



Jewish Museum Berlin

2013

Press Information

: W. Michael Blumenthal

Following a manifold and unusual career as economics professor, politician, manager and author, W. Michael Blumenthal has been director of the Jewish Museum Berlin since 1997.

W. Michael Blumenthal was born in Oranienburg near Berlin in 1926. His family moved to Berlin when he was three years old. In 1938, his father was deported to Buchenwald and mistreated for six weeks. After his release, the family was able to escape to Shanghai in 1939 where they survived the war.

In 1947, W. Michael Blumenthal immigrated to the United States and became a U.S. citizen in 1952. After finishing his studies with a Ph.D. at Princeton University, he taught there as professor of economics (1953-56). He then joined Crown Cork International Corporation, where he rose to vice president and director.

In the 1960s, he entered politics and public service. He served in the State Department from 1961 until 1967 as advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson on trade. Following a ten-year career as president and then chairman of the board with Bendix Corporation, President Jimmy Carter appointed him as Secretary of the Treasury in 1977. In 1979, W. Michael Blumenthal resigned from this position. He returned to the business sector and joined Burroughs Corporation in 1980 as vice chairman, then chairman of the board a year later. Following a merger into the Unisys Corporation in 1986, he became chairman and CEO of Unisys. After retirement, he was first partner, then advisor of Lazard Frères & Co. LLC (1990-96).

At this time, W. Michael Blumenthal turned ever more attention to the history of German Jews. Researching the life stories of his ancestors – among them Rachel Varnhagen, famous for her ‘Berliner Salons,’ the opera composer Giacomo



Meyerbeer and literary critic Arthur Eloesser – he knitted their biographies into the larger historical framework in his book “The Invisible Wall: 300 Years of a German-Jewish Family,” which appeared in 1998. It traces the difficult relationship of German gentiles and Jews since the 17th century and explores the question of how the Holocaust could have happened.

Since he became director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, the museum no longer concentrates primarily on the history Berlin Jews, but on German-Jewish history. The long-aspired independent status for the museum from the City Museum Foundation was granted on 1 January 1999. In 2001, the 14th German Bundestag passed the law to form a “Jewish Museum Berlin Foundation,” which has since been a foundation directly under federal government control. Its festive opening took place in September 2001. In recognition of his work in Berlin, W. Michael Blumenthal was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in June 1999 and the Leo Baeck Medal in New York in November 1999. In June 2000, he became an Honorary Citizen of the city of Oranienburg. He was honored with the Goethe Medal and the Order of Merit by the State of Berlin in 2002. In November 2006, he was awarded the Great Cross of Merit with Star of the Federal Republic of Germany. The American Jewish Committee honored him with the “Ernst Cramer Award” in March 2008. In October 2011, the Jewish Community of Berlin awarded him the Heinz-Galinski prize. W. Michael Blumenthal has received several honorary doctorates, including one from Hebrew University, NYC, and one from Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg.

Besides directing the museum, he is a member of the Advisory Board of the Investment Bank Evercore Partners, of the Advisory Board of the AJC, Berlin, and of the International Rescue Committee (New York). He continues to serve on the Board of Trustees of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation, is a member of the Council of Foreign Relations (New York) and the Century Club.

W. Michael Blumenthal lives with his wife Barbara (née Bennett) in Princeton, New Jersey. They have one son together and he has three daughters from his first marriage. His memoirs entitled “In achtzig Jahren um die Welt. Mein Leben” (Around the World in Eighty Years. My Life) were published by Pro-



pyläen Publishers in October 2010. In October 2011, a series of interviews with the Deutschlandfunk journalist David Dambitsch about his life's work were published by Membran Music Ltd. in the talking book "Auf den Einzelnen kommt es an" (It's the individual that counts).