

Letter by Werner Heisenberg, Ueberlingen 4-8-1948

Dear Rolf,

Your sign of life was a very heartfelt joy; it is so good that at least some of the old comrades can be found on the other shore after the major ship wreck.

I want to report to you our fate:

At the beginning of the war I was summoned to Berlin for work on atomic research; I ended up being something like the head of this entire endeavor, and was very happy that due to the limited German capacity in industry we were not even expected to make an atomic weapon; we only worked on nuclear machines. My family was initially living in Leipzig; I mostly came home there, from Berlin, on weekends.

On the first of March 43, I was with two of my children at my parents in-law, in Berlin; there we experienced the first major air strike: the house we lived in was severely damaged, we spent the whole night extinguishing the fire. Then I made the quick decision to also vacate the Leipzig house, take the family to Urfeld on Lake Walchen. Our Leipzig house was completely destroyed on December 4th, 43. I myself have experienced almost all the major air strikes from the autumn of '43 to the summer of '44 in Berlin. One time I saw- after one of these strikes not far from our institute- how some people were trying desperately to dig up the debris of a house in search of life; when I approached to offer help, I found Werner Marwede in his search for friends. After this chance encounter I have not seen him again, but do know that he is still alive.

My Berlin institute (The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics, under my Leadership since 41) was relocated in the autumn of '43 to the small town of Hechingen, (30 km south of Tübingen. There I had a small apartment in which I lived almost continuously, starting in the fall of 44. I was able to visit my family in Urfeld occasionally. In Berlin, at the time, I also was endeavoring to achieve a better turn in the political situation. Just on July 12, 44 I had Major General Beck, Botsch, v. Hassel, Min. Popitz, Prof. Jessen (?), here as my guests; you do know that all of them were executed in the aftermath of 20th of July 44. At any rate, every intervention at the time was in vain. That I myself was not harmed was most likely thanks to the work on Uranium. Starting in August '44, I was mostly in Hechingen. Particularly the last months of the war there are very good memories: the glorious Swabian landscape, the nice people, much music (in February 44, yet, we performed a real concert there!!), and almost every day, on the country roads, the hunt of the airplanes above when I rode my bicycle 15 kilometers to my distant work,. I learned then that the hunt can be very much fun for the hare too, (at least it was much less dangerous than the air raids in Berlin), particularly with blue skies and sunshine. I then remained with my institute, whose staff I had to protect from service in the Volkssturm, until the arrival of the French. In the night before, when I saw that nothing could go wrong anymore, I rode by bicycle to my family. This three day bicycle tour from Hechingen to Urfeld is one of the most beautiful trips of my life. The weather was unbelievably good, in the South there glistened the entire chain of the Oberstdorf mountains, and one knew: the war was over in a few weeks, and one only had to get through these three weeks with the family (we had by now six children, 3 boys and 3 girls) . I came to Urfeld on April

21.45. My mother at the time lived in a little room in Mittenwald, after her Munich apartment had been destroyed, I then brought her also to Urfeld.

The final days looked rather foreboding: While Kochel and Krun were already occupied by the Americans, SS factions and mountain soldiers settled themselves for defense with us. The huts on the Hezogstand too were all taken up, so the only thing we could do was protect ourselves in our house somewhat with sandbags and such in the basement. On the morning of May 3rd there were some minor skirmishes, all bridges and streets had already been blown up. In the afternoon three armed men broke into our house, who turned out to be American officers, on orders to arrest me. I sat down with the commander in our living room to discuss everything further. By then the SS had noticed the Americans and there ensued some shooting; the children were sent to the basement, the American in command handled the small skirmish from our terrace and I looked on from the living room. Eventually it all ended again. I then stayed for another night at home and the Americans allowed me to come along on a shopping trip for food for the family. I then stayed for another night and was allowed to go shopping with the Americans buying food for the family. Then I was brought first to Heidelberg, then to Paris, Belgium, and finally to England where I was kept imprisoned until January 46. We were always among our little group of ten atomic physicists and treated very well.

Unfortunately, my family fared very poorly after I had been taken away from Urfeld. My wife, the children, and my mother endured terrible hunger, the children searched the garbage heaps of the Americans for any remnants. On July 17th 1945 my mother died there, having apparently slipped in a moment of weakness and broken her upper thigh. A young friend of my wife who was living with us together with her child died shortly thereafter of an infection, so that my wife, almost without any help, had to take care of seven children. When I returned from England, I was soon able to take care of them again, and since Sept. 46 we have been living together in a nice house in Goettingen. We are now doing quite well; I still am active with much chamber music playing, and am trying, despite much work, to practice. Currently I am with my wife and two children in Ueberlingen for respite.

Of our friends from the old times many are not alive anymore. Eberhard Ruedel, Fritz Becker, Karl Evers, Walter Weigmann were killed in action. Kurt Pfluegel was taken by the Russians to Kujbischar (?). Karl Sonntag is living back in Munich again, has tried to start a publishing house. Robert Honsell lives in Oberaudorf. Heini Marwede lives in Baden-Baden and is working together with French insurance agencies. The Marwede parents are living in Wertheim, where the husband of Jenny is a pastor. Wolfgang Ruedel is a pastor in Augsburg; he has to my knowledge also six or seven children. Of my children two of them, a girl age 10 and a boy age 8, are currently in Switzerland with friends. My oldest boy (10 years) is already playing the violin quite nicely; I accompany him sometimes in the Beethoven Menuett and am thinking then of the Castle Prunn!

In old friendship ,

Yours Werner