



## Otto Metzger, Nuremberg

(24.11.1885 in Nuremberg - 31.3.1961 in Enfield, North London)



Otto Metzger as a German officer in World War I  
(photo: private)

### Family Background

Otto Metzger's father was Ludwig Metzger, a steel merchant in Nuremberg who had been awarded the title of commercial counsellor. He was born in Weisenau, a small town on the left bank of the Rhine near its confluence with the Main.

Otto's grandfather, Jakob Metzger, had trained as a tanner. Upon obtaining in 1838 the qualification of master tanner he had difficulties with his craft guild. These guilds were reluctant to admit Jews as members. He thereupon chose to become a hop merchant.

### **Education and training**

Otto Metzger went to the humanistic *Neues Gymnasium* in Nuremberg where he matriculated in 1904. He then studied mechanical engineering at the universities of Munich and Zurich and obtained his diploma as a professional engineer at the university of Berlin-Charlottenburg.

After his studies he went first to Austria and then to the United States where he spent 18 months working as an itinerant engineer and learning English. He was already fluent in French which he had learned in early childhood from his French governess.

### **War service**

Throughout the First World War he served in the engineers on the Western Front and was awarded the Iron Cross First and Second Class. His last rank was full lieutenant.

### **Professional life**

Virtually the whole of Otto Metzger's professional life in both Germany and England was spent as managing director of companies whose principal activity was the manufacture of ferrous and non-ferrous components and the refinement of light metals.

### **Career in Germany**

Upon his return from the United States in 1912 he joined the Nuremberg manufacturing firm *Gebrüder Schmittmer* as junior partner. After war service he became, in 1919, its managing director. In 1920 the company was taken over by *Vereinigte Deutsche Metallwerke* of Frankfurt of which it became the subsidiary in Nuremberg, *Süddeutsche Metallindustrie*. Otto Metzger became managing director of this subsidiary, as well as director on the board of the parent company which, in 1928, was itself taken over by the *Metallgesellschaft*, a public company existing since 1880.

In the eighteen years during which he was in charge he greatly expanded production, in spite of the economic slump of the late 1920s and early 1930s. After the Nazis came to power in 1933 he experienced increasing difficulties and was finally forced to relinquish his position in 1937. The company retained him as a consultant for another year.

His eminence as an employer of 2,000 people is shown by the fact that the local employers' association nominated him as its representative and labour judge at the local labour court. The Nazis, of course, deprived him of this position.

### **“Impact extrusion”**

Otto Metzger’s outstanding contribution was the successful development, in the early 1920s, of “impact extrusion”, particularly of zinc. This was a time and cost saving method of producing cans for batteries which allowed his company to capture a dominant share of this growing market, not only in Germany but also abroad. He had patents to his name.

### **The UK licence for Enfield Rolling Mills**

This new process of producing battery cans more quickly and more cheaply aroused the interest of Enfield Rolling Mills who obtained the licence for the United Kingdom and sent two of their directors (Lord Forrester and the Honourable John Grimston, who both later succeeded to the title of Lord Verulam) to *Süddeutsche Metallindustrie* in Nuremberg. There, in 1933/34, they spent several months under Otto Metzger’s guidance acquainting themselves with impact extrusion and preparing its introduction in the UK where a separate extrusion factory was established at Tottenham, a suburb of London.

This relationship was to have a profound influence on his later life.

### **The “*Kristallnacht*” and Dachau**

Having been forced by the Nazis into unemployment, Otto Metzger knew that he had to leave Germany without losing time. In early November 1938 he was in England to negotiate and sign a contract of employment with Enfield Rolling Mills to establish and run a secondary aluminium refinery at Brimsdown near Enfield, North London and, at the same time, act as consultant to the new zinc can factory at Tottenham.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of November he was on his way back to Germany with the comforting knowledge that the contract in his pocket would enable him and his family to obtain an entry visa and permission to reside in Britain from the British Consul in Munich. However, after he had crossed the Rhine from France to Germany, the Gestapo took him off the train and transported him to Dachau concentration camp. It happened to be the day after the fateful night, later euphemistically known as the “*Kristallnacht*”, when synagogues were burned down all over Germany and tens of thousands of Jewish men were taken to concentration camps.

Meanwhile his wife Sophie who, after having her home invaded and her furniture and belongings smashed and slashed by Nazi stormtroopers, had spent the night wandering the streets, together with her young daughter, with coats slung over their nightgowns, waited in vain for his return. Day after day she went to the Nuremberg police. She even travelled to the German

French border and enquired at the police there. Nowhere could she obtain any news. It was as if her husband had vanished from the face of the earth.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December Sophie received a message from a Dachau inmate who had just been released that Otto would be arriving in Nuremberg by train at half past midnight. She went to the station. The train arrived. The passengers alighted but she could not see Otto among them. She returned home and found him sitting in an armchair. Most of his teeth had been knocked out. His head had been shorn of all hair. Ill-treatment and starvation had, in six weeks, so changed his appearance that Sophie had not recognised her own husband as he passed her on the station platform. He had taken a taxi from the station, thereby unwittingly incurring a further risk. While he was in Dachau, the Nazis had made it illegal for Jews to take taxis.

### **Emigration**

After his release from Dachau, Otto Metzger tried to emigrate to England to take up his job with Enfield Rolling Mills. However, the German authorities had, at a high level in Berlin, refused to issue him with the necessary passport. He was considered too knowledgeable as a specialist engineer. Thanks, once again, to the efforts of Lord Forrester who interceded for him in Berlin, the passport was eventually granted.

### **A new start in England**

On 24 February 1939 Otto Metzger arrived in England together with his wife and younger daughter, the three older children having left Germany earlier for England and the United States.

He then spent a few days finding somewhere to live. On 1 March he was at his desk as managing director of Enfield Rolling Mills' aluminium refinery which he set up from scratch, with a production target of 1,500 tons a year for civilian use. Production started at the beginning of July 1939.

In September, war broke out and production was switched to supplying the aluminium for the castings for aircraft and military vehicles. By 1943 he had established three refineries, producing at their wartime peak 12,000 tons a year.

Officially, the British still regarded Otto Metzger as an "enemy alien". Yet, while most other male aliens of German origin, including refugees, were interned during the fraught summer of 1940, he was left free. His knowledge and his work were considered too important for the British war effort.

### **His later life**

After the war, Enfield Rolling Mills switched production back to civilian use. Otto Metzger remained managing director and in full control until the end of 1957, past his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday and well past the conventional retirement age. He remained a consultant until September 1959.

He died at Enfield, North London, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1961, aged 75.

### **His family**

Otto Metzger's wife Sophie (Nuremberg 1894 - Enfield 1998) came from the Josephthal family of eminent lawyers and reached the age of 104. She matched her husband in courage and steadfastness and was the acknowledged matriarch of their four children and nine grandchildren.

When he left Germany in 1939 he had the anguish of leaving behind his aged mother who, in spite of all efforts of her children, could not obtain a visa for any country of refuge. She was deported by the Nazis in 1942 and died in Theresienstadt concentration camp.

### **Character and personality**

Otto Metzger was a man of medium height, sturdy build and great physical and moral courage. In his younger days he had been an enthusiastic alpinist. He had a high sense of duty, disliked ostentation and adopted an austere lifestyle for himself and his family. Cigars were his only self-indulgence. He liked to make sure of his facts before he spoke and expected the same of others.

A recurrent theme of his professional life was the impression of high ability which he made on those who knew of his work. This applied not only to his colleagues and business friends, but also to his Nazi persecutors and to British bureaucrats.

17 December 2001

*Ludwig C Berlin*

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