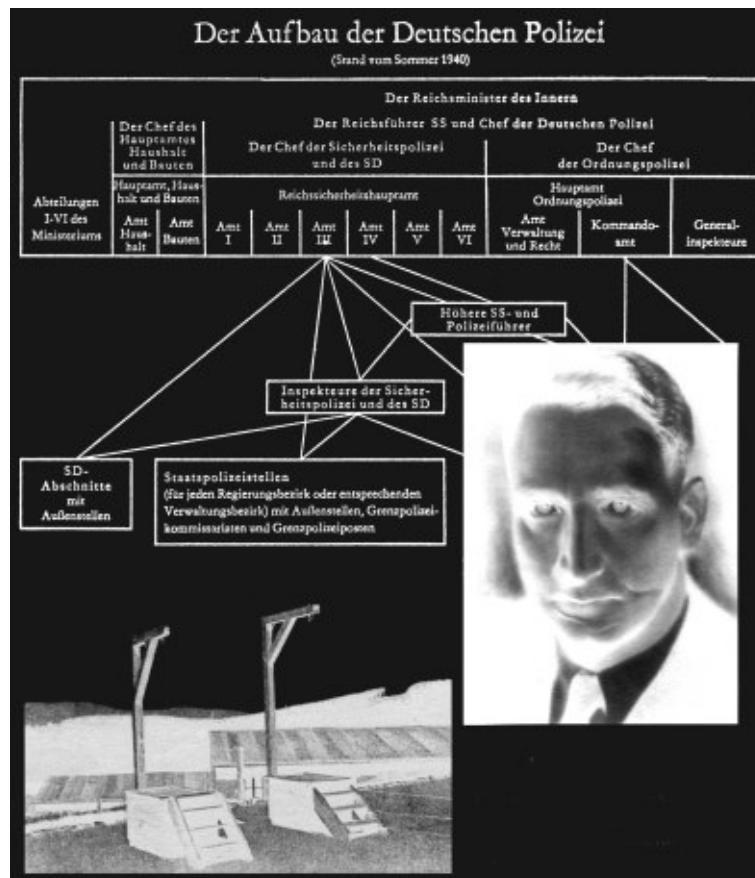




## Nuremberg's Police Commissioner SS General Benno Martin: A case in point of German legal and historical shortcomings after 1945



(graphics: *rijo*)

### Introduction

As many pillars of the Nazi system, the Nuremberg Gestapo and SS bigwig Benno Martin was no Nazi fanatic but an extreme cynic. The only loyalty he was capable of was to his career and his swollen ego. The SS uniform enhancing his stately appearance, made even more impressive by deep scars in his face, he rejoiced at being dubbed the “Black Knight”. But his was no role in a musical comedy.

### An unstoppable advancement beyond political systems

After serving in World War I and studying law Martin was assigned to the Bavarian State Police Headquarters of Nuremberg and Fürth in October 1923 as a legal counsel. Throughout

the Weimar Republic he acquired there a solid record of favoring the extreme right, encouraged and promoted by the notoriously Nazi-friendly police commissioner Heinrich Gareis, thus making friends with the up and coming leaders Julius Streicher and Willy Liebel.

After their seizure of power the Nazis considered him as reliable enough to make him the chief of the political department of Nuremberg-Fürth police in July 1933 after he had entered the party officially on May 1. A member of the SS since April 10, he became commissioner of the Nuremberg-Fürth police on October 1, 1934. Eventually in the rank of a SS general and in charge of the internal security in Military District XIII ranging from Lower Franconia to western Bohemia, he executed on a regional level what Berlin ordered: the persecution, torture and killing of thousands of foes to the regime, Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the oppression and draconic punishment of forced laborers in places like the infernal Gestapo camps on *Russenwiese* in Nuremberg and in the rural town of Langenzenn (Central Franconia), spreading and sustaining a wanton network of brutality, denunciation and fear.

He felt no qualms being personally in charge of the first deportation of Franconian Jews from Nuremberg in November 1941. Though he denied any knowledge after the war, he must have known for the sake of common sense that sending infants and octogenarians to Riga-Jungfernhof, a forlorn place in the war zone of occupied Latvia in deepest winter meant manslaughter at least. The only thing no Allied or German prosecutor could prove was that he battered anybody by his own hands - but neither did one of the defendants sentenced to death by the IMT in Nuremberg.

Caught on a not very heroic attempt to flee from his post he was kept in custody until 1949 but all trials at holding him responsible for what was going on in his domain came to nought. His most peculiar version of truth prevailed even in court. All the charges against him were dismissed because he succeeded in suggesting that he, the highest ranking SS and police officer in northern Bavaria since 1941, did nothing bad and lacked any knowledge about the systematic crimes of the regime. From today's point of view it is a bad joke, but it went well with the German public in the late 1940s who did not want to be reminded of what happened just a couple of years before.

### **No shame, no regrets**

After that unpleasant four years' intermezzo Martin retreated to Munich to enjoy his general's pension and though already claiming chronic poor health to gain concessions during imprisonment in the late 1940s, lived there happily ever after until the age of 82. He did not die be-

fore successfully styling himself for posterity as an almost anti-Fascist - never distancing from the Nazis' exterminatory ideology. It is significant for his tactics that the sources given in his biography by Utho Grieser, "*Himmlers Mann in Nürnberg*", for e.g. any actions in favor of Jews are either from Martin (his interviews by the author or testimonies in the trials against him) or his subordinates and friends. Unless being forced to, he never related his actions in compromising events such as "Kristallnacht" which in Nuremberg was among the worst and most murderous in entire Germany. The more he emphasized his role in the "Aryanization scandal" which felled Streicher in 1940 though in fact it was nothing but a leverage in the hands of the infamous *Gauleiter's* personal enemies struggling for dominance in the Nazi hierarchy. They did not care about the victims of brutish treatment and blackmail, only about the accordance to the legal pretext which they used to dispossess the Jews.

Martin had been smart enough to keep the backdoor open for himself at all times by not becoming a member of the Nazi party before 1933 though sympathizing strongly with its aims, sharing out favors to important members of the Jewish community and towards the end of the war protecting members of the aristocratic resistance against Hitler. But he did it all clandestinely and only to the extent that he had not to expose himself or take a personal risk.

According to his self-ascribed sanitized image the obituary in the local paper "*Nürnberger Nachrichten*", formulated by his widow, read almost defiantly:

*On July 2 [1975], suddenly and unexpectedly my beloved husband and life companion deceased.*

*Dr. jur. Benno Martin*

*Police Commissioner and Police General ret.*

*Bearer of high awards*

*b. February 12, 1893 in Kaiserslautern*

*Munich 40, Tengstraße 21*

*At the wish of the deceased the funeral took place without public attention.*

*[...]*

### **Dig again - right now and much deeper**

Because of the original documents having been destroyed by purpose at the end of the war, Martin was able to doctor his public image at will. Depending on his statements to learn about crucial historic facts made Utho Grieser, the only substantial researcher on Martin yet, almost inevitably surrender his independence and distance to his subject.

As it often goes in historiography, since his publication most authors dealing with Martin draw from Grieser rather than to start from the basics. Consequently even today the legend of the “Black Knight” resonates in the many books and on the internet. 65 years after the end of the Nazis’ reign of terror and more than 30 years after “*Himmlers Mann in Nürnberg*” it is high time to investigate Martin’s story anew and with it those of the chief representatives of the regime on a local level, before and after 1945.

What has to end in Nuremberg is the comforting ritual of reducing the involvement of the city into Nazism and its monstrous felonies to a couple of days in September between 1933 and 1938 when the party rallies took place here, and the self-restriction to redundantly analyzing their choreography time and again. To vary the famous German film title: The murderers were among us and it is up to our generation to name them - belatedly, now that they have found a permanently well-heated shelter after their vast majority evaded worldly justice.

*Gerhard Jochem*

### **Literature**

- *Utho Grieser: Himmlers Mann in Nürnberg*. Nuremberg 1974.
- *Stadtllexikon Nürnberg*. Nuremberg 2000.

**[Index\\*](#)**

**[Home\\*](#)**