

# Look out for “Stolpersteine”! Honouring Jewish Olympic Champions

By Volker Kluge



“Stumbling stones” as a monument to Alfred Flatow and his sisters who also died. They were sponsored by the pupils of the Flatow-Oberschule, some of whom are researching the biographies of the Olympic champions in their annual classwork.

Photos: Ekkehard Herholz, Thomas Lippert

The fate of the Jewish Olympic gymnastics champions of 1896, Alfred and Felix Flatow, was completely unknown 50 years ago. The few insiders were unaware of their murders or preserved a shameful silence. When in 1961 I asked the well-known German sports journalist Arthur E. Grix about Alfred Flatow, he wrote to me: “Flatow is from Berlin, but was a Jew and went the usual way.” The usual way...?

Today that name is present all over Berlin. There is an elite sports school named after the Flatows, the “Flatow-allee” at the Olympic Stadium and a “Flatow Sports Hall”. In 1996 a stamp was issued bearing their image.

Since the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2012 there have also been “Stolpersteine” (stumbling stones) in Berlin, set into the pedestrian pavements and sited in front of those houses in which the victims of the Shoah last lived. These are memorial stones made of concrete with 10x10 cm sized bronze plaques with the names and dates of birth and death. The stones were the idea of the artist Gunter Demnig, and they can be found now in more than 500 German settlements as well as in some other European cities. In Berlin alone 4500 have been put in place.

They have been financed only through private initiative. The sponsors of the “Stolpersteine” for Alfred Flatow and his sisters were the pupils and staff of the Flatow-Oberschule, who also provided a program for the inauguration. The sponsorship for Felix Flatow and his family was undertaken by the author. Commemorative speeches were given by, among others, the President of the German Gymnastic Federation, Rainer Brechtken, ISOH members Manfred Lämmer and Andreas Höfer as well as the granddaughter of Felix Flatow, Stephanie Flatow, now lives in the Netherlands.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the pogroms in Russia and Galicia, 65,000 Jews made their way to Germany, where they felt safe. 19,000 of them settled in Berlin, where they contributed to the development of the new imperial capital as a flourishing industrial metropolis.

Among them were the Flatows, who previously lived in West Prussia, which today is part of Poland. Like most Berlin Jews they were soon assimilated into society. They attended German schools, served in the Prussian army and joined the gymnastic clubs, although since 1898 there had also been a Jewish gymnastic and sports club called “Bar Kochba”.

**FELIX GUSTAV ISRAEL FLATOW**  
 Geboren am 7.1.1875 in Herent/Westpr.  
 Staatsangehörigkeit: Staatenlos; D.R. gemäss  
 § 2 der II. VC S. IIIb vom 25.11.1942-  
 Ruhl. I, S. 722 - verloren.  
 Verheiratet mit Margarete geb. Lamm, geb.  
 am 19.3.1885 in Berlin.  
 Anzahl der Kinder: 2.  
 In Theresienstadt seit 26.2.1944.

Sophien-Realgymnasium zu  
 Berlin bis zur Reife für  
 Einjährig-Preiwilligen-Dienst.

1890-1893 Kaufmännische Lehre in Ber-  
 lin.

1893-1899 Kaufmännische Tätigkeit.  
 1899-1933 Übernahme der Textilfirma Ed-  
 mund Leon als Inhaber.

1925-1935 Beteiligt an der holländischen  
 Firma Confectie-Fabriek A. Brandel  
 in Rotterdam.

1933 Wohnsitzverlegung von Berlin nach Rotterdam.  
 1933-1943 Tätigkeit zunächst in der Fa. Brandel, dann in eigener  
 Firma in der gleichen Branche.  
 Seit dem 7. Lebensjahr eifrig im Turnsport aktiv tätig.  
 Mit der deutschen Musterriege zur I. Olympiade nach  
 Athen entsandt. Olympiasieger für Gersteturnen.  
 Im Zustandekommen der deutschen Mannschaft für die  
 I. Olympiade aktiv beteiligt.



Among the absurdities of Theresienstadt was the card file of prominent people, which included Felix Flatow. By chance the author came upon his grave, which is in front of the "Kleinen Festung" (Small Fortress). Below: "Stolpersteine" for the Flatow family. The daughter was shot as she fled, the wife and son managed to survive. Below: "death certificate" for Alfred Flatow. The cause of death was given as "phlegmon" (an inflammatory process) which arises from undernourishment.

Photo: Gabriele Kluge; Documents: Holocaust Museum, Prague



In 1896 the two Flatows were part of the small Olympic team representing Germany in Athens. With the gymnastics squad they won the team competition on the parallel bars and on the horizontal bar. Alfred also won individual parallel bars competition and was also second on the horizontal bar. Seven years before, at the age of 20, he had become the youngest gymnastics teacher in Germany.

However there was to be no "reward from the Fatherland". As the gymnasts had taken part against the will of their leadership, they were banned from all national competitions.

Anti-Semitic attacks were remained the exception. These only began in earnest in 1933 after Hitler's "Machtergreifung" (seizure of power), when the German "Turnerschaft" organisation, led by a National Socialist, proposed to the clubs that their Jewish members should be excluded. Alfred Flatow, who after his competitive career worked as a "gymnastics writer" and wholesale cycle dealer, submitted his resignation voluntarily before it was asked for.

Felix Flatow realised the way things were heading earlier than others. He was the owner of a textile firm producing then fashionable sailor suits for boys, and emigrated in the same year to the Netherlands, where he built up a new professional existence.

It remains one of the cruel ironies of the period was that the Flatows were invited as guests of honour to the Berlin Olympics, although in the previous year the "Nuremberg Laws" had robbed them of their civic rights.

Six years after that, on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1942 – his 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday – Alfred Flatow was deported to the ghetto of Theresienstadt, where he died on the 28<sup>th</sup> December 1942. Felix Flatow managed temporarily to escape the threatened abduction by going into hiding with his family. But late on New Year's Eve 1943 he was betrayed. He was taken first to the concentration camp (KZ) at Westerbork and then to Theresienstadt on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1944. There he died of starvation on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1945, barely three months before the end of the war. ■

Ghetto Theresienstadt  
 Starbenußkarte  
**TODESFALLZEIGE**

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Name des Verstorbenen: Flatow, Alfred  
 Geburtsort: Herent/Westpr.  
 Geburtsdatum: 7.1.1875  
 Sterbdatum: 28.12.1942  
 Sterbeort: Theresienstadt  
 Todesursache: Hunger

Verwandte:  
 in Theresienstadt: Flatow, Margarete  
 in Potsdam: Flatow, Margarete

Tag der Beerdigung: 30.12.1942  
 Ort der Beerdigung: Theresienstadt

Beerdigt in: Theresienstadt  
 Friedhof: Theresienstadt

Beigezeichnet durch:  
 Die Angehörigen: H. Lamm, G. Lamm