

Kate Mendels & Leopold Herzberg

Title: *Noble is Man*

Author: Kate Mendels & Leopold Herzberg with Ursula Cher

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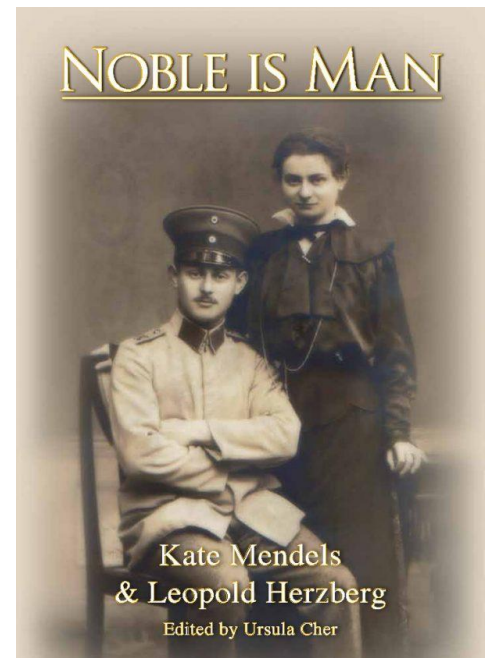
Cities/towns/camps: Germany: Westphalia, Buchenwald.

Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: *Kristallnacht*; concentration camp; Jewish refugee



Beginning in 1886, *Noble is Man* details Jewish life in Westphalia, Germany, spanning World War I and the Weimar Republic. The narrative captures the escalating horrors of Nazi rule, detailing *Kristallnacht* and Leopold Herzberg's imprisonment in Buchenwald. Following his release, the family escaped to Australia, where they build a new life in Sydney.

Pages 1-95, written by Kate (Käthe) Mendels, cover the Herzberg family history, their upbringing and the impact of the First World War. Pages 96-140, also written by Kate, recount the interwar years and rise of Nazism. Pages 141-84 comprise her brother Leopold's incomplete manuscript, translated into English by his daughter Ursula Cher, describing his arrest during *Kristallnacht* and incarceration in Buchenwald. Pages 185-238 are Kate's account of Leopold's release, the family's subsequent emigration to Australia, and their wartime and post-war experiences. Pages 239-68 contain family photographs as well as notes by Ursula. The text is interspersed with 82 historical documents and photographs.

Leopold Herzberg (born 22 September 1891) and his sister Kate Mendels (née Herzberg; born 25 February 1895) were raised in Gütersloh, Germany, the children of Bertha Levinsohn and Joseph Herzberg. Joseph, a widower with young children from a previous marriage, worked as a kosher butcher, supplying both the small Jewish community and the broader population. Leopold and Kate had two older siblings, Helene and Paul David, as well as three half-siblings from their father's first marriage: Saloman, Rosa, and Hermann. The Herzberg family were devout; they attended synagogue regularly and the children were educated at a Jewish school.

When the First World War broke out, all four Herzberg sons were conscripted into the German Army. In 1915, two were killed in action. The following year, their father Joseph died after a period of illness.

In 1926, Kate married Karl Mendels and Leopold married Ella Mendels, Karl's sister. After their marriage, Karl and Kate relocated to Harsewinkel, where they had two children, Paulhermann and Erika. Leopold and Ella also had two children, Walter and Ursula. Karl was a successful cattle and horse dealer and his family also operated a drapery business. Leopold ran a prosperous housewares store in Gütersloh, specialising in stoves, china, and crystal.

In the years following the First World War, the family witnessed growing antisemitism. Antisemitic leaflets circulated locally, accusing Jews of greed and of undermining the war effort. Economic conditions further deteriorated during the Great Depression, compounding the instability of the period.

In 1933, shortly after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, the Nazis launched a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses. A Brownshirt – who had previously been a business associate of Karl – was stationed outside the Mendels' drapery shop, but failed to deter customers.

In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws introduced harsher antisemitic restrictions. The following year, Karl's younger brother Ludwig emigrated to Australia. As antisemitic measures intensified, former friends increasingly distanced themselves from the Mendel family while others assured them of their loyalty and continued to patronise their businesses. As a result, the family enterprises initially remained largely unaffected.

By 1937, however, many friends and relatives had emigrated, and economic pressures intensified. Government decrees barred Jewish children from attending government school and Paulhermann and Erika studied at home. These developments prompted the Herzberg and Mendel families to seek emigration. Karl wrote to Ludwig with a request for nine landing permits. Preparations were made to sell their home and organise their departure.

On 9 November 1938, Nazi paramilitaries and their supporters launched the *Kristallnacht* pogrom. In the middle of the night, Nazi thugs broke into the Herzberg home in Gütersloh, smashing windows and ransacking the house. Leopold was beaten, arrested by the SS and taken to the local jail with other Jewish men, where he endured harsh interrogations and survived on meagre rations. On 11 November, the prisoners were sent to Buchenwald concentration camp; they were starved, savagely beaten, and crammed into overcrowded barracks, where filth and deprivation bred a raging typhoid epidemic.

A Catholic stronghold, Harsewinkel gave little support to the pogrom. Local residents hid the Mendel family's valuables and protested the Nazi measures. On 10 November, Stormtroopers arrived from Warendorf in a failed attempt to arrest Karl, who was away on business. They proceeded to break into the Mendels' shop and attempt to force entry into their home. As they gathered outside the property, intending to burn it down, neighbours intervened. Clashes followed, and the truck in which the Stormtroopers had arrived was overturned. The local policeman eventually restored order and the *Aktion*

was called off. However, when Karl returned home – believing the danger had passed – he was immediately arrested by Nazis waiting nearby. As Karl was detained later than others, he was not deported to the camps, which had already reached capacity.

After two weeks in custody, Australian landing permits for the Mendel and Herzberg families arrived. Armed with this documentation, Kate appealed directly to the mayor and secured Karl's release. Following his release, Karl travelled to Gestapo headquarters to obtain Leopold's freedom, and he was finally released from Buchenwald on 27 November.

In March 1939, Leopold and Kate left Germany for Holland with their families and their mother Bertha. They boarded the Dutch ship *Sibajak* from Rotterdam, arriving in Sydney in April. Karl and Kate established a successful confectionary shop while Leopold became a factory owner, making children's clothing and aprons. In 1941, Leopold Herzberg wrote an account of his experiences of *Kristallnacht* and Buchenwald in German. He died in 1957, and his memoir was later translated by his daughter Ursula.

After their arrival the Herzberg and Mendels families worked tirelessly to secure landing permits for the rest of their family in Germany, but the onset of the war thwarted their efforts.

Noble Is Man presents a detailed autobiographical account of Kate Mendel's life, discussing her childhood in Westphalia, her experiences during the First World War, and the gradual rise of Nazism culminating in *Kristallnacht* and the family's escape to Australia. Beginning in 1886, Kate's narrative offers rich depictions of family and communal life within small German Jewish communities, reflecting on Jewish participation in civic, cultural, and military life and the brief optimism of the Weimar years before mounting antisemitic persecution under Nazism. The memoir also explores varied experiences and responses to Nazi oppression, including acts of support and resistance. Edited by Ursula Cher, Leopold's daughter, the memoir is supported by historical notes.