

Kaufhaus N. Israel 1815 - 1939

Nathan Israel, Mobilienhändler und Trödler (dealer in second-hand clothes and furniture), opened his store at Jüdenstrasse 18 on March 10, 1815, after receiving his certificate of municipal citizenship. Three years later, he started a business importing linen fabrics from Silesia, in a house rented from Berlin's Municipality at Am Molkenmarkt 2. When the lease came to an end in 1843, Nathan Israel was able to purchase a house at Spandauerstrasse 28. By 1849, due to the success of his business, a fourth floor was added to offer four departments dealing not only with linen, but cotton and woollen goods as well.

After his father's death in 1852, Jacob Israel managed the wholesale and retail firm, continuing to take on apprentices as his father had done since 1840. Lodging on the top floor of the firm's building, the apprentices developed a close relationship with Jacob Israel. They subsequently opened their own businesses, becoming N. Israel customers. Having complete trust in Jacob Israel's integrity and decency, they invested their savings with N. Israel's own investments.

Born in 1823, Jacob Israel witnessed tremendous change in Berlin during his lifetime. He accordingly expanded his successful business to employ 250 people by 1875, offering furniture fabrics, silk fabrics and carpets, and complete trousseaux. He died in 1894 of a lung infection caught whilst attending the funeral of an employee, and was succeeded by his son, Berthold Israel.

Under Berthold Israel's management, the N. Israel firm was transformed into a modern department store. New space was added for the sale of furniture and interior decorations. In 1899, the architect Ludwig Engel began the construction of a new store to be built in stages. The symmetrical building was finished in 1914. The total ground surface of Kaufhaus N. Israel was then 5,000 square meters, and with six floors it became Berlin's biggest department store by 1912. Berthold Israel considered the modern and prestigious Jugendstil façade of the building as the best publicity for the firm. (The collages titled *Remembering Jacob Israel* and *Remembering Berthold Israel* contain reproductions of the building.)

The Israel family were known for the basic human values of decency and perseverance and ran their business with commercial and social responsibility. Jacob Israel served as honorary treasurer of the Baruch Auerbach Orphanage in Berlin until failing health forced him to resign shortly before his death.

The N. Israel 1903 album includes a four-page essay about the firm, by Conrad Alberti. After describing how the Israel firm developed step by step over three generations, he describes the benefits for the staff: *"In accordance with old tradition, the Israel firm remains closed on Saturday and Sunday, which gives their employees more time for themselves. The owners have installed a club in Probststrasse for their personnel to meet. There, the firm's doctor gives captivating lectures about hygiene, and the firm's lawyer information concerning the practicalities of daily life. If desired, teachers give French or English lessons. Some prefer to play billiards or chess, play the piano, or read in the library.*

In summer, the staff enjoy themselves in Strelau. Hermann Israel bought the boathouse "Alemania", renovated it with 30,000 marks, and in 1897, gave it to the rowing team. Competitions and outings are held on the Spree for the employees and athletes. At their

disposal are 15 big boats, with gardens and lawn tennis courts totalling a surface of 3,700 square metres.

The firm has an obligatory pension scheme for its employees. The total amount of 450,000 marks is intended for the pensioners, their widows and orphans. The owners pay one third of the sum each year, and the workers pay the rest.

In this manner, the N. Israel firm over three generations, has been the guarantor for the growing demands of the times, and reflect an interesting picture of the gradual commercial and social development in the last century. It is this recognition that gives us the impression that the firm will have a flourishing future which will be even more surprising than the past.”
(Translation: Irene Arnold)

Despite the difficult social and economic situation after World War 1, Berthold Israel managed to resist his competitors, as well as anti-Semitism and anti-capitalism. In 1925, Kaufhaus N. Israel started a trade school, unique of its kind in Germany, offering graduation certificates recognised by the municipal trade schools. It was financed solely by the firm. In 1927, the architect Heinrich Straumer designed the expansion of the department store in the Königstrasse. By 1928, nearly 2000 people were employed by the firm.

It is interesting to note that the Israel family twice intermarried with the Adler family from London. Jacob's wife, Minna Adler, and Amy Solomon, Berthold's wife, both descended from Britain's first Chief Rabbi, Nathan Marcus Adler (Hanover 1802 - London 1890).

Berthold Israel died in July 1935. In September of the same year, Jews were no longer German citizens, but “German subjects” by an official Reich Citizen Law. Berthold Israel's son and successor, Wilfred Israel was forced to nominate the personnel manager as Betriebsführer (General Manager), and after Kristallnacht in 1938, was forced to sell the firm to Emil Koester A.G. In February 1939, he emigrated to England and died in 1943 on a return flight from Lisbon to London. The Luftwaffe shot down the civil aircraft, though for what reason is not entirely clear.

The irony of Conrad Albert's prediction for N. Israel's “flourishing future” is particularly poignant, and indeed “more surprising than the past”. The N. Israel building was entirely destroyed in the Second World War. On the site of the building, nothing remains as witness to the history of one of Berlin's oldest department stores, N. Israel.

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