

# *Refugee scholars at Duke University*

. --by William E. King (*University Archives*)

*[Editor's Note: This essay was published in 1996 in a book entitled They Fled Hitler's Germany and Found Refuge in North Carolina.]*

The volume in the records of President William P. Few is marked "Strictly Confidential." It is dated 1936 and titled *List of Displaced German Scholars*. In content, it consists of more than 1,600 of the briefest of biographical sketches of victims of political persecution in Germany. Specifically the purpose of the compilation was to assist in finding employment for "Jewish scholars; scholars with Jewish antecedents or those connected with Jews by marriage; and non-Jewish scholars whose convictions made them unacceptable to the German Government."

Arranged by academic discipline, one can easily identify 102 psychologists, 104 sociologists or 197 theologians. The list seems to go on and on including the now familiar names of Einstein, Lewin, Barth and Tillich. Each listing represents the uprooting of family and the interruption of teaching and research. Both men and women and established and promising scholars are included.

At least five individuals employed by Duke University are listed in the volume. That Duke would employ so many émigrés is perhaps surprising. Despite obvious academic advantages and humanitarian appeal, the employment of the European émigrés was sometimes controversial and difficult to implement. The organizers of the placement services were concerned about anti-Semitism. Religious prejudice, however, was often less a problem than anti-foreign attitudes which were most often rooted in the hard economic reality of the times. The 1930s were the time of the Great Depression and as salaries were cut and research funds lost, native-born academicians sometimes resented limited funds going to foreign refugees. Prestigious Harvard University was conspicuously slow to join the effort to add German émigrés to its faculty. The South, as a region, was the slowest area to offer assistance.

The eleven states of the old Confederacy were still so poor the region was labeled

by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the nation's number one economic problem. The rebirth or second era of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and 1930s fed off of poverty and cultivated anti-foreign and anti-Semitic attitudes. The South's mixture of widely dispersed state-supported universities and teachers' colleges and numerous independent private colleges and universities did not lend itself to quick participation in a national effort of any kind. When the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars organized in 1933, it named only one southerner, Chancellor James H. Kirkland of Vanderbilt University, to its twenty-two member general committee of support. The final report of the Emergency Committee in 1945 lists the successful placement of 613 scholars. A partial listing by state reflects the relative emphasis of the efforts of the Committee: 111 in New York state, 27 each in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, 26 in Illinois, 10 in Maryland, 7 in North Carolina, 4 in Tennessee and Virginia, and 1 in Louisiana.

The policy of employing German scholars distinguished Duke University compared to other institutions in the region. When the assistant secretary of the Emergency Committee, Edward R. Murrow, sent a mass appeal to college and university presidents on November 2, 1933, President William P. Few replied the next day: "I should be very glad to have. . . a list of available men for consideration." By November 27, Few submitted seven names in order of preference for scholars in psychology, zoology, history, chemistry or physics, law, language and sociology.

Obviously desiring to be of quick assistance in such perilous times for refugee scholars, President Few also was grateful for assistance in building the faculty for the relatively new Duke University. Founded in 1838 as Union Institute in Randolph County, the institution became Trinity College before relocating to Durham in 1892 through the primary support of tobacco entrepreneur, Washington Duke. Duke's son, James B. Duke, a business genius with spectacular success in both tobacco and electric power, greatly expanded the family's commitment to serving the region in 1924 with the creation of the Duke Endowment, a philanthropic organization empowered to aid hospitals, orphanages, and selected institutions of higher education in the two Carolinas and the rural Methodist Church in North Carolina.

James B. Duke's generosity permitted the expansion of Trinity College into a university, and with an additional gift for construction of a new campus, President Few persuaded Duke to permit the expanded, reorganized institution to be named Duke University. Within six years the school was transformed by the construction of two new campuses. A Georgian style campus became the undergraduate

college for women, and a Gothic style campus became the site of the expansion of an undergraduate school for men, an engineering school, law school, and graduate school, as well as the site for the addition of new schools in religion, medicine, nursing and forestry. During the decade of the 1930s undergraduate enrollment increased 50 per cent, graduate enrollment 87 per cent, and faculty 34 per cent. The institution profited enormously by the unparalleled opportunity presented by James B. Duke's largesse at a time of economic depression.

In such flush times, however, President Few, early on and alone, concluded that perhaps the school had expanded too rapidly. The opportunity presented by the Emergency Committee offered decided advantages and fortuitously fit Few and the university's needs. Distinguished scholars were available to help in the staffing of new or expanded academic programs. And they were available at no expense, for the New York committee and the Rockefeller Foundation shared in paying all of the émigrés' salaries. Initially no long-term commitment was required of the employing institution. But as events worsened in Europe and the small number of academic refugees swelled dramatically, the Emergency Committee enacted a more restrictive policy. Financial assistance came to be granted for a limited term of three years and then only if the employing institution guaranteed the émigré scholar a permanent position or tenure. This change in policy, however, scarcely gave Few pause because he favored established scholars to bring prestige to the growing graduate and professional schools and he still had time to plan for assuming their total expense.

It is not surprising that Few's first choice for Duke in his initial list for the Emergency Committee was the renowned psychologist William Stern. The Duke psychology department was unusually strong with its chairman William McDougall, a native of England who came to Duke by way of Cambridge, Oxford and Harvard, generally acknowledged as one of the top ten psychologists in the world. It is clear that McDougall wanted his German contemporary, Stern, to join a department that consisted of a Swede, Helge Lundholm, and two Harvard- and Berlin-trained Americans, Karl Zener and Don Adams.

Murrow replied immediately to Few's request saying that Stern had not yet been placed, that he could be reached in Amsterdam, Holland, and that the employing institution had to initiate contact with the prospective faculty member. Upon confirmation that the Emergency Committee and the Rockefeller Foundation would share Stern's salary of \$6,000, Few promptly wrote Stern. McDougall wrote two letters of welcome, sending one to Holland and one to the New York office of the placement committee in case Stern was already en route.

A confidential addition to the letter from the Emergency Committee to Few described the scholar joining the psychology department. "Stern is," it read, "about 62 years of age, alert, almost boyish in his manner and enthusiasm. His wife is charming and gracious, a woman who has in her own right a first class reputation as a psychologist. They understand English and speak it well enough for conversational purposes, but unfortunately Stern is quite certain that he will lack freedom of intellectual formulation in the English language and must therefore be allowed to lecture in German." The description fit the Sterns perfectly. The couple brought a European gentility to the campus and community that was greatly appreciated, especially by graduate students who were entertained in their house with cakes and ale. One student remembers Stern as enjoying records, especially Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, because he had sung the choral portion.

Stern's expertise in child psychology complemented the Duke department well. Since he taught in German his courses were small, usually averaging fewer than ten graduate students. Often he explained devices he had developed, such as a puzzle box for testing children or a series of pictures of cloud shapes designed to elicit spontaneous remarks from children. Few once reported that at the end of a public lecture Stern received a great ovation and the presentation of flowers. Everyone was pleased, and Stern's employment was renewed annually. But tragically in April, 1938, Stern died suddenly one Sunday morning. Few reported that the whole community had become attached to Stern and was deeply distressed. Funeral rites, conducted by Rabbi Bernard Zigler of Chapel Hill and Professor Alban Widgery of the Duke philosophy department, were held in the Duke chapel.

Walter Kempner arrived in the Duke Medical Center in 1934 through the personal assistance of Frederic M. Hanes, Chairman of the Department of Medicine. Kempner was the son of medical doctors; his mother, whose specialty was bacteriology, is credited as being the first female professor in Prussia. Thirty-one years of age upon his arrival at Duke, Kempner had earned his medical degree at the University of Heidelberg before being associated with the University of Berlin's medical clinic. As associate in medicine and physiology, his research eventually established the reversibility of major disease processes through dietary control. The public knows Kempner as the originator of the "rice diet" which established Durham's reputation as a diet center. Dr. Kempner is still (in 1995) living in Durham.

Herbert von Beckerath arrived in 1935 to assume the unique position of a joint appointment at Duke and the University of North Carolina. Initial contact with

von Beckerath was made by Howard Odum, Director of the Institute for Research in Social Science at UNC. The correspondence of President Frank Porter Graham of UNC, reveals that Odum forwarded him outstanding recommendations for von Beckerath, noted a favorable personal impression from published articles and a personal interview, and explained that despite von Beckerath's background in jurisprudence, economics and political science, Odum believed the best students in sociology would profit considerably from his courses in broad-based theory as it is our desire "to get away from narrow disciplinary lines." Apparently financial constraints intruded in the hiring process, for at the last moment when the Rockefeller Foundation agreed to support one-half of his salary, Duke was invited to share one quarter along with Carolina. In 1938 von Beckerath became permanently associated with Duke where he taught graduate level courses in economics and political science until he retired in 1955.

When he arrived Herbert von Beckerath was forty-nine years old and an acknowledged authority on money market theory and industrial policy and organization. Protestant in religion and educated at the universities of Freiburg, Berlin and Bonn, he took leave from the University of Bonn in protest to growing Nazi authority. It was a leave a colleague said was for the right reasons and one von Beckerath "would be glad to extend." He had traveled widely, spoke several languages fluently, and had published in German and English. Durham colleagues described him as upper class, urbane, quiet, and an excellent conversationalist although he avoided politics in discussion. He had an aristocratic background, being from one of the oldest, most successful Rhineland families which had been quite wealthy before losing everything during World War I and its aftermath. Von Beckerath came to North Carolina by way of a one-year appointment at Bowdoin College in Maine. He married Guelda Elliott of Chapel Hill in 1937. After her death in 1966 he began a journey to return to his homeland. Sadly, while en route he died in his sleep in a hotel room in Washington, D. C.

Staffing the Physics department proved troublesome to President Few in the transition from college to university. Oftentimes he built successful programs around a "star" appointment like William McDougall in Psychology, Charles Ellwood in Sociology, and even Wallace Wade in football. Several attempts to lure "stars" in physics failed, however, until the Emergency Committee assisted in the employment of Hertha Sponer in 1936. Then forty-one years old, she was acknowledged as one of the two most outstanding women physicists in the world. A specialist in molecular spectroscopy she had just published an acclaimed two-volume work, *Molecular Spectra and Their Application to Chemical Problems*. Highly respected and non-Jewish, she nevertheless wondered about her career

given the common belief that Nazi authorities frowned upon women in academic posts. A student believed she left Germany out of sympathy for persecuted academicians and in fear of another war. She came to Duke by way of the University of Oslo. In welcoming a woman Few ignored the advice of Robert A. Millikin of the California Institute of Technology that he would get more for his money if he picked a younger man rather than any woman.

If perchance Few thought he was employing someone who would interact mainly with women undergraduates, he soon discovered otherwise. Sponer was a very serious scientist focused on research, publication, and professional lectures and meetings. Initially her highly specialized upper level courses averaged only four students. In 1946 at age fifty-one she married her former professor in Germany, James Franck. Franck, a Nobel Prize laureate in physics, had emigrated to the United States in 1935. Although Franck never taught at Duke and commuted between Chicago and Durham for awhile, they were a delightful couple to have in the academic community. She also attracted attention locally by raising world champion Doberman Pinschers. Noting how well cared for her dogs were, she once commented that she wished to be her own dog in reincarnation. James Franck died in 1965. Hertha Sponer-Franck retired in 1965 and died in 1968 in Germany, where she had gone to live with relatives.

In April, 1937, Few wrote the Emergency Committee seeking help in securing a theoretical physicist. The committee notified him that Lothar Wolfgang Nordheim was a visiting professor at Purdue University on temporary assignment and that he could switch to Duke if he received a permanent position. Nordheim transferred to Duke for the academic year 1937-38 with some confusion over a permanent position and whether his first year at Purdue counted as part of a three year appointment with shared salary. Not wishing to alienate the Emergency Committee, Few ended the negotiations with a clearly stated appreciation for the Emergency Committee's cooperation in "the protection of scientists and scholars and the protection of science and learning." He commented that he believed Nordheim to be an excellent man who would make a significant contribution in his field.

Born in Munich in 1899, the son of a Jewish medical doctor, Nordheim served briefly in World War I before studying at the universities of Hamburg, Munich, and Gottingen. His research was in quantum mechanics, particularly electron emission and conductivity in metals. When he was dismissed from his German university position in 1933, James Franck helped him obtain temporary positions in France and the Netherlands. In an interview with a student reporter at Duke,

Nordheim commented that World War I was thought of as a chemist's war while World War II was a physicist's war. He did his part in the Allied war effort by joining the top secret Manhattan Project in Chicago before becoming director of the physics division of the Oak Ridge laboratories. A man of proven administrative ability, he frequently alternated between the Duke campus and laboratories at Oak Ridge and Los Alamos, New Mexico, during and after World War II. In 1956 he joined the General Atomic Division of General Dynamics Corporation in San Diego, California.

Nordheim's wife, Gertrude, was also a Ph. D. in physics. Although she did not teach at Duke she became popular among graduate students by helping them with experiments. She died tragically in a bicycle accident in 1949 during a postwar visit to her hometown in Germany. Lothar Nordheim's sister came to live with him and helped to raise his son. A dedicated scientist-administrator, Nordheim did not avoid debate on the need for information versus secrecy during the Cold War or on the developing role of atomic energy in the postwar world. He participated in Duke-UNC colloquia, campus forums, statewide speaking tours and Unitarian discussion groups. He also did not hesitate to sign public policy releases by the scientific community from time to time.

In 1938 the last of the German émigrés who spent the remainder of their lives at Duke arrived in Durham. In Fritz London, Duke found the long sought "star" in science, and in reality perhaps one of the brightest stars in the history of the faculty of the university. A modest autobiographical statement in the news bureau clipping file begins as follows: "I was born the 7th of March 1900 in Breslau as a son of Franz London, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Breslau and graduated (Dr. phil.) summa cum laude in 1921 at the University of Munich. I served at the University of Stuttgart and Berlin in the departments of theoretical Physics. . . . I held a Rockefeller Fellowship with Prof. Schroedinger in Zurich 1927 and with Prof. Fermi in Rome 1931. In the summer 1933 I lost my position at the University of Berlin in consequence of the laws which exclude persons of Jewish origin from state appointments."

Fritz London was in Paris when Paul M. Gross, Chairman of the Department of Chemistry at Duke, approached him about coming to Durham. He was not employed with any assistance of the Emergency Committee. Reluctant to leave Europe, he came first as a visiting professor before accepting a permanent position. Describing Fritz London's work and contributions is difficult, and often one finds the simple statement "he thinks for a living" quoted by journalists. Known for theories in chemistry and physics, London was a pioneer in modern

quantum chemistry, in understanding atomic and molecular structures, and in super conductivity in low temperature physics. As an academician he was absorbed in his work, intense, precise, and an intuitive thinker who usually arrived at a solution first and then worked at proving it. Colleagues remember asking him if he had had a good vacation and getting the reply, "I had a great vacation. I got some good ideas." He worked alone with limited association with graduate students or colleagues. Yet upon the discovery of a solution to a problem a friend said he changed to where sharing the joy of his discovery took over and his enthusiasm became contagious. Personally he was considerate with a delightful sense of humor, and he was an excellent conversationalist. He had close friends at Duke, UNC, and in Durham with whom he enjoyed music and family. His wife Edith, an accomplished artist, and their two children broadened his circle of friends. Fritz London died prematurely at age 54 in 1954.

Today one hears on campus that had London lived he would have won the Nobel Prize for physics. Some may question whether that is institutional pride, but London's receipt of the prestigious Lorentz Medal for scientific achievement, awarded by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science, validates his being in the tradition of Nobel prize winners. Perhaps a biography by Professor Gavroglu which is being released this spring by Cambridge University Press will add more to that aspect of London's life. London is remembered at Duke today with a seminar room named after him and through an award and lecture. The Fritz London Memorial Lecture, begun through joint efforts of the Sigma Xi chapters at Duke and UNC, has brought seventeen Nobel laureates to the Triangle area since Lothar Nordheim gave the first lecture in 1956. In 1973, John Bardeen, a two-time Nobel Prize winner, established an endowment to underwrite the lecture series and initiate a Fritz London Award in low temperature physics. Bardeen acknowledged that his second award, which was for work in superconductivity, was inspired by London's pioneering in the field a generation earlier.

Altogether, then, in the 1930s Duke employed six émigré scholars, four through the assistance of the Emergency Committee. One other, Raphael Lemkin, taught briefly in the Law School in the early 1940s. A Polish-born lawyer, Lemkin was responsible for the United Nations' outlawing of genocide, a term he introduced and defined as meaning "the purposeful destruction of nations, races or groups."

One must be thankful that Duke acted so quickly to employ so many displaced scholars. It is instructive to identify them and note the contributions they and their families made to the university, community, and world of scholarship. Yet it is impossible to understand the very personal experience of having to leave one's



homeland under such trying circumstances. A final illustration of another émigré who frequently visited the Duke campus perhaps helps convey the sense of loss and beginning anew experienced by the displaced scholars. The theologian Paul Tillich first visited Duke when the Sarah P. Duke Gardens were taking on their present shape in the late 1930s. He was taken to see them as was common for any visitor of the time. But he strongly identified with the Gardens in being himself uprooted and planted in a new land and culture. Every time he returned to Duke through the years he asked to have time to revisit the gardens, visits reported by Tommy Langford, former Dean of the Divinity School and University Provost, that seemed to be an almost mystical experience. Tillich seemed to be lost in thought remembering his past and identifying with the growth and maturing of the landscape as it changed through the years. One almost felt like an intruder accompanying him on his visits, says Langford. Today one has somewhat that same sense of intruding in the lives of the émigré scholars in recounting their forced journey to live among us. But it is a significant story worthy of being part of the historical record nevertheless.