

The Fate of the LDS East German Mission Home in World War II

Roger P. Minert

Before the outbreak of World War II, the headquarters of the LDS Church's East German Mission in Berlin was on the main floor of a stately villa at Händelallee 6. Across the street to the south was the famous Tiergarten Park—Berlin's equivalent to New York's Central Park. The Siegessäule (Victory Tower), one of the famous landmarks of Germany's capital city, was just two hundred yards to the southeast. It was from the villa on Händelallee that the leaders of the mission directed the affairs of the Church.

All missionaries from the United States were evacuated from Germany in August 1939—just one week before World War II began. Mission President Edward E. McKay left the country in early 1940, after appointing Herbert Klopfer “mission supervisor” over the 7,608 members in thirteen districts and seventy-two branches. A former missionary and full-time employee of the Church, Elder Klopfer was fluent in English and understood the programs of the Church very well. His able counselors were Elders Richard Ranglack and Paul Langheinrich, both long-time Church members and residents of Berlin.¹

From his office in the villa, Elder Klopfer (only twenty-nine at the time) supervised a busy office staff consisting of full-time sister missionaries. Erika Fassmann of Zwickau, called as a missionary in 1940, was one of five young women who served for at least two years during the war.² The others were Edith Birth, Irmgard Gottschalk, Johanna Berger and Ilse Reimer. These

ROGER P. MINERT (rpm@byu.edu) is an Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University specializing in family history. He received his BA in German language from Brigham Young University, and his MA in German Literature and his PhD in German language history and second language acquisition theory from Ohio State University. He is a member of the editorial board of the *Immigrant*, published by the Palatines to America Society. He has authored more than seventy publications on German family history and German language pedagogy. He is also the author of the forthcoming book *In Harm's Way: East German Latter-day Saints in World War II* to be published by BYU's Religious Studies Center.



East German leaders and office staff in front of the East German Mission home, Berlin, Germany, ca. 1940. Front l-r: Erika Fassmann, Johanna Berger, and Ilse Reimer. Back l-r: Richard Ranglack (first counselor), Herbert Klopfer (mission supervisor), and Paul Langheinrich (second counselor).

Photograph courtesy Roger P. Minert.

young women had the talents and energy needed to monitor mission finances, collect genealogical documents, and provide training for the leaders of the Relief Society, the Primary Association and the Mutual Improvement Association throughout the mission. They lived in rooms on the top floor of the mission home and cooked their meals in the kitchen on the main floor.

When the war began in 1939, the family of Herbert and Erna Klopfer included two little boys, Wolfgang and Rüdiger. They inhabited rooms in the front of the main floor, their windows facing Tiergarten Park. Several other families lived in apartments on the second floor.

In 1941, Herbert Klopfer was drafted into the German army. Fortunately, he was stationed close enough to Berlin for the next two years to continue serving as mission supervisor. He visited with his family and his counselors on occasion and conducted much of the business

of the mission via correspondence and telephone calls. After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the entry of the United States into the war against Japan and later Germany, the leaders of the East German Mission lost all contact with the headquarters of the Church in Salt Lake City. For the first time since the gospel had been introduced in Germany, the Latter-day Saints there were on their own.

By 1942, Elder Klopfer was one of more than five hundred Latter-day Saint men wearing the uniform of Germany's armed forces and serving all over Central Europe, Scandinavia, and North Africa. By the time the German Army was defeated at the battle of Stalingrad in Russia in February 1943, many German Saints had died in battle far from home or in air raids in their



Sisters missionaries Johanna Berger, Erika Fassmann and Ilse Reimer at work in the East German Mission office, Berlin, Germany, ca. 1940. Photograph courtesy Ilse Reimer Ebert.

home towns. Life for the branches of the Church in East Germany was becoming increasingly challenging, but the Saints continued to magnify their callings within the Kingdom. “It was our intention to keep the work of the Lord alive in Germany, to strengthen the faith of the members, and to see to it that the brethren remained active,” reported Brother Ranglack. “We held district conferences in each district twice a year from 1940 through 1944 . . . and were able to travel all over the mission.”³

The Allied air forces began a concentrated schedule of bombing raids over Berlin in November 1943, with the goal of rendering life in the German capital unbearable. The very first night of that campaign, November 20, 1943, the office of the East German Mission lay in the sights of the British Lancaster bombers. Erika Fassmann, the only missionary in the building, described the experience in these words:

On this evening I was totally alone in the office. I again disregarded the alarm (we missionaries usually did that because we believed the Lord would save us—the brethren scolded us more than once for doing so). Then I heard the bombers coming and they apparently were heading right for [the neighborhood of] Händelallee. Suddenly the huge wood [front] doors were blown into the building. I hid in the kitchen and prayed for protection. Then I wondered where I could seek refuge. In the office we had a huge table on which genealogical papers—family group records—were stacked in tall piles. I told myself: “If the Lord protects anything at all, it will be these papers.” So, I dove underneath the table. Then when the bombs stopped, I grabbed all of the

papers and ran out of the building. All of the buildings around me were on fire. The moon was red and the sky on fire and I thought it was the end of the world.⁴

Sister Fassmann recalled how relieved she felt the next morning that the mission home had escaped with little damage. However, both Richard Ranglack and Paul Langheinrich received strong impressions to remove all the records and Church property from the offices, then spent all day moving boxes to the Langheinrich home at Rathenowerstrasse 52, about one mile to the north. By that evening, only the personal possessions of the sister missionaries and some of the property left behind by the Klopfer family were still in the building. Significantly, the bombers returned that very evening.



Sister missionary Johanna Berger in front of the East German Mission home, Berlin, Germany, ca. 1940. All of the buildings behind her were destroyed in the war, as can be seen in the photograph below. Photograph courtesy Ilse Reimer Ebert.



Site of the East German Mission home, Berlin, Germany, 2007. Photograph by James Larsen.

While mission staff members were emptying the office building, Herbert Klopfer was on leave from the army, traveling from his home town of Werdau to the mission home with his wife, Erna. They arrived that evening to find the villa at Händelallee 6 the only structure on the street that had not been destroyed the night before. They planned to stay that night in their apartment in the villa, but somehow had forgotten the key to the mission office. Unable to gain entry to the office, they had only one practical option—to go to the home of the Ranglack family for the night.

Just hours after the most valuable property was removed from the mission office, the British bombers returned, dropping bombs on the very same neighborhood they had so badly damaged the night before. This time the mission home was almost completely destroyed. Had the Klopfers remembered the key to their apartment and spent the night in the building, when the bombs fell the second time they probably would have occupied the basement of the building (the usual air raid protection in that neighborhood) and surely would have been killed.

On the morning of November 22, three very despondent mission leaders viewed the ruins of the villa that had been the mission home. Erna Klopfer later recalled that only the lower sections of the walls remained standing. In the ruins they found the office safe with the tithing funds. The coins in the safe had melted from the heat of the fire and flowed out of the safe to form a small pool of metal. The only item recovered from the ruins was a small teapot with its lid.⁵ Richard Ranglack later described the discouraging scene: “The next morning we stood before the burned-out building. The feelings that came over us naturally gave way to tears. Now we had to start over. Our energy and courage would come from a higher source.”⁶ Just after the mission leaders left the ruins at Händelallee 6, several delayed-action bombs exploded and leveled the surviving wall remnants. Once again, these loyal Latter-day Saints narrowly missed being killed.⁷

From November 1943 until the summer of 1945 (after the war had ended), the mission office was housed in an apartment in the building in which the Langheinrich family lived at Rathenowerstrasse 52. By December 1943, Herbert Klopfer was transferred to Denmark and could no longer function as mission supervisor. In July 1944, his wife, Erna, was informed that her husband was officially listed as “missing in action” on the Eastern Front. First Counselor Richard Ranglack assumed the leadership of the mission.

In the temporary mission home at Rathenowerstrasse 52, a colony of Latter-day Saint refugees began to form in January 1945. After many of the apartments in that five-story building were vacated by people fleeing the destruction of Berlin, Paul Langheinrich was quick to appropriate the empty rooms for the missionaries and LDS refugees. They arrived from points as close as



By the end of the war, the apartment house, located at Rathenowerstrasse 52, Berlin, Germany, housed several refugee LDS families and served as the East German Mission office. Photograph courtesy of James Larsen, 2007.

the other branches in Berlin and as far away as Königsberg, East Prussia, hundreds of miles to the east. By the time the war ended on May 8, at least thirty members of the Church were living in the building.⁸ In her diary, missionary Helga Meiszus Birth of the Tilsit Branch in East Prussia recorded the arrival of mothers and children from January through April. In summary, she wrote: “Rathenowerstrasse 52 has become the place of refuge for the Saints.”⁹

From this mission office, principally one bedroom on the floor where the Langheinrich family lived, Elders Ranglack and Langheinrich administered the affairs of the mission for the last eighteen months of the war.¹⁰ By March 1945, all but one of the sister missionaries had been released. Thereafter, the brethren were assisted by missionary Helga Birth and several young women refugees, such as Renate Berger of Königsberg, and Ingrid Bendler of the Berlin Schöneberg Branch. Most of their time was spent proof-reading German genealogical documents that were to be forwarded to Salt Lake City. They also began recording the whereabouts of Saints who had been bombed out or evicted from their homes all over the mission.

On April 25, 1945, just days before Nazi Germany collapsed, the invading Soviet Army surrounded the metropolis of Berlin. In bitter street fighting,

the invaders fought their way toward Hitler's headquarters in the city center. A few days later, enemy soldiers approached the Langheinrich neighborhood in north-central Berlin.¹¹ As the sound of enemy artillery fire became ever louder, Brother Langheinrich probably wondered how he could protect the members of his household—mostly women and children. During this tense waiting period, all stores were closed and the Latter-day Saints joined in a community effort to collect enough food to sustain the group. They gathered each morning and evening for prayer and scripture study as they waited and wondered if they would survive death and destruction as Germany's capital city lay dying.

On Friday, April 27, 1945, Renate Berger began a diary. Years later, she explained why she did so:

My mother made me write a journal during the last few days of the war. There was nothing for us to do but to think about the horror that was to come upon us, and pray. We had been through so much and lived with the reality of death for the last 6 years. . . . Now my greatest fear was not dying but falling into the hands of Russian soldiers. So here we were, and the Russians were coming. We prayed. Our fate was in God's hands. I was 17 years old.¹²

Soviet troops first came down Rathenowerstrasse on April 28, but did not stop—concentrating on military objectives toward the center of the city. Some of the Saints in the Langheinrich apartment building believed that the terrible rumors about what the conquerors did to civilians were not true after all. However, the general insecurity and physical danger were not over, as young Sister Berger described in her diary:

Tuesday, 1 May: We had Relief Society in the afternoon. Marie Ranglack gave the lesson. Now during this time all the shooting and heavy artillery fire had stopped. It was very peaceful when all of a sudden a bomb exploded in the building next to ours. The air pressure was so strong that we were thrown off our chairs. Shell fragments came flying through the windows. It was a miracle that no one was hurt. It took our breath away. Another close call!¹³

When the fighting in Berlin ended on May 1, the Rathenowerstrasse was one of very few intact neighborhoods in the city. The Saints were convinced that divine intervention had preserved house no. 52 as their refuge and for the work of the mission office.

Most civilians in Berlin were relieved that the bombings and combat were over, but after the city's surrender, it continued to be a madhouse of unbridled terror for several weeks. Soviet troops were committing unspeakable atrocities against the citizenry. No female was safe, and the Langheinrich home was just another potential target. Relying on a political ruse, Brother Langhei-

nrich posted a sign by the door saying “American Church Office” and was successful in turning away marauding soldiers who respected the name of their American ally in the war against fascism.¹⁴ On at least one occasion, Elder Langheinrich stared down a Russian soldier who attempted to enter the building—apparently with evil intentions. Paul Langheinrich was determined to protect the women from molestation.¹⁵

Just when the storm seemed to have passed, the sister missionaries made what could have been a tragic error. One day, they ventured out onto the balcony on the fifth floor and were spotted by a passing Soviet soldier. He hurried into the building in search of the young ladies, but their hiding place was not discovered. Needless to say, they did not go out onto the balcony again for a long time.

Late in the evening on May 2, the tension in the building reached a crescendo. Sister Berger described the situation:

[Late tonight] we were startled when Elsa Langheinrich suddenly opened our door and said: “Children, the Russians are coming.” What now? We quickly dressed. During that time 3 Russians were already in the kitchen and we heard them going from room to room . . . [There was no room under the bed] so we crawled into bed and covered ourselves with a big feather bed and then we waited. . . . Then the door opened and we heard steps coming to our bed. We were sweating “blood and water;” then someone lifted the feather bed. We were horrified. When I opened my eyes I saw Brother Patermann standing there. What a joy it was to see his smiling face. . . . We said a prayer of thanks before we went to sleep.¹⁶

On May 11, 1945, three days after Germany surrendered, the mission records indicate that Sister Angela Patermann of the Berlin-East Branch was called as a missionary and assigned to work in the mission office.¹⁷ The leadership of the East German Mission clearly did not miss a beat as they contemplated how best to continue their work amidst the desolation and confusion of conquered and occupied Germany. “We had three goals,” recalled Richard Ranglack: “to find the members who had been driven from their homes, . . . to call full-time missionaries, . . . and to find a larger facility for the mission home.”¹⁸ By the end of the year 1945, all three goals had been totally or substantially achieved. Mission leaders calculated at the time that at least four hundred members of the Church in the East German Mission had perished and hundreds more were missing.¹⁹

During the summer of 1945, the office of the East German Mission was reestablished in a fine building in the southwest Berlin suburb of Dahlem, replacing the temporary facilities in the Langheinrich apartment. Most of the mission property and records had survived the war and communications with branches all over East Germany had been maintained. Sadly, however, Mis-

sion supervisor Herbert Klopfer was one of hundreds of LDS soldiers reported missing in action or died in German uniform.

The continuation of the work of the mission under such trying conditions seemed to defy human logic, but German Saints were convinced that the hand of the Lord was manifest in their survival. Most of the Latter-day Saints of the East German Mission survived the tyrannical rule of Adolf Hitler and the destruction of the Third Reich, but they must have remembered with sadness the words of the prophet Mormon recorded in Alma 60:13: “For the Lord suffereth the righteous to be slain that his justice and judgment may come upon the wicked; therefore ye need not suppose that the righteous are lost because they are slain; but behold, they do enter in the rest of the Lord their God.”

In 1948, a ragged German POW returned from Russia and found Sister Erna Klopfer in Werdau, Germany. According to her son, the soldier gave the following report: “I was with your husband, Herbert Klopfer, as he lay dying in a Russian POW camp. I promised him that if I survived, I would find you and tell you what happened to him.” Elder Klopfer died on March 19, 1945, just seven weeks before the German surrender.²⁰

Notes

1. At the time, there were no organized stakes in Germany, and therefore no high priests or seventies.

2. The last full-time male native German LDS missionary was Richard Deus of Breslau, who served from February 1939 until he was drafted in early 1941.

3. Richard Ranglack, *Autobiography*, 2, LDS Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, copy in possession of the author.

4. Erika Fassmann Mueller, Interview (by the author), February 3, 2006, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. Wolfgang Herbert Klopfer, *Childhood in the Big German City of Berlin (1936–1943)*, typescript, 5, copy in possession of the author.

6. Ranglack, *Autobiography*, 2.

7. Klopfer, *Childhood in the Big German City of Berlin*, 5. After emigrating to the United States, Wolfgang (born 1936) changed his name to Herbert in honor of his father.

8. Wolfgang Kelm, Interview (by the author), October 9, 2006, Hurricane, Utah.

9. Helga Meiszus Birth, *Diary*, April 21 1945, 3, translated by the author, copy in author's possession.

10. The Ranglack family lost their apartment in an air raid in February 1945 and moved into the apartment house at Rathenowerstrasse 52.

11. Birth, *Diary*, 8.

12. Renate Berger, *Diary*, copy in possession of the author.

13. Berger, *Diary*.

14. Wolfgang Kelm, Interview.

15. Armin Langheinrich, Interview (by the author), December 15, 2006, Salt Lake

City, Utah.

16. Berger, Diary.

17. East German Mission Quarterly Reports, 1945, no. 104, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

18. Ranglack, Autobiography, 3. "When I look back on those years . . . I have to say that I could never have found the energy to do those things without the help of my brethren, without the help of the Lord, or without praying to the Lord." Richard Ranglack was officially called as the president of the East German Mission by Ezra Taft Benson on March 20, 1946, and released by George Albert Smith on June 16, 1947.

19. According to research conducted by the author for a book on this topic, 604 members of the LDS Church in the East German Mission died during World War II or after the war from war-related causes.

20. Klopfer, *Childhood in the Big German City of Berlin*, 6.