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## ALWIN BERGER: HIS LIFE, FAMILY AND FRIENDS

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### ABSTRACT

The life and professional career of the gardener and botanist Alwin Berger are outlined briefly based on the manuscript “Lebenserinnerungen” of his wife Elise Berger (née Keller).

### KEY WORDS

Alwin Berger, botanist, biography, cacti, succulents

### INTRODUCTION

At the beginning there was the word. A huge collection carefully written down by Elise Berger. It was the base to search the life and creativity of her husband, the German botanist Alwin Berger. You can find the bundled notes in the book “Lebenserinnerungen” (Memories of life), which Elise has given to her children Fritz and Verna and to her brother-in-law Adolf in remembrance of Alwin, after he died. One exemplar of the manuscript is family-owned since then (Berger undated). It was written with a typewriter and carbon copy. In 2009 it became the basis for research to the established “Alwin-Berger-Archiv”. The objective is to collect and reprocess all publications, correspondences and papers of Alwin Berger (Luding, 2011). In this report, we want to introduce the biography of the person Alwin Berger, based on (Berger undated, see also Berger, 2016). The Alwin-Berger-Archiv is part of the Möschlitzer Bürgerverein e.V.

### CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Alwin Berger (henceforth refers to Berger) was born on 28th August 1871 in Möschlitz (Thuringia, Germany). He was the first child

of the married couple Johann Heinrich Berger (1845-1885) and Marie Friedericke, birth name Göller (1847-1917). His little brother was Adolf Berger. Alwin reminded the big fire in his village in 1875. During that occasion 43 houses, the church and the school burnt down. His family home was destroyed too in many parts and they had to rebuilt everything. Berger attended the grammar school in Möschlitz from 1878 to 1880. During that time his botanic interest awoke, caused by two people: one was his teacher Christian Oswald, who taught him how to graft fruit trees and the other person was his five years older friend Karl Möckel. They both laid out their first herbarium. Berger went to academic high school in Schleiz from 1881 to 1886. His favorite teacher, Prof. Hartenstein, found out about his ability in natural science.

At New Year's Night 1885, Berger's father died; this was a decisive turning point in his life. His mother hold onto his attendance of the school in Schleiz, although the financial situation got worse for the family. She married the farmer Ernst Weise and Hermann Weise, Berger's halfbrother, was descended from this marriage.

#### EDUCATION AND YEARS OF TRAVEL

A new part of Berger's life started in 1887 with the vocational training at the promological institute in Reutlingen. After only one year, however, he went back to the Thuringian homeland. On one hand, the training costs were too high for the guardian, but on the other hand it was not the work Berger longed for.

Instead of a training as a farmer, which his guardian would have liked to see, he began a gardener training in Ebersdorf in the court yard of Prince Henry XIV of Reuss in 1888. There he discovered his passion for the exotic greenhouse plants. After the training, he realized that his further path will take him to botanical gardens. Dresden became his first stop. There he spent the year 1890, where under the guidance of Franz Ledien, the new botanical garden was being built. Since that time, Berger had a close friendship with Ledien and his wife. In addition, he met Kurt

Dinter, who told him that he was looking for a job in Italy to work for a rich Englishman.

Berger went on to the botanical garden in Freiburg im Breisgau. Professor Hildebrand, the director of the garden, allowed him to attend university lectures. Berger's time in Freiburg lasted from January 1891 to August 1893. His route led him to the Grand Ducal court yard in Karlsruhe. But the winter over there was too hard for this health, so that during severe cold his desire to the south grew. From 1894 to 1895 a time began in Pallanza at Lago Maggiore (Italy) in a market gardening for Berger.

But as beautiful as the surroundings of Lake Maggiore was, he was reluctant to make money from plants. Berger dared to jump from the sunny south to the cool north, where the botanical garden in Greifswald was his new workplace between 1896 and 1897. He won another friend in Greifswald, Camillo Schneider, who reminded him of his early death friend Karl Möckel. When Schneider, after Christmas, already resigned again, Berger did not last long in Greifswald. He also quit. After a brief stopover in Gießen, Berger received a lucrative offer from the Palmengarten in Frankfurt am Main.

Already on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1894, Inspector Ledien from Dresden wrote a letter to Berger with an offer to come to Italy. There would be a place as a curator in a private botanical garden of Sir Thomas Hanbury. Berger did not receive a commitment until 5<sup>th</sup> May 1897. The traveling years were over at that time.

#### IN THE HANBURY BOTANICAL GARDENS

In the following 18 years from 1897 to 1915, Alwin Berger was hired as curator of the Hanbury Botanical Gardens. This was probably the most beautiful time of his life for Berger.

Hanbury was not only his boss and owner of the garden, but also a paternal friend and promoter of his research. During this time, Berger was able to undertake different journeys, also through the generous financial

support of his mentor. For instance, Berger was a number of times at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, London.

#### LATER STATIONS

##### „Wilhelma“ in Stuttgart

With the outbreak of the First World War an important part of life came to an end for Berger. In 1915 he had to return to Germany with his family. At the service of King Wilhelm II of Wurttemberg, Berger began a new era.

The new work was quite different; he was responsible for the various gardens and parks of the King of Wurttemberg and took over several administrative tasks. Berger supervised the Wilhelma and the Rosensteinpark in Stuttgart, the Schlosspark Ludwigsburg, the parking facility of Hohenheim, the Schlosspark of Kirchheim unter Teck, the park of Bebenhausen and the castle grounds of Ludwigshafen on Lake Constance.

In line with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King's throne, in October 1916, Berger was appointed Royal Court Director. He was also awarded the *Wilhelmskreuz* for his botanical work. But it was only for a short time that this part of life lasted in a time of upheaval.

The November Revolution became the next change for Berger. Thus the Royal Court Garden Court was dissolved. In the following period he developed the plan to put Wilhelma into one popular botanical garden. This encountered resistance, but at the very end he could thwart a planned sale of Wilhelma. In 1921, Berger was also dismissed as a court garden director, since he did not want to be immediately available to the new government. He continued to receive his salary, but his employment relationship rested. It was an increasingly difficult time for Berger, who was only able to improve in 1923 with an offer to come to America.

#### New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva

With the help of his friend Dr. Rose, he got a job for a research project in Geneva (USA). Berger was there alone at first, later his family came after him. The research work lasted from 1923 to 1926.

During this time, Berger never really felt at home, so he returned to Germany with his family. There the situation had improved somewhat. His son, Fritz, continued to live in Arizona, where he faithfully resembled his father's model of cacti and succulent research in the Huntington Botanical Gardens.

#### Naturkundemuseum (Museum of Natural History) in Stuttgart

Alwin Berger once again found a position in Stuttgart. During that time he directed the Botanical Department of the Natural History Museum. It was Berger's last stop in his working life. The Bergers had acquired a small row house in the Heidelberger Strasse 44. The advantage was in a related garden, which soon included a small botanical collection. Traces of Berger are still to be found in this garden. There are terraced beds and roses, which Berger planted at that time.

But in terms of health, Berger was getting worse and worse. He did not recover completely from a severe cold in the winter of 1930. On March 21, 1931, Berger died of the consequences of an appendicitis in a hospital in Stuttgart. It was discovered too late.

#### FAMILY AND FRIENDS

In 1902, Berger met Elise Keller (1869-1944), his later wife. She was the foster daughter of Dr. Southgate of London, who was a friend of Hanbury. Elise wanted to make a stopover from Cairo in Ventimiglia, then continue to London. However, Elise's originally planned short visit was a longer stay. On April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1903, the wedding of Alwin and Elise took place in the German Consulate General in Genoa. A year later, on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1904, there was an increase in family numbers among the

Bergers. The son Erich Fritz Ernst was born. Two years later the daughter Iris Verna was born on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1906.

In the life of the Berger family, various friends played a role. This included the Bulgarian royal family of Ferdinand I. The royals were far more than just visitors to the Hanbury Gardens — their children played together with those of the Bergers in the garden, and later the desire of King Ferdinand was to install a second La Mortola from Berger. These plans were thwarted by the consequences of the First World War.

Francis Darwin (Charles Darwin's fifth child) was another friend. A letter of friendship with several visits consisted of Ernst Haeckel in Jena. During one of the visits of Haeckel to the Hanbury Botanical Gardens he painted watercolors, which he later sent to the Bergers as a gift. Professor Schweinfurth also belonged to a close circle of friends. With Professor Engler, a friendship extended far beyond their joint publications.

Dr. Rose from Washington D.C. was one of Berger's colleagues, who also worked on cacti. In a difficult time, he helped him to find out the possibilities for research at the Geneva laboratory in the state of New York.

He also had a friendly relationship with Karl Hagenbeck (founder of Hagenbecks Zoo, Hamburg) and Professor Straßburger. Along with Professor Straßburger, Berger worked together on a project to design the island of Brioni as a mixture of zoological and botanical gardens.

The Daimlers (Paul Daimler was the eldest son of the German automobile manufacturer Gottlieb Daimler), who were not only repeatedly named in the book "Lebenserinnerungen" (Berger, 2016), but were also at the side of the family in difficult times. And before Fritz, the last representative of the Berger family, moved to the United States, the Daimlers took over the parental care for him at short notice.

Among his friends was Carl Schmidt, who worked in the company "Haage & Schmidt" in Thuringia, a large plant and seed trade.

Simplified considered, Professor Hartenstein from Schleiz was the first to discover Berger's abilities. Franz Ledien from Dresden acted as a pioneer for Berger. Carl Ludwig Sprenger, in turn, opened the life-task of cacti and succulent research. Professor Penzig acted as a companion for Berger's work in the Hanbury Botanical Gardens. In addition, he was witness at Berger's wedding, together with the painter Vernazza, Francis Darwin, and Sir Thomas Hanbury. Sir William Turner Thieselton-Dyer, the director of Kew Gardens, was one of Berger's friends and who have enabled to do research.

Berger maintained his friendships by regular correspondence. Many of his letters, which bear witness to his lively exchanges with professional colleagues, are still preserved in archives, such as the Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.) and Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (London). In his travels, Berger always combined visits with friends. Some were very pleased with Berger's souvenir of plants. Several friends were also regular guests in the Hanbury Botanical Gardens.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – A special thanks to Horst Luding from the Berger family. With the few material available about Alwin Berger, he started the Berger research even before the founding of the Bergerarchive. Dr. Rainer Redies also owes my gratitude, he was concerned with the life of Elise Berger as part of the Stolperstein initiative. I would also like to thank Dr. Detlev Metzger (University of Oldenburg), who has been working for several years on the scientific work of Berger, as well as a group of high school graduates from the Duden Gymnasium in Schleiz, Johannes Enk, Matthias Naumann and Florian Knoch, who have written their seminar work on Alwin Berger and have also been instrumental in the preparation of the lecture held during the conference "Alwin Berger e gli altri" in October 2016 in Hanbury Gardens. In addition, I thank the Berger family for their support and their interest in Berger research. I'm also grateful to Dagmar Ritter for her text translation. Finally, a special thank you to my spouse Sybille. Only with her support, the Berger research is possible.

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