

Fritz Josephthal, Nuremberg

(9.7.1890 in Nuremberg - 14.2.1954 in New York)



(photo: Nuremberg City Archives)

Family background

Fritz Josephthal was born into a family of lawyers. One of his great-grandfathers was Privy Councillor Samuel Berlin, the first Jewish advocate in the Kingdom of Bavaria. His grandfather was Privy Councillor Gustav Josephthal, for many years chairman of the Nuremberg Bar Association. His father was Councillor Emil Josephthal. They all worked in the same family law practice, first in Ansbach and then in Nuremberg. The ancestors on his father's side had lived in these towns at least as far back as 1675. His mother was Auguste, née Brüll.

Education

He frequented the humanistic "Neues Gymnasium" in Nuremberg. After matriculation he studied law and passed his examination at the university of Erlangen. He received his further professional training as legal assistant at the Nuremberg district and regional courts and at Munich's police headquarters.

War service

The First World War broke out just after his twenty-fourth birthday. He immediately joined the local 14th Infantry Regiment as a volunteer and spent the remainder of the war on the Western Front. He was promoted to lieutenant and served as troop and company commander and as battalion adjutant. He was twice wounded and was awarded the Iron Cross First and Second Class as well as the Bavarian Order of Military Merit, 4th Class, with Swords.

In their written assessments his superiors describe him as an officer of great personal courage who rapidly gained the trust of his men. They stress his distinguished conduct “particularly in major battles” as well as his modesty and tact. However, they also comment on his shyness and low self-assertion.

As lawyer

After the war, he resumed his law studies and passed his State examination in the spring of 1919. He then joined his father’s law practice where his relative Dr. Walter Berlin was already working on his return from war service. The work consisted in advising the almost exclusively industrial and commercial clientele of the practice.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they forbade Jewish lawyers to represent “Aryan” clients and Fritz Josephthal and his partner Walter Berlin acted exclusively for Jews, advising them when they were threatened with “Aryanisation” of their enterprises or with prosecution for mostly invented offences. They acquired the reputation of fearless representatives and their law practice became the centre from which Nuremberg’s Jews defended themselves against the Nazis.

In the Jewish community

In Nuremberg’s Jewish life, the Association of Jewish Nursing Sisters was close to his heart. He was chairman and it can be assumed that the four months that he spent in 1915/16 as a seriously wounded soldier in military hospitals had given him a special insight into the work of nursing sisters. The Jewish nursing sisters cared, without charge, for the sick of all religious denominations.

In the mid-1930s the Association had to cease its activities and Fritz Josephthal arranged the conversion of the sisters’ residence in Nuremberg’s Wielandstraße into an old people’s home. It was used as such until the deportation of all Nuremberg’s Jews to the death camps began in November 1941.

Fritz Josephthal and Julius Streicher

His father Emil died in May 1923 and the funeral at the Jewish cemetery was an important local event. Favourable obituaries appeared in Nuremberg newspapers.

Julius Streicher, then a primary schoolteacher and later Nuremberg’s “Gauleiter”, thereupon published a defamatory article about the deceased in his anti-Semitic journal “Der Stürmer”. Fritz Josephthal knew that the law offered no redress against defamation of dead persons.

Streicher was notorious for always ostentatiously carrying a riding whip. Fritz Josephthal bought himself a whip, confronted Streicher on his way home from school and challenged him with the question: "Did you know the late Councillor Josephthal?" When Streicher said "No", Fritz Josephthal drew his whip several times across Streicher's face with the words: "You will now at least get to know his son."

This incident had unexpected consequences. Streicher who already at that time - ten years before Hitler came to power - had at his disposal gangs of violent street bullies against whom the Nuremberg authorities intervened but feebly, refrained from any reprisal. In all the years until his emigration in 1939, during which Streicher's power grew and grew, not a hair was harmed on Fritz Josephthal's head.

The pogrom

In the pogrom night from 9th to 10th of November 1938 Fritz Josephthal was the only leading Nuremberg Jew who was not arrested. While almost all Jewish homes were wrecked and looted, his own remained untouched. In the following weeks, many Jewish women whose husbands had been arrested and had disappeared, turned to Fritz Josephthal in their despair. Although there was little he could do, not a few gathered strength from his caring manner.

Emigration

In May 1939 he emigrated to England with his wife Anna and his aged mother. In the summer of 1940 he was interned because of his German nationality but released after a few months. He lived in London and earned a living as packer in a factory. In 1946 he re-emigrated to New York where he worked for a Jewish-American organisation in order to help other European immigrants to be absorbed into American life.

Fritz Josephthal died in New York on 14.02.1954, aged 63. He was survived by his wife Anna, née Mohr, whom he had married in 1917. They had no children.

13 August 2001

Ludwig C Berlin

Postscript

Fritz Josephthal never knew why Streicher refrained from reprisals against him but surmised that Streicher respected him for his direct physical action.

The writer of this brief biography recently came across a book which lends strength to Josephthal's supposition, viz. *Nuremberg Diary* by G.M. Gilbert, Ph.D., New York 1947.

Gilbert was Prison Psychologist at the Nuremberg Trial of Nazi War Criminals. In his book he recounts the overheard conversations of the Nazis among themselves. On page 419 he reports Streicher as saying that the current riots in Palestine had convinced him that the Jews

had plenty of fighting spirit and spunk and that he was filled with admiration for them now ...:
“For such people I can only have the greatest respect!”

16 January 2002

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