

Neff, Dorothea

Dorothea Neff, a leading stage actress, risked her life rescuing Jewish fashion designer Lilli Wolff. While performing in Cologne in the 1930's, she met Wolff and ordered garments from her. The two women formed a close friendship. In 1939, Neff reached the apex of her career and was invited to act in Vienna's Volkstheater. One day in the winter of 1939-40, Neff heard a quiet knocking at her door. Standing outside in front of her was Lilli Wolff, who had fled from the increasing persecution of Jews in Germany. She had hoped that the Jews of Vienna were better off than those of Germany, and that Dorothea Neff would help her. At first Neff provided her with financial assistance, and brought her medications which Jews could no longer purchase. In October 1941 the Jews of Vienna received deportation orders. Limited by a strict weight allowance, Lilli packed a case with essential items and went to Dorothea to weigh it. Neff immediately understood what she must do and insisted that Lilli move in with her.

The famous actress was well aware of the risk she was taking. She began to lead a double life. During rehearsals and plays, she was troubled by concern for Lilli and by the terrible fear that they would be caught. The two continued to live in this way for over three years, sharing Dorothea's small food ration. The Nazis never imagined that Dorothea Neff, a celebrated stage actress, would be hiding a Jew. In August of 1944, Dorothea suspected that Lilli had developed breast cancer. She decided that they must risk possible arrest and she brought her friend to one of Vienna's most prominent physicians. She introduced Lilli as Antonie Schmidt, "a refugee friend from bombed-out Cologne, who had lost all of her papers and documents". Dorothea Neff's stature was sufficient to convince the doctor, and Lilli was transferred to a hospital to undergo surgery. Nobody could have handled the many improvisations required to hospitalize a Jew in Vienna in 1944 better than a great actress. After having successfully confronted this danger, the two returned to their home, where they remained together until the liberation of Vienna in April 1945.

