



Forgetful Remembrance: Compromised Chemists at the Renaming Ceremony of the Richard Willstätter Gymnasium 1965 in Nuremberg

by

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Prof. Richard Willstätter (1872 - 1942)

(Source: Reichshandbuch der deutschen Gesellschaft. Berlin 1931.)

On 12 November 1965 the *Realgymnasium*, a high school with an emphasis on modern languages and sciences, in Nuremberg was renamed *Richard Willstätter Gymnasium* in honor of its most illustrious graduate. For this, the city fathers and the administration of the *Gymnasium* still must be commended.

Willstätter and Academic Anti-Semitism in Germany

Richard Willstätter, a world famous chemist, was a professor (*Ordinarius*) from 1915 till 1925 in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Munich - a rarity for a Jewish scientist in Wilhelmine Germany. In 1915 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Why then did he resign his *Ordinariat* in 1925 at the age of 53 at the height of his scientific achievements and world wide fame? In 1925 the Department of Chemistry at the University of Munich initiated a search for an additional faculty member. Willstätter suggested three eminent and world famous chemistry candidates. Because of their names the faculty thought, mistak-

only, that they were all Jewish and voted them down. When his colleagues made it clear that they felt that “one Jew in the Department was enough” Willstätter decided that he did no longer want to be associated with the Department and resigned. It should be noted that anti-Semitism, both open and disguised, was deeply woven into the fabric of both Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany long before the Nazi take-over in 1933. The future fate of Willstätter after his resignation can be learned from his well-known autobiography *Aus meinem Leben*.

Drs. Richard Kuhn and Dr. Eugen Bamann at the Ceremony: Insufferable Godfathers

The facts presented below are based on the dissertation of Dr. Ute Deichmann of the University of Cologne as published in her book *Flüchten, Mitmachen, Vergessen - Chemiker und Biochemiker in der NS-Zeit* (2001).

In organizing the dedication of the *Willstätter Gymnasium* in 1965 it is not surprising that the organizing committee approached two of the most prominent former students of Willstätter, namely, Drs. Richard Kuhn, himself a Nobel laureate (1938), and Dr. Eugen Bamann to present lectures in honor of Richard Willstätter. What is difficult to understand, however, is that no one apparently tried to ascertain the history of Drs. Kuhn and Bamann during the Nazi period and their relation, if any, with their revered teacher and *Doktorvater* (tutor) during this period. Willstätter did not flee from Germany until 1939. As shown below, the choice of Richard Kuhn in particular was an undeniable insult to the memory of Richard Willstätter.

Richard Kuhn was a faithful and convinced adherent and supporter of the Nazi regime and all it stood for. In 1933 he dismissed all of his Jewish co-workers without making the slightest effort to save their jobs. In 1936 he denounced his colleague Otto Meyerhof who had kept his Jewish co-workers. In 1938 he became the President of the German Chemical Society, a position which he kept till 1945. He voluntarily re-oriented his research to develop a more effective poisonous nerve gas for the *Wehrmacht*. In 1941 in connection with the 75th anniversary of the founding of the German Chemical Society he gave a speech as President of the Society which except for its references to chemistry was typical Nazi blather and which ended with “... *dem Duce, dem Tenno und unserem Führer ein dreifaches Sieg Heil*” (a triple *Sieg Heil* to the Duce / Mussolini, the Tenno / the Japanese emperor and the *Führer* / Hitler). This speech was published in a well-known scholarly chemical journal and thus became widely known among his colleagues in Europe and the USA. As Ute Deichmann summed it up, “*Sein moralisches Versagen im Nationalsozialismus wurde nach dem Krieg international bekannt ...*” (his ethical failing became internationally known after the war).

Eugen Bamann, the other principal speaker at the dedication, was the last student of Willstätter. He was a typical careerist of the Nazi period. He joined the SA in 1933, which was a purely voluntary choice, and the NSDAP in 1938 and was interned by the allies till 1947. He continued his career after the war and became the President of the German Pharmaceutical Society from 1962 to 1965.

There are two points which need to see the light of day in connection with the dedication ceremony: Neither Kuhn nor Bamann in their speeches addressed or condemned the anti-Semitism which drove Willstätter from his position in Munich in 1925 and then from Germany in 1939. Furthermore, there is absolutely no evidence that either one of them, who so warmly spoke of their “beloved teacher”, made the slightest effort to contact him or offer him any support before and during the Nazi period. Moral courage and human decency was not part of their makeup.

The other point is the question whether the Nuremberg organizing committee for the dedication ceremonies could or should have known about the Nazi past of Richard Kuhn before extending an invitation to him. To be sure, the Deichmann study was not available to them. However, many of Kuhn’s contemporary colleagues in various areas of Chemistry, some of whom openly distanced themselves from the Nazi regime, were well aware of his close involvement with the Nazi party and its philosophy. The failure of the committee to check into this led to the unseemly spectacle of the memorializing of a man whose career and life were destroyed by anti-Semitism by speakers who themselves were part of the anti-Semitic cabal.

Professor Dr. Shuler, the author of this article, was born in Nuremberg in 1922 and was a student at the Realgymnasium until 1936 when he was expelled because he was Jewish. After emigration to the United States in 1937 he obtained his PhD in Chemistry in 1949 in the US under Professor Karl F. Herzfeld who coincidentally was a colleague and friend of Richard Willstätter in the Department of Chemistry in Munich. Professor Herzfeld left Munich in the late 1920s to accept a Professorship at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Professor Shuler became Emeritus in 1991 after serving twice as Chairman of the Department of Chemistry at the University of California, San Diego, where he spent his academic career.

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