

DER REKTOR



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386

English translation of the letter to Mr. Franz Leichter by Prof. Dr. Bernhard Eitel, Rector of Heidelberg University, and Prof. Dr. Stefan Maul, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy

Heidelberg, 11 November 2013

Dear Mr Leichter,

Thank you for your letter of 9 September 2013, which is a harrowing testament to our country's and our university's shameful past and the many injustices and unspeakable crimes committed during this terrible time. We apologise for not responding earlier; we wanted to examine your mother's case – a case of persecution, humiliation, defamation and murder by the Nazi regime – with all due care based on the available records.

On 24 July 1918, the Faculty of Philosophy of Heidelberg University awarded the title "Doctor of Philosophy" to your mother, Ms Käthe Pick. She had submitted a doctoral thesis on the subject of economics which she had prepared under the supervision of Max Weber. In the late 1930s, the Vienna Regional Court brought charges against your mother because she had attempted to procure forged papers in order to flee the country and so save her life.

The cynical judicial system of the Nazi regime accused her of having committed a crime and sentenced her to a seven-month term in prison, from which she was never released. Your mother, Dr. Leichter, was imprisoned in the Ravensbrück concentration camp and murdered in Bernburg in 1942.

According to the "law" of the time, a conviction in a criminal court of law automatically led to the revocation of a doctoral degree. This was the subject of a letter dated 31 October 1939 which the Vienna Regional Court sent to Heidelberg University along with a copy of the verdict. With great dismay and deeply felt shame, we must acknowledge that the Rector of Heidelberg University in turn sent a letter dated 7 December 1939 to Dr. Leichter in detention in which he ordered her – in accordance with "legal" requirements – to abstain from using her doctoral title in the future.

The records in the university archives show that, after the end of the war, the Senate of Heidelberg University investigated a number of cases in which doctoral degrees had been revoked during the National Socialist rule. The meeting minutes state the following (minutes of the Senate meeting on

20 December 1946): "... Mr Jellinek (law professor Dr. Walter Jellinek (1885–1955)) proposes that the revocations of doctoral degrees that were declared by the university should be regarded as null and void for political reasons. The faculties may answer any queries on the subject directly to this effect. The motion is adopted." Minutes of the Senate meeting on 3 November 1948: "... Doctorate certificates for denaturalised persons. The restitution of revoked doctoral degrees to "denaturalised persons" seems a matter of course: Decision: Mr Jellinek is asked to examine the legal issues involved."

The criminal prosecution of your mother, and the resulting revocation of her doctoral degree, were carried out under a "legal" regulation that is in blatant violation of human rights and therefore invalid. Our university regards the revocation of your mother's doctoral degree as annulled, for reasons that include the Senate's decision of 20 December 1946 cited above. As far as our university is concerned, your mother Dr. Käthe Leichter was entirely justified in carrying the title of "doctor", and her name will be forever linked to the degree she earned at Heidelberg University.

We are at a loss to understand why our university and the faculties and bodies concerned did not attempt, either in 1946 or in subsequent years, to inform those concerned about the Senate's decision of 20 December 1946 or, if the graduates had been murdered in Nazi Germany, to notify their families and ask their forgiveness.

Today, in 2013, we are, whether we like it or not, the successors of those who committed this injustice, those who let it happen and hushed it up. We are deeply sorry that our university has failed until now to ask your family's forgiveness for the dishonour that was brought upon your mother's name by our predecessors.

We can no longer ask your mother's forgiveness, or at the very least show her that the injustice she suffered is regarded as intolerable by the university at which she earned her degree. We are also aware that it is nothing short of an imposition to ask forgiveness of you, who have lived your whole life with the memory of your mother's defamation.

We can, however, assure you that we will do our utmost to prevent an injustice such as the one committed against your mother and many others from ever happening again in our country.

Yours respectfully

Prof. Dr. Bernhard Eitel
Rector of Heidelberg University

Prof. Dr. Stefan M. Maul
Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy