

Wilhelm Zeev Haller (1884-1956) – Life and Work of a German-Jewish-Israeli Architect

by Ulrich Knufinke

In the last issue of PaRDeS, an article was published about the German born architect Wilhelm Zeev Haller and his projects in Tel Aviv.¹ The 100th anniversary of Tel Aviv and the 125th birthday of Haller was a good reason to make a documentation about his life and work. At the Kulturstiftung Leipzig and at the Bauhaus Center Tel Aviv, exhibitions were opened in autumn 2009, commemorating Haller's contribution to the development of modern architecture in Germany and Erez Israel.²

After searching a long time for his relatives and descendants without any success, it was an exciting moment to meet his granddaughter and his step-granddaughter in Holon and Tel Aviv. An article in an Israeli newspaper about the exhibition at the Bauhaus Center made them aware of the project and they got into contact with the owner of the gallery, Micha Gross. It was wonderful to talk to people who knew Haller personally, and it was very interesting to ask them about his biography.

After interviewing Haller's family we can correct some mistakes, made in previous publications, and give some new information on his work.

In the 1920s, Haller was a successful architect in Leipzig. The crisis of the late Weimar Republic, the increase of anti-Semitism and Hitler's and the National Socialists' rise, forced him to emigrate from Germany in 1932 or 33. Probably in touch with Zionist circles, he went to Palestine and started to run a studio of his own in Tel Aviv. In only three or four years he was able to build at least nine apartment houses in the city, some of them being "icons" of the International Style in the Middle East. At the same time he also designed a house with classrooms for the family of his sister in Petach Tiqva, where she

1 Ulrich Knufinke: Building a Modern Jewish City: Projects of the Architect Wilhelm Zeev Haller in Tel Aviv, in: PaRDeS 15 (2009), pp. 54-71.

2 Wolfgang Hocquél, Peter Leonhard, Ulrich Knufinke and Loreen Schiede (eds.): Wilhelm Haller – ein Leipziger Architekt in Tel Aviv. Wilhelm Ze'ev Haller – Modern Architecture between Leipzig and Tel Aviv. Leipzig 2009. Another article published in 2009 presents new information specially on Haller's early years: Bernd Melzer: Die Wege des Architekten Wilhelm Haller, in: Zittauer Geschichtsblätter 41 (2009), pp. 11-22.

and her husband ran a private school for mentally handicapped children. The building was destroyed some years ago, unfortunately no photos or drawings have been preserved. Due to the political and economical crisis in the late 1930s, the building boom of the “White City” came to an end. Haller’s last known buildings in Tel Aviv were erected in 1936.

After closing his studio, Haller moved to Jerusalem around 1940. There he worked at the Public Works Department, an authority for the infrastructure and the public buildings of the Jewish settlements in Palestine. According to the grandchildren, the family lived in relatively poor circumstances. German was the usual language at home, and the family was integrated into “Yekkish” circles as it was customary for immigrants from Germany.

Haller’s first wife Clara (née Goldschmidt), died at the age of 57 in 1945, she was buried in the Mount of Olives cemetery in Jerusalem. Later Haller married for a second time, but this marriage was unfortunately short as his second wife died shortly after the wedding. About 1954, Wilhelm Zeev and Clara Haller’s only child, Hans J. Haller, moved to the US. Hans J. Haller died in Mesa, Arizona, at the age of 91 in 2004.

According to his granddaughter, Wilhelm Zeev Haller left Israel only once for a trip to Italy and never returned to Germany. Wilhelm Zeev Haller died in Jerusalem (neither in Tel Aviv nor in the US, as it was assumed until now) on May 10th 1956. An obituary was published in a German-speaking newspaper in Israel. He was buried in the Givat Sha’ul cemetery in Jerusalem. The family keeps two photographs of Wilhelm and Clara Haller, taken probably in the 1930s. They were never published before (fig. 1 and 2).





Another worthy legacy kept by the family is a collection of unpublished drawings. All through his life, Haller was passionate about drawing. He made small sketches of historic buildings, cities and landscapes, using pencil, ink and colored crayons. Among the drawings preserved in the family archive are two, which Haller did in Europe before he emigrated. One depicts a castle near Darmstadt. Finished in 1910, it is the earliest drawing done by Haller known to date. At that time the young man studied in Darmstadt, later he moved to Frankfurt and to Leipzig. The other drawing of his pre-immigration period was done in Linz in 1932. It shows a street in the old city (fig. 3).



In Palestine Haller continued drawing historical sites, cities and landscapes. Remarkably no “artistic” sketches of modern architecture are preserved in the family collection, and obviously he never did any: Although being a part of the “modernist” movement in Tel Aviv, his drawings prove a constant interest in

the history of architecture in the places where he lived. One of his last preserved drawings depicts the gate of the citadel (“Tower of David”) in the Old City of Jerusalem (fig. 4).



Thanks to the memories of Haller’s descendants, his character and personality is known to us a little more now – his grandchildren call him a warm and loving grandfather who liked smoking cigars and driving “his large old black car”.

Figures:

Fig. 1: Wilhelm Zeev Haller, photo from the mid 1930s (family property, Holon, Israel)

Fig. 2: Clara Haller, née Goldschmidt, photo from the mid 1930s (family property, Holon, Israel)

Fig. 3: Wilhelm Zeev Haller: Street in the old city of Linz, 1932 (family property, Holon, Israel)

Fig. 4: Wilhelm Zeev Haller: The gate of the citadel (“Tower of David”) in Jerusalem, 1942 (family property, Holon, Israel)