



## Prof. Dr. Gottfried Merzbacher, Munich

(Dec. 9, 1843 in Baiersdorf – April 14, 1926 in Munich)

### The Merzbacher family



**Gottfried Merzbacher**

(photo from: "Der Bayerlaender", vol. 29, July 1926)

The documented genealogy of the family can be traced back to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The village of Baiersdorf near the city of Erlangen (Middle Franconia county) was their original domicile, but gradually liberalized residential restrictions allowed century-old rural Jewish communities to relocate to larger urban centers. The Merzbachers did what others did: They followed the trend. Life in larger communities facilitated active participation in the emerging industrial economy. After an initial several years stay in Nuremberg, the Merzbachers finally settled in the Bavarian capital, the city of Munich and the seat of the Bavarian monarchy.

### Gottfried Merzbacher: Education and vocational training

Gottfried was born on December 9, 1843. He was the son of Marcus Merzbacher, a trader in pelts, born on January 24, 1807. After primary school Gottfried continued at the Erlangen "Realschule", one of several kinds of secondary schools. Subsequently, following a family tradition he apprenticed

to become a furrier-craftsman (Kuerschner) which training involved way-stations at foreign cities like Paris, London and St. Petersburg. Aside from learning English and French, he attained fluency in Russian which later would become a most useful asset.

In 1868 he considered himself sufficiently prepared to open a fur-fashion store located at 14 Residenzstrasse in Munich. The business flourished. Gottfried became financially independent. He sold the business and started to embark on his life-long passion: Mountaineering.

## **Alpinist and explorer**

The end of the 1870s witnessed his first successful mountaineering exploits, particularly in the Brenta-Range north of Lake Garda and the Dolomites. On June 16, 1881 his first ascent of the extremely challenging "Totenkirchl" in the so-called "Wilder Kaiser" range (Tyrolean Alps) brought him fame. To this day, the route he took bears his name "Merzbacherweg".

A period of writing activity followed, including travel reports and scientific contributions to numerous specialized periodicals. In 1891 he undertook his first expedition, a venture into the remote, still unexplored regions of the Caucasus . His richly illustrated two-volume book "Aus den Hochregionen des Kaukasus" published in 1901 presented the scientific and cartographic results of the expedition. The truly spectacular maps of the region accompanied the books. Several other expeditions into Asian mountain regions like the Tien-Tshanand and the Bogdo Ola (now part of Kyrgisistan) followed.

## **Recognition at home and abroad**



**Moehlstrasse 25 in the district of Bogenhausen, Gottfried Merzbacher's last residence. Visitors of his apartment on the ground floor reported that it looked like an ethnographic museum.**

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

1901 the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Munich bestowed on Gottfried the title of "doctor honoris causa", a distinction rarely awarded. Election to the position of Second Chairman of the prestigious Munich Geographical Society followed. 1907 brought him the Bavarian Order of Merit and the title of Royal Professor. Numerous domestic and foreign honors rounded up his list of distinctions.

Professor Dr. h.c. Gottfried Merzbacher died on April 14, 1926 and was laid to rest at the beautiful Waldfriedhof cemetery. His voluminous library became the property of the Bavarian State Library. Two years later a street in the Gern district of Munich was named after him.

## Aftermath

Up to 1933 the name Merzbacher was that of a highly regarded and distinguished citizen. After 1933 Gottfried's travel companion Karl Leuchs became chairman of the Munich section of the Alpine Society and, in accordance with the so-called "Arierparagraph" all "non-Aryan" members were excluded from membership.



Merzbacherstrasse in Munich's Gern district

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

*Susanne Rieger, revised and translated by Mr. Peter Merzbacher*

## Literature

Hans Dollinger: Die Muenchner Strassennamen, Munich 1997.

Yvonne Gleibs: Juden im kulturellen und wissenschaftlichen Leben Muenchens in der zweiten Haelfte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Munich 1981, p. 196 - 200.

Hans Lamm: Vergangene Tage. Juedische Kultur in Muenchen. Munich 1982.

H. Pfann: Obituary for Gottfried Merzbacher, in: Der Bayerlaender. Mitteilungen der Alpenvereinssektion Bayerland e.V. in Muenchen, vol. 29, July 1926, p. 1 f.

Ilse Sponsel: Hoch hinaus! Prof. Dr. h.c. Gottfried Merzbacher, in: Traegerverein Juedisches Regionalmuseum Mittelfranken (Hg.), Aus der Juedischen Geschichte Baiersdorfs, Fuerth 1992, p. 46 f.

Anonymous: Dr. Gottfried Merzbacher, der Forschungsreisende, in: Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums, edition of Jan. 6, 1905, p. 5 f.