Walter Hess focuses largely on his childhood in Ruppichterorth, Germany, describing their farming life, his dawning awareness of anti-semitism toward the late 1930s, the imposition of anti-Jewish measures in his town, his family's eventual emigration from Germany by way of Holland, their arrival in Ecuador in 1939, and later immigration to the United States, his childhood and adolescence in New York, and his induction into the U.S. Army, including his deployment to Germany and return to his hometown in 1953.

### **System of arrangement**

The Hess and Spier families papers are arranged in two series: I. Memoirs, II. Photographs.

### **Indexing terms**

#### *Personal headings*

Spier, Alfred (1900-1937)  
Spier, Ruth (1903-1981).  
Spier, Elisabeth (1930-2015)  
Steinberg, Siegfried.  
Hess, Oskar (1901-1976)  
Hess, Melitta (1906-1998)

#### *Topical headings*

Jews--Germany--Wolfenbüttel  
Jews--Germany--Ruppichterorth.  
Jews--Germany--North Rhine-Westphalia.  
Jews--Germany--Lower Saxony.  
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Germany--North Rhine-Westphalia.  
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Germany--Lower Saxony.  
Germany--Emigration and immigration.  
Jewish refugees--Ecuador--Biography.  
Jewish refugees--New York (State)--New York--Biography.

#### *Geographical headings*

Ruppichterorth (Germany)  
Wolfenbüttel (Germany)

Ecuador  
Washington Heights (New York, N.Y.)

## CONTAINER LIST

### I. Memoirs

- Hess, Hannah Spier: "An Extraordinary Woman"
- 1 Pages 1-200
- 2 Pages 201-420
- Hess, Walter: "Refugees Journey: a Memoir"
- 3 Pages 1-200
- 4 Pages 201-365

### II. Photographs

- 5 Hess, Hannah Spier: childhood photographs, circa 1934-1936
- 6 Spier, Alfred, undated, circa 1915-1937
- 7 Spier, Alfred and Ruth: wedding photographs, 1928
- 8 Spier, Ruth Steinberg, 1926, and undated ca. 1903-1930s
- 9 Spier family, 1928 and undated
- 10 Steinberg family: includes Siegfried and Fanni Steinberg, and other relatives, 1928-1933, and Undated