



Dr. Walter Berlin, Nuremberg

(11.3.1887 in Nuremberg – 21.8.1963 in London)

Family background



Dr. Walter Berlin as artillery officer in the First World War

(Photo: Mr. L.C. Berlin)

The Berlin family tree goes back to the middle of the seventeenth century and covers twelve generations. The first four lived in Halberstadt in central Germany, the following seven in the region of Middle Franconia where their birth places were Fuerth, Ansbach and Nuremberg.

His youth and the First World War

Walter Berlin was born on 11.3.1887 in Nuremberg. His father was a hop merchant, his grandfather was Privy Counsellor and Royal Bavarian Advocate in Ansbach, the county town of Middle Franconia.

He went to school in Nuremberg from 1893 to 1905 and matriculated at the "Altes Gymnasium" (today "Melanchthon-Gymnasium"). He studied law from 1905 to 1909 at the universities of Munich, Berlin, Kiel and Erlangen and obtained his doctorate in 1913.

Throughout the First World War he served in the 8th Royal Bavarian Field Artillery Regiment and was discharged as captain and battery commander. He was awarded the Iron Cross First and Second Class and the Bavarian Order of Military Merit 4th Class with Crown and Swords. He also had the badge signifying that he had been wounded.

Solicitor* and Jewish representative

From 1919 Dr. Walter Berlin practised as a solicitor* in Nuremberg. The clients of his law practice were mostly industrial and commercial firms and he sat on a number of supervisory boards. His partner was Fritz Josephthal, a member of the distinguished family with which the Berlins had been linked for generations, both professionally and in kinship.

* British English for lawyer

Walter Berlin actively represented Jewish interests. He was chairman of the Nuremberg branch, and a member of the national board, of the Central Union of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (the "Central-Verein") whose main purpose was the fight against anti-Semitism. In this capacity he gave evidence, in 1929, against the Nazi "Gauleiter" Julius Streicher before a jury in a Nuremberg court. Streicher was sentenced to two months' imprisonment for incitement to class hatred.

After January 1933: Advocate for the persecuted

After the Nazis came to power in January 1933, Jewish lawyers were forbidden to represent "Aryan" clients and Walter Berlin acted exclusively for Jews. Thus, he advised them when their businesses were threatened with "Aryanisation" and defended them when they were accused of some offence. He often appeared in court in order to plead for his clients. Although he had previously always been on good terms with his "Aryan" colleagues he now found himself totally isolated in the courthouse. None of his colleagues said a single word to him.

In his efforts to help endangered Jews Walter Berlin was, however, often supported by the Nuremberg Police President, Dr. Benno Martin, whose relationship with Streicher was often strained. Benno Martin and Walter Berlin had been friendly acquaintances since their younger days. Dr. Martin often gave warning when individual Jews were in imminent danger and was, within the limits of his possibilities, ready with practical help, such as the immediate issue of passports which allowed travel abroad. Walter Berlin could not foresee Martin's later misdeeds when he organised the deportation of Franconia's Jews to the East.

The "Kristallnacht" and the end in Germany



Rose Berlin (1899 - 1983)

(Photo: Nuremberg City Archives)

During the night from the 9th to the 10th of November 1938, later known as the "Kristallnacht", two SA-men came to Walter and Rose Berlin's apartment in order to arrest him. He was, however, in Stuttgart in order to represent a client before a court. The following morning his wife travelled to Stuttgart and urged him to go to Holland as planned. He was due to attend a meeting there and had a valid passport with visa. He refused and both returned to their apartment in Nuremberg. They found it had been broken into and the contents partly destroyed, partly stolen.

The following night two different SA-men came to the apartment, arrested Walter Berlin and took him to the Nuremberg police prison where he found many other Jews most of whom had been severely ill-treated. On the way to prison the SA-men had hit him in the face with knuckle-dusters which led to the loss of an eye. Towards the end of November Walter Berlin was released from prison.

On 30 November 1938 Walter Berlin's right to practise as a lawyer was declared invalid and he was deprived of his profession.

In the meantime his wife Rose had succeeded in obtaining short-term residence permits in France for the two children. In April 1939 Walter and Rose Berlin emigrated to England. Towards the end of the year the family was reunited in London.

On 15 May 1940 the German Government revoked Walter Berlin's citizenship. He only learned of this after the War.

A new start in England

Almost immediately after his arrival in London he joined fellow refugees from Germany to found, in the summer of 1939, a Jewish congregation which, over the decades, grew from modest beginnings into the flourishing Belsize Square Synagogue. In this development he played, for many years, a leading part.

In England Walter Berlin was at first unemployed, his wife providing the subsistence income by long hours of hard work. From the spring of 1941 until the end of the Second World War the owners of a London office building employed him as a firewatcher. His main task was to make German incendiary bombs harmless during air raids. He was awarded the British Defence Medal.

In 1941 he decided to take up accountancy as a profession. During air raid-free periods he studied in the attic of the office building which he guarded. He passed his final examination in 1945 but was not admitted to public practice until he could provide evidence of several years' practical experience. He therefore worked as an employee in an accountancy firm until 1948.

In the spring of 1948, when he was 61 years old, he made himself independent once more. He worked until the end of his life and died in London 21 August 1963 aged 76.

A brief pen portrait of Walter Berlin

Walter Berlin was a tall and powerful man. His character was uncomplicated, his wit and repartee were quick but never wounding. He loved classical and German history and literature. In old age he once again read Horace. He had understood how to enjoy all the phases of his varied life. He was survived by his widow - who, after "Kristallnacht", had saved the family through her cool judgement and power of decision - two children and six grandchildren.

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Ludwig C Berlin