“He Was a Friend of the Greatest Geniuses of His Time – Indeed, He Was One of Them” – Ludwig Hopf (1884–1939)

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the life and work of Ludwig Hopf, including the effects the Nazi regime had on him and his time in Dublin where he arrived in July 1939 as a “Refugee of distinction,” some five months before his death, in order to teach at Trinity College Dublin. Born in 1884 in Nuremberg, he studied Mathematics and Physics at Berlin, Munich and Zurich. For his PhD he was supervised by Arnold Sommerfeld in Munich. Later he worked in Zurich and Prague as Albert Einstein’s assistant before moving to Aachen, where in 1923 he became professor for mathematics at the Technical University. Suspended in 1933 and pensioned off in 1934, he tried to support the emigration of his four sons and searched for a long time in vain to find a new academic home for himself before he could emigrate in spring 1939 to England, where the invitation from Ireland reached him.

In January 2014 an article appeared in the Irish Times recalling that, about seventy-four years earlier, a fifty-five year old mathematics professor from Germany who had found refuge in Ireland died in Dublin, only a few months after he had come there. The writer of the Irish Times article, journalist Frank McNally, had already elaborated on the Irish-Kenyan link that had brought Hopf’s story to his attention in three previous articles in his column ‘An Irishman’s Diary’.¹ This link was through Fr. Willie Walshe, an Irish priest who came to Kenya in the early 1970s to do missionary work, based in Kitale. The residents there included a German expatriate named Arnold Hopf – Ludwig Hopf’s third son. A magistrate in the old colonial service, Arnold Hopf had settled in Kenya and had married a local Catholic whose children became part of Walshe’s congregation. When Arnold Hopf died in 1992, Willie Walshe was asked to conduct the funeral service. In the following years he became

¹ See Frank McNally: An Irishman’s Diary. In: Irish Times. 22 January 2014, as well as the earlier articles in the Irish Times on 17 April 2013, 10 January 2013 and 20 December 2012.
fascinated to know that Arnold’s father Ludwig was buried in Dublin and he wondered where. Willie Walshe's sister Kay McNamara, closer to the locality as she works in Dublin, took up the challenge and searched for Ludwig Hopf’s grave, eventually finding it in Mount Jerome Cemetery, Harold’s Cross, Dublin, originally a Protestant graveyard from the first half of the 19th century but opened up to other religions from the 1920s. Due to the endeavours of Willie Walshe and Kay McNamara as well as John Halligan, the gravestone was repaired in 2013. At the small gathering described by Frank McNally in 2014, there were prayers over Hopf’s grave by Willie Walshe in English and by Tomi Reichental, who survived the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen as a boy and came to Ireland in the 1960s, in Hebrew.

Apart from these remembrances, there has not been much awareness of Ludwig Hopf and specifically of his short time in Ireland. If he is mentioned in English-speaking publications it is mainly a brief reference to him as Albert Einstein’s assistant, often recalling that he introduced Einstein to C.G. Jung. He also plays a part in Michael Eckert’s publications on Arnold Sommerfeld, specifically his recent biography, and on the developments in fluid dynamics. Hopf is briefly mentioned in publications about exiled scientists but there appears to be only one article dedicated to him. That article, in German, draws on files at his main work place, the Technical University in Aachen, and mainly concerns the developments leading to his suspension and subsequent early retirement under the Nazi regime. So who was Ludwig Hopf, what kind of background did he have, how was his relationship with the “greatest geniuses” (and who were they?) – and what can we establish regarding his own genius?

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