

## Richard Lenel (1869-1950)

Richard Lenel (\*29.07.1869 Mannheim †03.08.1950 Neckargemünd); parents: Viktor Lenel (1838-1917), Sara Helene Michaelis (1844-1917); siblings: Walter (1868-1937), Klara (1872-1932); married to: Emilia (Milly) Maas (1880-1959); children: Irmgard (1901-????), Ruth (1902-1947), Klaus (1904-1980), Victor (1907-????), Adelheid (1910), Heinzwalter (1914-1998), Rosmarie (1916-1981), Renate (1916-2010), Ernst (1918-1944)

Richard Lenel was born on 29 July 1869, to his parents Victor Lenel and Helen Michaelis in Mannheim. After his secondary education and an apprenticeship in the family business, he undertook from 1889 to 1892 extensive travels of France, England and North America. At the age of 23, he joined his father's company in Mannheim, where he started as a clerk, and subsequently became a chief clerk. In 1897 he became general manager of the factory of waterproof clothes Lenel, Bensinger & Co.



Three years later, in 1900, he married Milly Maas. In 1902, after the birth of two daughters, he withdrew from the Jewish community, without joining another denomination or giving reasons for his resignation. In 1906 he participated in the founding of the General Association of Employers of Mannheim-Ludwigshafen, whose president he became. In 1908 he was a co-founder of the employment pool of the industry Mannheim-Ludwigshafen, which he presided as well. In 1911 he even took on the chairmanship of the manufacturer's association. In 1911 he was elected to the Chamber of Commerce and from 1909 to 1920 he was a commercial judge. After his election as President of the Chamber of Commerce in 1920, he said in his introduction speech:

*"Deeply moved and full of gratitude for the trust you place in me, I accept the position, which already my grandfather [Moritz Lenel] and my father [Victor Lenel] held. I am willing to put my utmost effort into maintaining and consolidating the Chamber of Commerce's high reputation in all circles. I will support fullheartedly all efforts to enhance and expand Mannheim's economy "*

These intentions expressed in his appointment he fulfilled in full measure, leading his honorary post with unerring objectivity and a high sense of responsibility. Connected with his role as President of the Chamber of Commerce were numerous other functions. He was a member of the Baden Handelstag, the German Handelstag, the International Chamber of Commerce, the National Railway and National Waterways Advisory Board and the Board of the national airmail and broadcasting services.

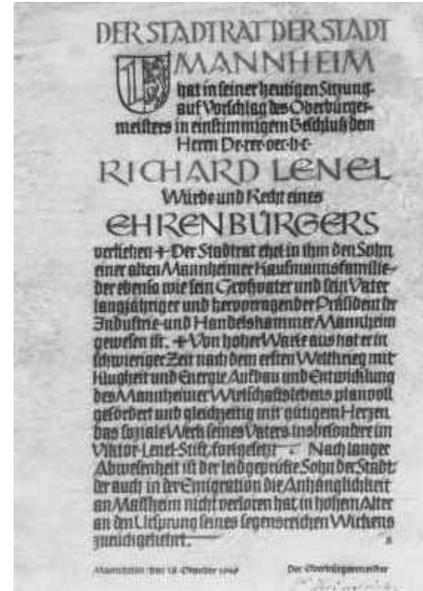
Despite his proverbial frugality he generously supported the arts and science. Thus, the society for the promotion of a commercial college founded in 1921 received on his proposal an annual grant from the Chamber of Commerce of 30,000 marks. Thus it was a deserved recognition of his work that on the occasion of his ten-year presidency on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1930, he was awarded the first honorary doctorate from the commercial college.

Despite his many obligations, Richard Lenel was a leading candidate of the German People's Party for the citizens' committee on 19 November 1922. He was convinced, that it

was the duty of business leaders to participate in politics, which he expressed in his speech at the inauguration of the new building of the Chamber of Commerce in 1926, when he said that it was not sufficient to dedicate oneself to business, but that it was the primary task of business leaders to extract from the ranks of the economy those who are able and willing to participate responsibly in the duty of the state. After two terms, at the end of 1930, Richard Lenel resigned from the citizens' committee, as the deepening economic crisis caused severe problems in the Chamber of Commerce. On September 8<sup>th</sup> 1931, in order to alleviate the destitution of the unemployed, he placed himself at the head of the Mannheim Fund (founded by the Lord Mayor), of which he said a year later, that it was a moral duty of every individual to contribute to alleviating the emergency situation in which a large part of the population of Mannheim was. Although he had little enough time, he had determined to make twenty per-

sonal visits. Bad investments led in 1929 to the sale of the Rhenish Rubber and Celluloid Manufacturing Co. (which employed about 6,000 people) to the IG Farben. Partial closures and mass layoffs followed.

On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1933 the Nazis forced Richard Lenel to resign as a president of the Chamber of Commerce. Still, he tried with the help of his two eldest sons remaining in Germany, Klaus and Viktor, to continue the business. In 1938 he returned from a trip to the U.S. back to Germany. Only when during the pogroms of November 10<sup>th</sup> 1938, his sons were deported to the Dachau concentration camp, he realized that staying any longer was impossible. At this time it was already extremely difficult to liquidate the family fortune, so eventually he had to dissipate the company, the cash and the house in order to leave the country. On August 31<sup>st</sup> 1939, a day before the beginning of WW2, he arrived with his wife in London. Because virtually nothing was left of his former wealth, the former industry tycoon found himself in complete destitution, a situation that caused him great difficulty. In the English and US exile (with Paul and Heidi Stearne), the former family patriarch was reduced to supplicant and dependent on the remittances of his son Heinzwalter from Switzerland. When the Lord Mayor of Mannheim invited him in October 1947 to return to Germany, he gladly accepted. On April 15<sup>th</sup> 1949, Richard and Milly Lenel moved to an apartment in Neckargemünd near the Viktor-Lenel-Foundation.



On October 18<sup>th</sup> 1949 he was made an honorary citizen of the city of Mannheim, a day later he was awarded the title of Honorary President of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. In his letter of thanks to the Lord Mayor of October 19<sup>th</sup> 1949 he wrote:

*Unfortunately, it is not possible for me as it was granted to my grandfather and my father, to express my deep attachment to my native town by a foundation for my fellow citizens. However, I shall convey in these days, a painting of Baden artist Hellweg named "The Port of London" to the city council and I have also, together with my wife, bequeathed a painting of the old master Adolf Menzel named "head of an old man" to the city council, which shall serve after our deaths as a lasting testimony of our devotion to our home town.*

On August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1950, a few days after his 81st birthday, Richard Lenel passed away. He was buried in the family burial site at the Mannheim Jewish Cemetery. A street in Mannheim-Feudenheim bears his name and there is a memorial plaque on the South German Sugar Building, which stands on the plot of his former home at the Maximilianstrasse.

Sources: Watzinger, Karl Otto, Geschichte der Juden in Mannheim 1650-1945, Stuttgart, 1984, S. 119ff.; Familienarchiv Lenel; Schaefer, Hermann, Lenel, Richard in: Neue Deutsche Biographie 14 (1985), S. 203f.



The South German Sugar Building at the former site of Richard Lenel's Home, Maximilianstrasse, Mannheim



Memorial Plaque for Richard Lenel at the South German Sugar Building



The road sign of Richard-Lenel-Street in Mannheim-Feudenheim