

Bernhard Zepernick (1926–2019)

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Bernhard Zepernick (1926–2019)

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Bernhard Zepernick (Fig. 1) passed away on 7 December 2019 at the age of 93 in Berlin. He was a retired curator at the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin (BGBM) and the co-author of a very useful collection of materials on the history of the institution to which he belonged from 1974 until his retirement in 1991. A man of broad interests, among them ethnobotany and medicinal plants, he was for several years in charge of BGBM's public relations.

A belated start under difficult conditions

BZ was born on 1 December 1926 as the only child of Wilhelm Zepernick and his wife Frieda, née Krausche, in Berlin. His father was an employee of Siemens, active in the company's administration. BZ attended primary school, followed by Realschule in Berlin-Spandau, but starting from his youth his life was overshadowed by bad health. He suffered from what were probably the consequences of infectious endocarditis contracted at a time when no antibiotics were as yet available. This chronic cardiac infirmity accompanied him for all his life and was the reason why he could never seriously contemplate doing fieldwork. On the other hand, his fragile health was the reason for not being conscripted during the Second World War, neither to the German army nor to the German Volkssturm, the national militia established during the last months of the war. During the Battle of Berlin his life was incidentally saved by a neighbour who was able to convince a group of Soviet soldiers that BZ was not a clandestine fighter but chronically ill and had never worn a uniform. After the armistice he attended a business school in the British sector of Berlin; subsequently he had several short employments as a clerk, with spells of unemployment in between. It was only in 1956 that BZ, aged 30, passed the Abitur, the prerequisite for being enrolled at a university in Germany, on a second-chance track.



Fig. 1. Bernhard Zepernick in 2009.

Interested in big game with the dream of becoming one day the director of a zoological garden, BZ studied zoology and botany at the Freie Universität Berlin in the years 1956–1962. Among others he attended the botany lessons given by Theo Eckardt (1910–1977), professor of botany (Gerloff 1978), who was to be appointed in 1964 director of the BGBM, then an institution independent from the university. BZ was employed for a short interval at the Technische Universität Berlin in the field of botany, after having successfully passed the state

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exam, the prerequisite for becoming Studienrat, i.e. a civil servant teaching in a regular, state-owned grammar school in Germany. Rather surprisingly he subsequently decided to continue his studies at the Freie Universität and chose ethnology, anthropology and Dutch philology as his subjects. Here his mentor was Hans Nevermann (1902–1982), head of the South Pacific department of the Ethnographical Museum in Berlin and honorary professor at the Freie Universität (Zepernick 1985). Making use of his previously acquired knowledge in botany and supervised by Nevermann, BZ wrote both his M. Phil. thesis and his Ph. D. thesis on topics that could be qualified either as contributions to ethnology or to ethnobotany. Both had Polynesia as their geographical focus and were published in Berlin: the first dealt with dye plants in Polynesia and appeared as a volume of *Willdenowia Beihefte*; the latter gave an overview of medicinal plants in Polynesia and was published in *Baessler-Archiv, Beiträge zur Völkerkunde*. Promoted Dr. phil. at the Freie Universität in 1969, BZ worked for a few years as Wissenschaftlicher Hilfsassistent at the Chair of Comparative Ethnology, and later, from 1971 until 1974, as scientific assistant at the Institute of Genetics, both positions belonging to the Freie Universität. Apart from a share in academic teaching, his duties at the Institute of Genetics included the continuous cultivation of larvae of the fly *Phryne* for cytological studies. Because of the retirement of BZ's superior, no pertinent papers were ever published. It was in 1971 that he married Hannchen Gärtner, 23 years his junior, who became his companion for life and the mother of their two sons, Thilo and Florin.

At the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem

In the early 1970s Eckardt had managed in a carefully staged political manoeuvre to substantially increase the number of permanent positions for scientists at the BGBM. One of his early recruits was BZ, aged 47, who was appointed curator on 15 August 1974 and thus had finally entered a safe harbour for his professional life.

At that time the Botanic Garden and the Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem was, as the name implied, a botanic garden and a botanical museum and comprised a rich herbarium and a substantial library, all belonging to the Land Berlin. Research was welcome, but within limits, and Eckardt made sure that the scientists, all at that time civil servants in permanent positions, served the institution to which they were affiliated and, at least indirectly, the public. BZ, a generalist with knowledge in ethnobotany, but definitely neither a plant taxonomist nor a herbarium specialist, perfectly fitted into Eckardt's concept for his scientific staff. Unsurprisingly the latter asked BZ to supervise the section of the botanic garden dedicated to medicinal plants. In addition, he took over the responsibility for those families of flowering plants,

both in the herbarium and the living collections, that had previously been curated by G. M. Schulze (1909–1985; Gerloff 1986) and G. K. Schulze-Menz (1908–1978; Potztl 1979), who had both just retired.

In those far-off days, the entrance fee for the botanic garden was one symbolic Deutsche Mark, while entrance to the botanical museum was for free. The number of visitors per year was counted, but admittedly the income they created was a minor factor in the budget. Eckardt belonged to the generation of directors who regarded his institution, among others, as a place for public education where accurate information was offered to the general public. In addition, he wished his visitors to come home well, i.e. better, informed. This resulted in each curator's obligation to offer guided tours to the botanic garden and the botanical museum at regular intervals, and not just general tours, but focused on clearly circumscribed topics to be announced well in advance. BZ was particularly active in this field and is mentioned in a report to have undertaken no less than 25 such guided tours in two years. It also went without saying that guidebooks for the botanic garden, for the botanical museum, brochures on specific topics and a miscellany of handouts were produced by the members of the BGBM's scientific staff, and BZ was one of the contributors. Several brochures published years later, two co-authored with I. Hagemann (1944–; curator at the BGBM 1979–1992) and focused on children, as well as miscellaneous other contributions were the result of this aspect of BZ's work. As a man of broad interests and gifted with good communication skills he was chosen by Eckardt as the member of staff responsible for BGBM's public relations, an obligation he continued to fulfil for several years, including the first years of W. Greuter (1938–) as director of the BGBM (see below).

As editor of *Willdenowia* and *Willdenowia Beihefte* BZ followed W. Schultze-Motel (1934–2011; Hiepkö 2011), but BZ was responsible for BGBM's publications only for four years, i.e. for *Willdenowia* 7(3) (1975), 8 (1977–1979) and *Willdenowia Beihefte* 8 (1975; together with Schultze-Motel), 9 (1976) – 11(1978). It should be kept in mind that at that time the role of editor meant basically reading the manuscripts submitted for publication and marking them typographically for the printers. The age of the obligatory peer-review process undertaken by two independent, external referees was still to come. For the following six years, i.e. for *Willdenowia* 9 (1979) to *Willdenowia* 15(1) (1985), BZ was responsible only for the book reviews published in this journal, of which a very considerable number was written by him.

A further commission came from Johannes Gerloff (1915–2000; Kusber & Jahn 2007), who acted as interim director of the BGBM after the retirement of Eckardt until Greuter was appointed professor of botany at the Freie Universität and director of the BGBM on 1 April 1978. Gerloff asked BZ and F. K. Timler (1914–1995; Zepernick 1995) to write an account of the history of

the BGBM for the tercentenary of the foundation of the Botanic Garden by Friedrich Wilhelm, the elector of Brandenburg, to be celebrated in 1979. This resulted in an extremely valuable collection of documents on the complex history of this institution and appeared as the first volume of the series *Englera*. Although not a chronicle in the strict sense, this book continues to be obligatory reading for everyone interested in the development of the BGBM with its ups and downs from its foundation in 1679 until 1979. Considering the fact that BZ suffered from a severe pneumonia in 1978 leading to COPD for the rest of his life, the publication of this volume in time for the celebration was at the same time a very personal achievement for BZ and his co-author.

However, medicinal plants also remained high on BZ's agenda, resulting in, e.g., a dictionary of officinal plants co-authored by L. Langhammer and J. B. P. Lüdcke (Zepernick & al. 1983). Apart from being a standard textbook, this book also contained references to the pharmacopoeias of Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Democratic Republic of Germany, and Switzerland as well as to the European and Homeopathic Pharmacopoeias.

In collaboration with F. K. Timler, BZ was among the contributors to the *Flora of Togo*, a BGBM-initiated project (Brunel & al. 1984), writing the accounts of 25 families. Moreover, he possessed a deep interest in the history of science, which resulted among others in a paper on the extra-European travels of Adolf Engler (1844–1930; e.g. Lack 2000) and in three more papers on colonial botany.

After retirement

Collaboration with I. Hagemann continued after BZ's retirement on 30 November 1991 and resulted in the co-authored publication of a new guidebook for the Botanic Garden that appeared in a German and English version. On the same line was a guidebook for the medicinal garden on the grounds of the Botanic Garden written in collaboration with S. von Kruedener and I. Hagemann, and subsequently published in French and Flemish translations by the National Botanical Garden of Belgium. BZ wrote two more books on this topic, both focused on the cultivation of medicinal plants in one's own garden and with a distinctly practical approach. Otherwise BZ contributed to the multi-volume textbook *Hagers Handbuch der Pharmazeutischen Praxis* and wrote essays for catalogues that accompanied major exhibitions in Berlin, e.g. "Amerika 1492–1992" and "Schön und nützlich", the latter on historical gardens in Brandenburg.

For BZ retirement also meant more time, in particular for travelling with his wife, and this he thoroughly enjoyed. Destinations included Africa south of the Sahara, among them two trips to Namibia, the United States, Uzbekistan and many places all over Europe. Always found in music, BZ enjoyed his rich collection of vinyl records,

tapes and discs with a special emphasis on military marches and reading publications in the fields of geography, geology and ethnology—unsurprising for a man who had published a long list of book reviews, notably in *Willdenowia*.

As a member of several scientific societies, all based in Germany, BZ attended many meetings, mostly accompanied by his wife. In particular, he developed a special attachment to the Gesellschaft Naturforschender Freunde zu Berlin, the oldest natural history society in what is now Germany, founded in 1773, and acted for a short period as its treasurer. This resulted in the mammoth project of producing a biographical dictionary of all the 1840 members of this society, i.e. from its foundation until 1973, which included a long list of celebrities from Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838) to Carl Ludwig Willdenow (1765–1812). BZ had the satisfaction of seeing this valuable mine of otherwise widely scattered information comprising 399 pages published in his 87th year.

In 2016 BZ was still able to travel with his wife to Mallorca and to celebrate, admittedly weak, but still with a clear mind, his ninetieth birthday with his family and his colleagues in Berlin. However, over the following three years he suffered from strokes and deteriorated also mentally, which necessitated the transfer to a home for the elderly. He had the fortune to remain free from pain and did not complain about his reduced circumstances. Having received a last visit from his wife on 6 December 2019 he died rather unexpectedly the following night in Berlin. Though sickly from his youth and often in bad health, BZ had lived a long and fruitful life.

As a person, BZ was a kind and helpful colleague, deeply rooted in Christian, i.e. humanitarian principles, enjoying many social contacts. At the same time he was definitely more of a lexicographer than a curator or researcher. Good in communicating to the general public, he possessed a deep affection for the plant world in general and the Botanic Garden Berlin-Dahlem in particular, to which he had dedicated seventeen years of his professional life.

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