

Braving the Odds

Egyptologist Herta Mohr during the Second World War*

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An invocation offering on the day of the rising of Sothis, the Thoth-feast, the New Year's feast, the Wag-feast, the Sokar-feast, the Great Feast, the feast of burning, the procession of Min ...

Offering formula on the façade of the tomb chapel of Hetepherakhty

Sometimes in practicing Egyptology you stumble upon a story that suddenly strikes you as close and poignant. A mummified child, wrapped in colourful linen and carefully laid to rest on the ruined wall of a New Kingdom tomb;¹ the papyrus testament of a lady who lived over 3000 years ago, disinheriting some of her ungrateful children in true Jane Austen fashion;² or the life of a young Egyptologist, who continued to follow her academic passion while the world around her was crumbling.

Herta Theresa Mohr (1914–1945) was born in Vienna on 24 April 1914,³ several months before the outbreak of the First World War. Her father was Adolf ~~Israel~~ Mohr (1872–1944), a physician who had practiced medicine since 1902 and was awarded for his service during the War.⁴ Her mother was Gabriele ~~Sara~~ Kaufmann (1886–1944).⁵ The family lived at Winkelmannstraße 2, a stately home near Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. Initially, Herta wanted to follow in her father's footsteps and become a physician. After completing the Realgymnasium, she enrolled in the study of medicine at Vienna University in 1932.⁶ However, after three years her interests changed to Oriental Studies.

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¹ As excavated by the author as a student in the New Kingdom necropolis at Saqqara in 2010 (Raven et al. 2011).

² The Will of Naunakhte, a documentary papyrus from Deir el-Medina dating to the reign of Ramesses V (Donker van Heel 2016).

³ <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/en/page/138409/herta-theresa-mohr> (accessed August 1, 2022).

⁴ <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/en/page/217142/adolf-mohr> (accessed August 1, 2022).

⁵ <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/en/page/217143/gabriele-mohr-kaufmann> (accessed August 1, 2022).

⁶ Arnolds 1947: 91.

From her enrolment in the summer semester of 1937, we know she followed courses in Egyptology by Wilhelm Czermak and Heinrich Balcz (*Einführung in die altägyptische Sprache; Lektüre des Papyrus 'Vom beredten Bauern': Staat und Gesellschaft zur Zeit der Pyramidenbauer*), but also African languages (notably Fula and Somali). In the winter semester of 1937/1938 this was supplemented with Shilha-Berber as well as more Egyptian reading (*Lektüre klassisch-ägyptischer Texte*), art (*Das Relief in der ägyptischen Kunst*) and poetry (*Proben altägyptischer Poesie*), while also taking a course in philosophy (*Die großen Systemen nach Kant*).⁷



Fig. 1: Herta Mohr's photo from her enrolment at Leiden University, 1937/1938.

A piece of Egypt in Vienna

What sparked Herta Mohr's interest in Egyptology? After the initial excitement of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 and the following Egyptomania craze, Egypt had somewhat gone out of fashion. The economic depression of the early 1930s did not help in this regard. Although Vienna had come through the First World War relatively unscathed, shortages had occasionally led to malnutrition, disease and death. The wave of incoming refugees furthermore elicited hostility towards foreigners, especially against Jewish refugees.

An acquaintance of Herta Mohr was Vienna-born Walter Federn (1910–1967). He came from a Jewish family of doctors: his father Paul was a psychiatrist, his grandfather Salomon a physician.⁸ Like Mohr, he studied Egyptology at Vienna University, obtaining his PhD in 1934. He was apparently able to read and translate over twelve languages. Immanuel Velikovsky, with whom he regularly corresponded, described him as such: 'Walter wore his hair long, had very bushy eyebrows, and looked almost like a medium'.⁹ After the *Anschluss* in 1938,

⁷ <https://gedenkbuch.univie.ac.at/person/herta-mohr> (accessed August 1, 2022).

⁸ Bierbrier 2019: 160.

⁹ <https://www.velikovsky.info/walter-federn/> (accessed August 1, 2022).

Federn emigrated with his parents to Sweden and later to the USA. There, he initially worked on his Egyptological research at the Brooklyn Museum and in the New York Public Library, but later turned his interest to the history of medicine. He reviewed Mohr's first and only book,¹⁰ and she thanked him in the preface for his friendliness and 'many encouraging hints'.¹¹

Another factor that may have influenced Mohr's interest in Egyptology and Egyptian art history was to be found at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Since 1912, Hermann Junker had excavated at Giza, the necropolis of the ancient Egyptian capital city of Memphis.¹² On 10 January 1913, he discovered there the mastaba of a Fourth or early Fifth Dynasty state official named Kaninisut (G2155 in the Western Cemetery; fig. 2). In the early twentieth century, it was almost *de rigueur* for museums to acquire a decorated offering chapel from one of these mastabas as an example of Old Kingdom tomb architecture. In Junker's words: 'The entire chamber is in every respect so beautiful and instructive that I consider it pre-eminently suitable to be transferred to Vienna'.¹³



Fig. 2: Dismantling the mastaba chapel of Kaninisut at Giza in 1914.

¹⁰ Federn 1946.

¹¹ Mohr 1943: xi.

¹² Jánosi 1997: 31 ff.

¹³ Hölzl 2005: 13.

The cult chamber of Kaninisut was thus purchased by the Viennese industrialist Rudolf Maass, who covered the 30,000-Kronen cost of acquisition and transportation. Over the course of a month, the limestone blocks of the chapel were dismantled and transported to Vienna in 32 crates, weighing 65 tons in total, to arrive at the museum in July 1914. Due to the First World War and the subsequent poor economy, it was only made accessible to the public from 17 June 1925.¹⁴ Herta Mohr must have seen it at the museum, perhaps on a visit with the Realgymnasium or during her later Egyptological studies. It might explain her later interest in the ‘Leiden mastaba’ of Hetepherakhty at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (fig. 3). While these tombs tell part of the history of Egyptology in Austria and the Netherlands, they also formed the backdrop to Herta Mohr’s more personal story.

Controversial Egyptologists

The Egyptology courses that Mohr followed at Vienna University were taught by Wilhelm Czermak and Heinrich Balcz. In 1923, the Institut für Ägyptologie und Afrikanistik had been founded with Junker at its head.¹⁵ His close assistant was Czermak, who was both an Egyptologist and African scholar, and who taught while Junker spent the winter months excavating in Egypt. When Junker became head of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Cairo in 1929, and subsequently left Vienna University in 1931, Czermak became his successor as Professor of Egyptology. Heinrich Balcz studied Egyptology under Junker, obtaining his PhD in 1925. He worked as a librarian for the Institute and started teaching there in 1928. He also took part in the Austrian excavations at Giza, Merimde Beni Salame, Hermopolis and on the Theban west bank.¹⁶

The difficulty with these scholars, while passionate about ancient Egyptian and African culture, is that they held problematic political views. Czermak was a member of the antisemitic networks *Bärenhöhle* at the Philosophical Faculty and the *Deutsche Gemeinschaft*, actively preventing Jewish or left-wing scholars from getting appointed at the university during the interwar period.¹⁷ Balcz became a member of the NSDAP in 1940.¹⁸

¹⁴ Hölzl 2005: 37.

¹⁵ Czerny and Navratilova 2021: 268.

¹⁶ Bierbrier 2019: 31, 118.

¹⁷ The founder of *Bärenhöhle*, paleontologist Othenio Abel, wrote in 1923: ‘I really take the credit for binding our anti-Semitic group together so closely that we form a strong phalanx. And while I have lost and still lose much time and energy, I hold on to the knowledge that this work is perhaps as important as making books’. <https://geschichte.univie.ac.at/en/articles/baerenhoehle-secret-anti-semitic-group-professors-inter-war-period> (accessed August 3, 2022).

¹⁸ Voss 2014: 53.

When Egyptologist Georg Steindorff was asked to name Nazi Egyptologists after the Second World War (the so-called ‘Steindorff-Liste’), he described Czermak as a ‘Nazi of the first order’.¹⁹ Czermak nevertheless became dean of the Philosophical Faculty and was thus a member of the Denazification Commission at Vienna University.²⁰ His successor Gertrud Thausing recounts how he had actually once agreed to let a Jewish woman hide at the Institute.²¹ Heinrich Balcz was called for military service in 1942 and did not return from the front. Based on his membership of the NSDAP he was removed as a lecturer in Egyptian language and archaeology in 1945, without knowledge that he had been killed already in 1944.²²

Egyptology in Leiden

Growing antisemitism in their home country must have been the reason why the Mohr family relocated to the Netherlands. For the academic year of 1937/1938, the Leiden University Library documents the registration of Herta Mohr,²³ now living at Hogewoerd 113, and enrolled in the faculty of Literature and Philosophy. Instead of Jewish, as stated in the Austrian registration book (see n. 7), her religion is now stated as Roman Catholic. A small enclosed photo shows her smiling face and 1930’s wavy hairstyle (fig. 1). She was now 23 years old and living on her own as a student in the centre of Leiden, while her parents resided a ten-minute bicycle ride away at Fagelstraat 17. During this period, Mohr also became a member of the Catholic student association, Augustinus.

The following years would prove to be the most fruitful of Herta’s life. She was free to pursue her academic interests, publish articles, correspond with professors and meet with her study friends and peers.

The study of Egyptology had been officially introduced in Leiden when Pieter Boeser was appointed there as lector in 1910. However, the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden already boasted a collection of Egyptian antiquities and during the nineteenth century, its directors were the only professional Egyptologists in the Netherlands.²⁴ Boeser, who had studied in Berlin and Leipzig, had been a curator at the museum and the first to systematically catalogue the Egyptian collection.²⁵ From then on, the museum and courses of study at Leiden University went hand in hand. Adriaan de Buck, succeeding Boeser at the university in 1928, became the first Dutch full Professor of Egyptology in 1939.²⁶ Also working at Leiden

¹⁹ Schneider and Raulwing 2013: 179.

²⁰ Czerny and Navratilova 2021: 270.

²¹ Thausing 1989: 54–55.

²² Schneider and Raulwing 2013: 214.

²³ Registered on 30 November 1937 as number 1857.

²⁴ Schneider 2014.

²⁵ Boeser 1905.

²⁶ Raven 2021.

University at the time were Henri Peter Blok, one of Boeser's students, who went on to become a professor in Utrecht. Adriaan de Buck was working on a large project editing Coffin Texts, while Henri Frankfort excavated in Egypt and the Middle East.²⁷ At the museum, Jan Hendrik Holwerda was succeeded in 1939 by Willem van Wijngaarden, who had previously been a curator. Other important initiatives were the founding of *Ex Oriente Lux* in 1933²⁸ and the *Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten (NINO)* in 1939, both still existing today.²⁹

We know that Mohr studied under several of these scholars,³⁰ because she thanks them in the preface to her later book.³¹

Excursus to Brussels

In September 1938, the 20th International Congress of Orientalists took place in Brussels, chaired by Belgian Egyptologist Jean Capart. The event brought together 550 scholars from various countries in the halls of the *Musée du Cinquantenaire*.³² One of these was the 24-year-old Herta Mohr, who on the penultimate day of the conference presented on 'Einige Bemerkungen zur Leidener Mastaba (avec projections lumineuses)'. In the presentation, she discussed three motifs that can be found in the mastaba of Hetepherakhty: the tomb owner's 'portrait' on the false door at the back of the offering chapel, the tomb owner spearfishing on a papyrus boat, and an atypical scene of two fighting boys on the north wall of the tomb.³³

During the conference, participants had the opportunity to view an exhibition about the recent excavations at Elkab. In Belgium, Jean Capart had almost single-handedly established the field of Egyptology by his tireless efforts to augment and study the Egyptian collection at the *Musée du Cinquantenaire*.³⁴ He campaigned for the setting up of Egyptology courses at Belgian universities, undertook fieldwork in Egypt and successfully marketed the field of Egyptology to Queen Élisabeth, in whose name the *Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth (FÉRE)* was established in 1923. Capart mentored budding students, as he himself had been mentored during an early scholarship abroad, and Herta Mohr thanked him in her presentation.

²⁷ Kaper 2014.

²⁸ Kampman 1947.

²⁹ Van Zoest and Berntsen 2014.

³⁰ De Buck, Blok and Frankfort.

³¹ Mohr 1943: xi.

³² Bruffaerts 2021: 171.

³³ Anonymous 1940: 95–97.

³⁴ Bruffaerts 2013; 2021.



Fig. 3: The mastaba of Hetepherakhty in Leiden.

Like the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the Musée du Cinquenaire possessed a mastaba chapel, this one belonging to the Fifth Dynasty official Neferirtenef, buried at Saqqara. It had been purchased in 1905 by the Belgian businessman Édouard Empain (builder of Cairo's Heliopolis district) and transported to the Cinquenaire in spring 1906, where it became a major attraction.³⁵ Unfortunately, the funerary chapel was not on display at the time of Mohr's visit to Brussels due to a reorganisation of the galleries.³⁶

In the preface to her later book, Mohr mentioned the 'kind friendliness of Professor J. Capart, who allowed me to work a considerable time in the library of the Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, where also Miss. M. Werbrouck and Mme É. Bille-de Mot did everything to facilitate my work'.³⁷ Marcelle Werbrouck was effectively the first female Belgian Egyptologist,³⁸ and Éléonore Bille-de Mot had studied in Paris. Both had joined the first season of fieldwork

³⁵ Van de Walle 1930; Bruffaerts 2005.

³⁶ Bruffaerts 2005: 25–26.

³⁷ Mohr 1943: xi.

³⁸ Bruffaerts 2018.

at Elkab in 1937.³⁹ After her visit to Brussels, Mohr continued to correspond with the FÉRÉ.

Work on the mastaba

In 1938, Mohr's most important work came into focus. In a steel drawer in the archives of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, a typescript can be found titled 'Studien zur Mastaba im Leidener Museum (Mariette D60)', signed by "H.Th. Mohr, Leiden 1938". It is a German manuscript of 42 pages and two pages of plans, with sketches, corrections and hieroglyphs in pencil. It contains a systematic description of the scenes and texts in the tomb chapel of Hetepherakhty (fig. 3), with discussions on the figure of the tomb owner and the relationship between image and text. The folder also contains a number of black and white photos of details of the decoration (fig. 4).

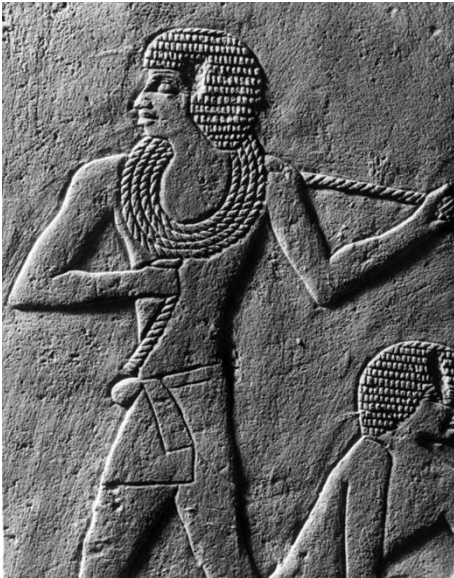


Fig. 4: Detail of the decoration of the mastaba of Hetepherakhty. Photo from the folder 14.03/01 that contains Mohr's manuscript.

Like the mastaba chapels of Neferirtenef and Kaninisut, the tomb chapel of Hetepherakhty had been removed from its original location at Saqqara and brought to Leiden in the early twentieth century. The reason for this 'mastaba sale' is described in the 1902–1903 annual report of the Egypt Exploration Fund: 'A scheme has been approved for the sale of entire *mastabas* from Sakkareh to the museums of Europe and America. It is hoped that when such can be obtained at a moderate figure the directors of museums will be less eager to buy odd blocks and fragments broken out by robbers, and that so the robbers will give up their

³⁹ Bruffaerts 2021: 165, 171.

detestable trade'.⁴⁰

The tomb chapel of Hetepherakhty had originally been excavated in the 1860's by Auguste Mariette,⁴¹ quite near to Mariette's house at Saqqara. His successor as head of the Service des Antiquités, Gaston Maspero, dismantled the chapel in June 1902 and had it shipped to Cairo.⁴² Dutch contractor Adriaan Goekoop paid for the sale and transport to Leiden. The travel firm of Thomas Cook took care of the transport by ship and train to a warehouse at the Nonnensteeg where it arrived in a number of lots in October/November 1902. Apparently, one of the 70 crates (total contents valued at 3360 Dutch guilders) fell off the train due to a rope breaking, but its contents were unharmed. The *Leidsch Jaarboekje*⁴³ mentions the opening to the public of 'three newly decorated Egyptian halls', including the mastaba chapel, in June 1904.

In 1905, curator Pieter Boeser published a photographic record of the mastaba in his *Beschrijving* of the Egyptian collection.⁴⁴ This was the only publication of the mastaba chapel until Herta Mohr began her work.

War on the doorstep

On 13 July 1939 Mohr was baptized as a Catholic.⁴⁵ A good reason for this would be the increasing persecution of Jewish people, but she also had Catholic friends, and became a member of Catholic student association Augustinus.

One of these friends was Jozef Marie Antoon Janssen. Ordained as a Catholic priest in 1932, he gained permission from his bishop to pursue his passion for Egyptology. Studying at Leiden University he specialised in Egyptian philology under Prof. Adriaan de Buck, and later received his doctorate with a dissertation about ancient Egyptian autobiographies.⁴⁶ He initiated the *Annual Egyptological Bibliography*, a complete index of relevant Egyptological literature, now surviving in digital form as the *Online Egyptological Bibliography*. After the Second World War, Janssen joined expeditions to Elkab, Thebes and Soleb, and eventually became professor of Egyptology at Amsterdam University.⁴⁷ Mohr mentions him as one of her 'Dutch friends'.⁴⁸

The opening of NINO was delayed as history caught up with our story: on 10 May 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands. The dark cloud of war had been

⁴⁰ Griffith 1903: 12.

⁴¹ Mariette 1889: 340–348; mastaba D60.

⁴² Van de Beek 2015.

⁴³ Anonymous 1905.

⁴⁴ Boeser 1905: 11–18, pl. V–XXI.

⁴⁵ Arnolds 1947: 91.

⁴⁶ Janssen 1946.

⁴⁷ Bierbrier 2019: 237; Raven 2021: 146.

⁴⁸ Mohr 1943: xi.

looming over Europe and repressive politics would inevitably reach Mohr's corner of the world. We know that she benefited from the new research institute, but only for a short while. A library slip signed by Herta dated to 17 April 1940 notes her permission to borrow for two days from the NINO library *The affinities of the mural painting of El-Amarnah* by Henri Frankfort.

Here, Mohr's Leiden adventure ends. The memorial book of the Catholic Academic Society states: 'It is hard to say what moved her not to use the permit she had for the US in 1939. But an attempt to find a place on a boat to America after the German invasion failed. In September 1940 she had to leave the coast and after some wanderings ended up in Eindhoven, where she tried for better or worse to continue her academic work'.⁴⁹

Academia in diaspora

And continue her research she did, as is evident from the appearance of an article in the *Jaarbericht of Ex Oriente Lux (JEOL)* about one of the scenes she had discussed at the Brussels Orientalist conference.⁵⁰ She meant to include this discussion in her upcoming monograph, but since Prof. Günther Roeder from Hildesheim had published on the topic,⁵¹ she replied in a separate communication. The article deals with the depiction of two fighting boys next to a milking scene in the tomb chapel of Hetepherakhty. Mohr suggests that certain motifs were inspired by the nearby mastaba of Ti, which was slightly older, and in turn contained parallels in the tomb of Ptahhotep, which was slightly younger in age. The ancient Egyptian artist, drawing both from memory and artistic examples in 2- and 3-dimensions, constructed an image of one of the figures based on two separate poses, causing an odd sort of hunchback. Small clues in this article point to the fact that it was probably transcribed and translated from German into Dutch by the editors of *JEOL*.

The daily ordeal of being far away from her object of study is poignantly brought forth in a letter dated to 12 November 1940, addressed to Marcelle Werbroeck of the FÉRE in Brussels (fig. 5). It consists of two typed pages in French, composed at Parklaan 35 in Bilthoven:⁵²

⁴⁹ Arnolds 1947: 91.

⁵⁰ Mohr 1940.

⁵¹ Roeder 1939.

⁵² A collection of 25 letters between Mohr and various members of the FÉRE is kept in the archives of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, spanning the years between 1938 and 1941 (AÉRE-EGKE: BE/380469/2/585, folder Mohr, Herta Theresa). I thank my late mother A.J. van Straaten for helping transcribe these letters that were written mostly in French, some in English, and a single letter in German. I thank Luc Limme for granting permission to use these letters in this article, and Marleen De Meyer for alerting me to their existence.

On September 5 they wrote to me that I must leave Leiden immediately; I am not allowed to travel to a large part of the country, for example, The Hague, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, etc., and also Leiden. This means that I had to leave my house, my books, everything, and look for a domicile elsewhere. I went to Bilthoven, which is near Utrecht, as it is not too far from Leiden and especially since there is the university, where Mr. Blok, my dear master, is a professor of oriental art – he succeeded Bissing.

My parents are in 's Hertogenbosch.

Since the end of September I have made efforts to be allowed to return. The last moment that I was in Leiden, De Buck had promised me to do everything he could to help me return, but, you know, they are quite slow there: it took until yesterday, when he went to the police with a number of papers etc. and now we have to wait for the result. God knows, how many more weeks this will take! The papers must go through the military authorities and German police.

It is because of these various difficulties that I have not yet responded to your kind card, and I beg you to excuse me – and also to excuse my French, as I do not have a dictionary with me. There are four students living in my house – out of necessity – and my books are with the editor of our *Jaarbericht*, which will be published shortly, in a few days, I suppose. I was ill for a while and hardly worked on my mastaba book for two months, but I hope I can work now. [...]

Life is quite interesting at the moment – I do not regret not having left Holland before. It is a charming country! If I can return home, I think I will be fine. Should that be impossible I plan to leave Bilthoven and go to Eindhoven, as there is work there, like translations, and we have to think of the pennies. [...]

Here is a funny little story: I asked van Wijngaarden to send me a paper with a few words: that it was his opinion as director of the museum that it was necessary for me to remain in Leiden, as I work in the museum preparing a book on the mastaba. This paper will accompany the others, written by Professors Blok, Böhl and de Buck. Here is what he replied to me: he could not write that, as it made no sense for me to be in Leiden, because the object of my studies, the mastaba, was still hidden in the cellar. – It seems that the use of books and journals alongside the object is not yet known in this museum. [...]

This is an unscientific letter. So let us hope that the next one will be full of hieroglyphs again! But there is nothing at Bilthoven, no papyri, no stones, no bronzes. Do you still have the proofs of the new *Chronique*? If you still have them and if you could send them to me, I will be very, very, very happy and I will not feel so lost in this world anymore. [...]

Donc j'ai seulement mon dictionnaire anglais et Montet, Les Scènes de la vie privée, avec moi à Balthoven. J'espère de finir bientôt.

La vie est assez intéressante pour le moment - je ne déplore pas de ne pas avoir quitté la Hollande avant. C'est un pays charmant! Si je puis retourner à la maison, tout sera bien je crois. Si cela sera impossible j'ai le plan de quitter Balthoven et d'aller à Eindhoven, comme il y a du travail là, comme des traductions, et il faut penser aux cents. En tout cas toute correspondance envoyée à Leide ou à Balthoven en me fera suivre.

Voilà une petite histoire comique: j'ai demandé à van Wijngaarden de m'envoyer un papier avec quelques mots: qu'il était son opinion comme directeur du musée que c'était nécessaire pour moi de demeurer à Leide, comme je travaillais dans le musée préparant un livre sur le mastaba. Ce papier accompagnera les autres, écrits par les professeurs Blok, Bèhl et de Buck. Voilà ce qu'il me répondait: il ne pouvait pas écrire ça, comme il n'avait pas de sens (sic) que j'étais à Leide, par-ce-que l'objet de mes études, le mastaba, était encore caché dans le caveau. - Il semble que l'usage des l i v r e s et des p é r i o d i q u e s - Il semble que l'objet n'est pas encore connu dans ce musée....

Voilà une lettre non-scientifique. Espérons donc, que la prochaine de nouveau sera pleine d'hieroglyphes! Mais il n'y a rien à Balthoven, pas de papyrus, ni de pères, ni de bronzes. Est-ce-que vous avez encore l'égruue de la nouvelles Chronique? Si vous en avez encore une et si vous pourriez m'envoyer, je serai très, très, très heureuse et je ne me sentirai plus tout à fait perdue dans ce monde.....

En vous remerciant je vous prie, chère Mademoiselle, de bien vouloir croire à mes sentiments les plus dévoués

Herta Mohr

Mes meilleurs hommages à M. Capart et à Mlle Préaux!

Balthoven, Parklaan 35, 12 Nov '40
repondre à sa - curieuse Chron. 80
 Chère Mademoiselle,

excusez mon longue silence et cette machine à écrire, mais selon mon expérience l'expédition des lettres écrites à la main va plus lentement et plus difficilement.

J'ai bien reçu votre carte du 21 Août et je comprends qu'auors Mme Bille n'y était pas. J'espère donc qu'elle et près de son mari. Si vous en avez des nouvelles je serai très heureuse de les entendre. Je suis très curieuse de lire la nouvelle Chronique, dont M. Janssen m'annonçait l'apparance; je n'ai pas la possibilité de la voir dans ce moment.

Le 5 Septembre on m'a écrit que je dois immédiatement quitter Leiden; je n'ai pas la permission de me rendre dans un grand partie du pays, par exemple, la Haye, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, etc, et aussi Leide. Cela veut dire que je devais quitter ma maison, mes livres, tout, et chercher domicile d'autre part. Je me suis rendu à Balthoven, ce qui est près de Utrecht, comme ce n'est pas trop loin de Leide et surtout comme il y a l'université, ou M. Blok, mon chère maître, est professeur de l'art etc. oriental - il succède à Bissing. Mes parents sont à 's Hertogenbosch.

Depuis la fin du septembre je me donne la peine pour qu'on me permet de retourner. Le dernier moment que j'étais à Leide, de Buck m'avait promis de faire tout ce qu'il pouvait pour m'aider de retourner mais, vous savez, on y est assez lentement: ça durait jusqu'à hier, quand il est allé à la police avec une quantité de papiers etc. et maintenant il faut attendre le résultat. Dieu sait, combien de semaine cela dure encore! Les papiers doivent passer par des autorités militaires et de police allemands.

C'est à cause de ces difficultés différentes que je n'ai pas encore répondu à votre gentille carte, et je vous prie d'excuser - et aussi d'excuser mon français, comme je n'ai pas de dictionnaire avec moi. Il y a quatre étudiants demeurants dans ma maison - c'est nécessaire - est mes livres se trouvent chez le redacteur de notre Jaarbericht, qui paraîtra sous peu, dans quelque jour, je suppose. J'étais malade pendant quelques temps et je n'ai presque rien travaillé pour mon livre sur le mastaba pendant deux mois, mais j'espère de pouvoir travailler maintenant. Il n'y a pas beaucoup à faire et surtout c'est de la chance que je puis déjà travailler sans livres.

Fig. 5: Letter from Herta Mohr to Marcelle Werbrouck, 12 November 1940.

It is hard to miss the undertone of desperation in this letter. Seemingly light in tone, Mohr openly describes her exile from Leiden, the various scholars who did or did not help her, the bureaucracy involved, the pressing need for study material and her determination to continue her research on the tomb chapel, which is now 'hidden in the cellar' of the museum. Museum director van Wijngaarden certainly failed her in this regard. In light of what happens next, it is painful to read that she does not regret having stayed in the 'charming country' of the Netherlands.

From study to book

On 14 December 1940, Mohr writes another letter to 'Chère Mademoiselle' (Werbrouck), this time from Rodenbachlaan 7 in Eindhoven, updating her on the progress of her book for which van Wijngaarden had already given his permission to publish it. She writes: 'The style of the study is a very simple and extremely concise English [...] The tracings of the scenes are better than those in my Jaarbericht 1940 article (most of those had to be reduced more or less! But the circumstances, the circumstances ...)'. She goes on to write: 'The University of Leiden is closed'.

In January 1941, an advance notice of her mastaba book was published in the *Chronique d'Égypte*: 'Significant work continued at the Antiquities Museum in these last four years. Miss Herta Mohr was in charge of the complete study (texts and representations) of the funerary chapel of Akhetetepher, transported from Saqqara to the museum around 1850'. It mentions her presentation at the Congress of Orientalists and her JEOL article. Continuing: 'The management of the museum has decided to publish the entire mastaba and the work, delayed by many circumstances, will nevertheless appear, shortly, in Jaarbericht format. Written in English, it includes a preface, an introduction to drawings and reliefs from this period, a bibliography on the subject, reflections on the architectural layout of the whole and, above all, the description of the scenes, the transcription and the translation of texts'.⁵³

On 3 July 1941, Mohr writes to 'monsieur le professeur' Capart: 'With the greatest pleasure I received the Chronique no. 31 [in which the notice appeared]. What a beautiful volume! And what a source of optimism that we so need! Please accept, Professor, the expression of my greatest thanks'. And later that month, on 21 July: 'The vagabond has found an address: Prins Hendrikstraat 35, Eindhoven. I hope to be able to stay there, until my return to Leiden'. She is impatient to receive her books, many of which are still at the institute in Leiden. The NINO library archive contains a lengthy list of books (undated) that she has requested. The titles range from Egyptian dictionaries and grammars to tomes in Junker's Giza series, Mogensen's *Le mastaba égyptien* (about yet another 'museum mastaba', this one in Copenhagen) and Schäfer's *Von Ägyptischer Kunst*. She requests the FÉRÉ to send her van de Walle's *Le Mastaba de Nefertit* and asks how she can transfer the 20 francs required (letter dated to 19 August 1941).

⁵³ Capart 1941: 98.

In the year that follows she must have worked hard to finish the final manuscript of her book. In the preface, written in Eindhoven during the summer of 1942, she writes:

This book is the result of studies made in Leiden in the years 1937–1940. It is meant to be as complete a study as circumstances allow of one of the finest monuments of the Old Egyptian civilization’.

It is as if she refuses to mention the war:

‘The photographs we had planned to give here could not be taken because of the special circumstances of these times. [...] I was forced to make the drawings of the scenes mostly by means of the old printed photographs of the *Beschrijving*. They were all corrected by means of the photographs I took in the year 1939 and my drawings and notes made in the Tomb Chapel in the years 1937–1939. During the last period of my work, from September 1939 onwards, the Chapel was inaccessible.

She thanks the many people who helped her realise her work, including the director of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Willem van Wijngaarden, and the staff of the Leiden University Library and the Allard Pierson Stichting in Amsterdam. She acknowledges Adriaan de Buck, Henri Blok, Henri Frankfort and Walter Federn for their help and encouragement. Three members of the FÉRE are thanked by name as well – Capart, Werbrouck, and Bille-de Mot – for allowing her to work in the library in Brussels and facilitating her work in general. And finally she mentions her ‘Dutch friends’, the late W.A. van Leer and his wife B. van Leer-de Jongh, Jozef Janssen, and the editor B.A. van Proosdij: ‘Without their various encouragement, as well as the help of others not mentioned here, it would have been impossible to get the necessary preparatory work done under difficult circumstances’.

The reason for this becomes clear. As the *Gedenkboek* recounts: ‘On 1 August 1942 she received the reassuring message that everything was ready for her to go into hiding. It was unfortunately too late, as the following morning on 2 August 1942 at 6.30 am she was taken from her bed and sent to Camp Westerbork together with other Catholic Jews. It was a reprisal for the letter of 20 June 1942, in which the Catholic church protested against the persecution of Jews’.⁵⁴

While she was at Westerbork, and probably without her ever seeing it, the book finally appeared as volume 5 of the *Mededeelingen en Verhandelingen van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch genootschap ‘Ex Oriente Lux’*: ‘The Mastaba of Hetep-Her-Akhti, study on an Egyptian tomb chapel in the Museum of Antiquities Leiden’.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Arnolds 1947: 91–92.

⁵⁵ Mohr 1943; fig. 6.

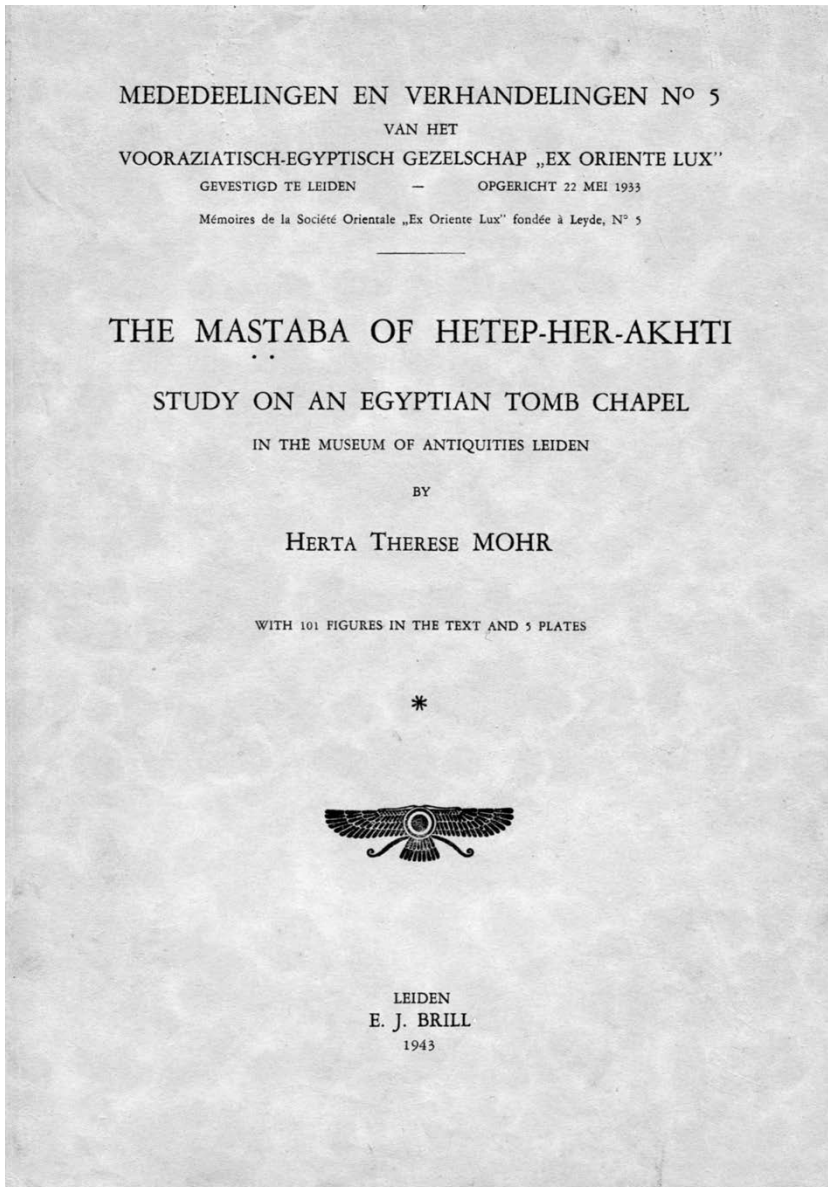


Fig. 6: Cover of Mohr's publication of the mastaba of Hetepherakhty.

Mud and barbed wire

On 4 August 1942, Herta Mohr was placed in barrack 48 of Lager Westerbork, a German transit camp on the Dutch heath in the province of Drenthe: 500 × 500 meters of barbed-wire fence, watch towers and a growing number of wooden barracks. Every Tuesday, like clockwork, a train with freight cars would leave for Eastern Europe, packed with over a thousand lives. Between July 1942 and September 1944, this train left 93 times, sealing the life of the inmates. The camp had a dining barrack and delousing barrack, an orphanage, a synagogue, a morgue and a 'theatre'. And mud everywhere, turning to a desert of sandstorms in the summer. 'Between it all, the uninterrupted crackling of typewriters: the machine-gun fire of bureaucracy'.⁵⁶

Barrack 48 was one of the so-called 'family barracks'. It consisted of tiny houses with 2–3 small rooms, central heating, and a kitchen with tap and toilet. These were the 'royally housed'. The others had to make do with dormitories housing hundreds of men and women.⁵⁷ The family barracks were meant for people with jobs and/or with a provisional exemption from transport (*Sperre*). Mohr obtained this *Sperre* because she was working as a translator (*Übersetzerin*).⁵⁸ Her talent for learning languages, all that was left of her former academic life, was what kept her going. She also had a friend in the camp: Clara Meijers, daughter of Eduard Meijers, the Leiden professor who was fired by the Nazis.⁵⁹

In a last postcard to the FÉRE in Brussels, undated but perhaps from 1943, and seemingly sent from Westerbork, Mohr writes (fig. 7):

Monsieur le Professeur et toute la Fondation,
As an exception, it is possible for me to tell you that I am here, that I exist, and that everything goes well until now. At the moment I have a very interesting job; and my little book is being printed (according to friends). I hope to at least be able to stay where I am as I have no desire to travel. We must hope for the best and above all: au revoir bientôt.

⁵⁶ Etty Hillesum (1914–1943), of Herta's age, wrote diaries and letters from the camp. In a letter from December 1942, she writes about the 'remarkable day when Jewish Catholics or Catholic Jews came on a transport, the nuns and priests with the yellow star on their monastic dress' (Hillesum 1994: 20–21).

⁵⁷ In Hillesum's words: 'colossal, hastily built barracks, crowded human sheds of drafty trellis, drying laundry, and iron cots three storeys high' (Hillesum 1994: 26).

⁵⁸ Information kindly provided by Raymund Schütz of the Netherlands Red Cross.

⁵⁹ In his famous speech of 26 November 1940, professor Rudolph Cleveringa protested against the dismissal of his tutor Eduard Meijers and other Jewish colleagues. In response to this, Leiden University was forced to close. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/algemeen/oraties/cleveringa-oratie/teksten/protest-speech-rudolph-cleveringa.pdf>.

Monsieur le Professeur et toute la Fondation,
 Par exception il m'est possible de vous
 raconter que j'y suis, que j'existe, et
 que tout va bien j'usqu'au moment.
 J'ai pour le moment un travail très
 intéressant; et mon petit livre est en état
 d'imprimerie (selon des amis). J'espère
 de au moins pouvoir rester ou je suis
 comme je n'ai pas d'envi de voyager.
 Il faut espérer le mieux
 et surtout: au revoir bientôt
 H. Th. Mohr

Fig. 7: The final postcard Mohr sent to the FÉRÉ,
perhaps from Westerbork (1943?).

There were attempts to get Herta out of Westerbork. Henri van der Putt, the 'war mayor' of Geldrop, facilitated many Jews to go into hiding, and was posthumously honoured by the World Holocaust Remembrance Center Yad Vashem. On 25 March 1943 he wrote a letter on her behalf to Friedrich Bühner of the Reichskommissariat in The Hague, asking for her to be sent to 'Doetinchem'.⁶⁰ He called her an 'excellent person', mentioned her Egyptology studies and presentation at the Brussels conference as a single student of Leiden University. Her father had volunteered during the war and been awarded a medal. If Herr Bühner could please look into the case?⁶¹

Gabriel Italie, a Classical languages teacher and orthodox Jew from The Hague, kept a diary during his stay at several camps. In November 1943, one of his entries reads: 'At the "silver paper" I met Miss Mohr, an Austrian Egyptologist, who worked for my former classmate Blok'.⁶² In the summer of 1943, the management had decided to turn Westerbork into a labour camp, designating several barracks as factories for the sorting of tinfoil (silver paper) and taking apart of batteries for reuse. Anne Frank also worked there.⁶³

⁶⁰ 'Doetinchem' housed the so-called Villa Bouchina, a place where privileged Jews would be sent in order to avoid transport.

⁶¹ Regionaal Historisch Centrum Eindhoven, collection 10030, inv. 530.

⁶² De Lang 2009: 424.

⁶³ <https://kampwesterbork.nl/de-stichting/nieuws/item/column-barak-65> (accessed 3 August 2022).

The next trace we have of Herta Mohr is through the controversial figure of Friedrich Weinreb, a Jewish economist and esoteric from Vienna, and lead character in the so-called 'Weinreb affair'. From the disentangling of this case, we learn that Mohr's parents were also in Westerbork. Despite the *Zivilverdienste* of her father, they were both put on transport to Theresienstadt on 18 January 1944, and from there to Auschwitz at the end of October, where they were killed on arrival. It also becomes clear that Herta had received a letter mentioning corruption in the camp management, and was deported as a consequence.⁶⁴

On 25 January 1944, a few days after saying goodbye to her parents, Herta found herself on the train with destination Auschwitz. Gabriel Italie describes the occasion: 'It was miserable again: a thousand people were loaded into 27 cattle wagons, including many sick and children. Hertha Mohr was among them'.⁶⁵

There, the trace becomes thin. We know that a year later, in January 1945, Auschwitz was evacuated because of the approaching Russian troops. Some of the inmates were sent westward via Gross-Rosen. According to survivor Beate Mohr (no relation), Herta was seen at the infirmary of Gross-Rosen: 'Herta Mohr, ca. 32 Jahre alt, lag zu meiner Zeit in Gross-Rosen im Krankenhaus. Über ihr weiteres Schicksal ist mir nichts bekannt'.⁶⁶

From there, inmates were transported in cattle wagons to Bergen-Belsen. The records of the Netherlands Red Cross show that research has been done trying to learn the exact date and place of her death, but ultimately these could not be established. The official records mention 15 April 1945 in Bergen-Belsen as date and place of death, but this was possibly established by the court.⁶⁷

Aftermath

After the war, Leiden counted its losses. In a letter dated to 20 July 1945 from NINO director Arie Kampman to Henri Frankfort in England, he recounts the flower bulbs they ate, ground using a coffee mill and baked as little pancakes. He also mentions the publication of the Leiden mastaba by Herta Mohr, 'who is probably killed in Germany'.⁶⁸ In a second letter dated to 10 August, he is more frank: the institute has been 'bared and looted by the ruthless *moffen*',⁶⁹ who twice raided the place. Assyriology assistant Madelon Verstijnen was held in Buchenwald, but she escaped from a death march. Lucie van den Bergh and Herta Mohr 'presumably died in Auschwitz'. Willem Alexander van Leer (whom Herta names as one of her 'Dutch friends' in the preface of her book) died of a stroke, his wife and

⁶⁴ Giltay Veth and van der Leeuw 1976: 1314.

⁶⁵ De Lang 2009: 442.

⁶⁶ Information kindly provided by Raymund Schütz of the Netherlands Red Cross.

⁶⁷ Personal correspondence with the Netherlands Red Cross.

⁶⁸ These letters can be found in the NINO archives, foreign correspondence 1945 sorted by date. Access kindly provided by Sebastiaan Berntsen.

⁶⁹ Dutch slang word for Nazis.

three daughters were transported to Poland. Also several ‘traitors’ do not go unmentioned.

In the *Chronique d’Égypte* a short notice of her death appeared that Prof. David Cohen from Amsterdam (a papyrologist and chair of the Jewish Council) had sent to the FÉRE:

Miss Herta Mohr was transported in 1943 to the internment camp of Westerbork (Province of Drente, Netherlands) where the Germans gathered the Jews from Holland before taking them to Central Europe and Poland. Herta Mohr’s father was a former German officer; we could hope therefore that he would be sent to Theresienstadt (a fortress in Czechoslovakia where the privileged Jews were gathered) and that his wife and his daughter would accompany him. But, during her stay in Westerbork, Herta Mohr received a letter from another Jew accusing certain ‘Dienstleiter’ of the camp. This letter was opened by the censor and delivered to the Westerbork authorities, who imprisoned Miss Mohr. She was liberated, shortly afterwards, by the German commandant of Westerbork who condemned her to be transferred to Auschwitz. The Jewish offices tried everything to obtain, but without any success, that Miss Mohr be directed to Theresienstadt. Herta Mohr, after being able to hide once, was sent to Auschwitz in February 1944. There has been no news of her since: it is in Auschwitz that she must have died.⁷⁰

When Walter Federn reviewed Mohr’s book from New York in 1946, he praises her ‘extraordinary clarity and conciseness and felicitous formulations’.⁷¹ He calls the book ‘a document both of human persistence and of scholarly solidarity. For it was prepared under trying circumstances, and not yet quite finished when the author, already a refugee from Vienna, where she had begun her studies, was seized by the invaders and finally deported to certain death. In fulfilment of her last wish it was carefully worked over by Prof. De Buck and Mr. Janssen, before being edited by Mw. Van Proosdij’. He concludes: ‘There is a touching symbolism in the photograph under the dedication: ‘A man bears a large vessel of blood of the slaughtered cattle towards the offering places’.

It is a pity to end Herta’s story here on such a sad note. Perhaps it is better to ask what legacy she left behind. For a while, she all but disappeared from history, but for a slim brown book on the shelves of the NINO library, containing the buds of an Egyptological career and a manuscript written against the greatest of odds. One started to ask questions: why is this book so slim, why are these drawings so scribbly, what are the ‘circumstances’ of which the author speaks? One starts digging, the beginning and end become clear, but not yet the life in between. Then a photo comes to light, a scrap of information, a letter. One calls in the help of

⁷⁰ Capart 1946.

⁷¹ Federn 1946.

archivists and librarians and suddenly, after much puzzling, a clearer picture appears.

Herta Mohr's story deserves to be told. Perhaps unremarkable in the grand scheme of things, she was one of the earliest female students of Egyptology in both Austria and the Netherlands. She was a Jew and a Roman Catholic, knew a variety of languages, made friends in her adopted home town of Leiden, published and presented her research internationally, and continued studying and researching during a World War. All this before the age of 30.



Fig. 8: Stolpersteine for Herta Mohr and her parents outside their last voluntary address, Fagelstraat 17 in Leiden.

In 2017 I already published an article touching on Herta Mohr and her work on the mastaba.⁷² Thanks to a NINO initiative, she now has a Wikipedia page.⁷³ She and her parents possess stones at the Holocaust Names Memorial in Amsterdam, while a plaque mentioning her name hangs in the garden room of Augustinus

⁷² Van de Beek 2017.

⁷³ https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herta_Mohr (accessed August 3, 2022).

in Leiden. Thanks to Maarten Raven, she now finally has an entry in the latest edition of the *Who Was Who in Egyptology*.⁷⁴ Most recently, in 2022, commemorative *Stolpersteine* have been laid for the parents of Herta Mohr at their last place of residency in Den Bosch, and for Herta and her parents in the Fagelstraat in Leiden.⁷⁵ And a new and updated study of the tomb chapel is in preparation by René van Walsem and myself, which will be dedicated to her memory. For whose name is mentioned lives on, as the ancient Egyptians understood more than anything.

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⁷⁴ Bierbrier 2019: 320–321.

⁷⁵ With thanks to Jo Kutchinsky of the Struikelstenen Stichting Den Bosch and Arnold Schalks of the Struikelstenen Stichting Leiden.

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- Fig. 6: The Khedivial Library in Cairo. Postcard, private possession of the author.
- Fig. 7: Adolf Eрман in 1881. From Grapow 1935: 1.
- Fig. 8: Reading Hall within the Berlin Royal Library. Postcard, private possession of the author.
- Fig. 9a–b: Title pages of the *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* in 1884 and 1889. Staatsbibliothek Berlin.
- Fig. 10a: Title page of the *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, Vol. 1, 1897. Staatsbibliothek Berlin.
- Fig. 10b: Celtologist Kuno Meyer, brother of the famous historian Eduard. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:K_meyer.jpg.

Hélène Virenque

- Fig. 1: Hermine Hartleben. [s.d.] © Martin Hartleben.
- Fig. 2: Lettre envoyée à Hermine Hartleben, « homme de lettres », 31 mars 1898. © Martin Hartleben.
- Fig. 3: Frontispice de H. Hartleben, *Champollion. Sein Leben und sein Werk*, 1906. Reproduction du tableau de Victorine Genève-Rumilly conservé au Musée Champollion de Vif, après 1822. © BnF/Gallica.

Nicky van de Beek

- Fig. 1: Herta Mohr's photo from her enrolment at Leiden University, 1937/1938 (courtesy of the Leiden University Library).
- Fig. 2: Dismantling the mastaba chapel of Kaninisut at Giza in 1914 (Hölzl 2005: fig. 4).
- Fig. 3: The mastaba of Hetepherakhty in Leiden (Boeser 1905: pl. 5).
- Fig. 4: Detail of the decoration of the mastaba of Hetepherakhty. Photo from the folder that contains Mohr's manuscript (courtesy of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden).
- Fig. 5: Letter from Herta Mohr to Marcelle Werbrouck, 12 November 1940 (© Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, Archive of the AÉRÉ-EGKE: BE/380469/2/585, folder Mohr, Herta Theresa).
- Fig. 6: Cover of Mohr's publication of the mastaba of Hetepherakhty (Mohr 1943).
- Fig. 7: The final postcard Mohr sent to the FÉRÉ, perhaps from Westerbork (1943?) (© Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, Archive of the AÉRÉ-EGKE: BE/380469/2/585, folder Mohr, Herta Theresa).
- Fig. 8: Stolpersteine for Herta Mohr and her parents outside their last voluntary address, Fagelstraat 17 in Leiden (photo by the author).