

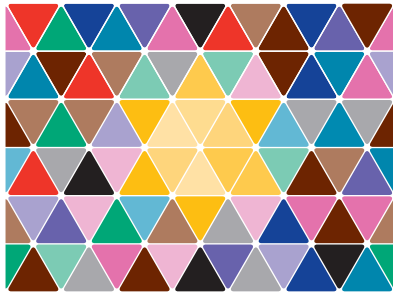


Theodor WONJA MICHAEL



Mosaic – Victims of
Nazi Persecution





Theodor Wonja Michael

Theodor Wonja Michael was born into a mixed race family in Berlin on 15th January 1925. His father Theophilus had

come to Germany from Cameroon in the hope of studying but, like many Africans in Germany, had only been able to find work in travelling circus-style shows which treated black people as 'exotic' entertainment. Nonetheless, Theophilus settled down and married Martha Wegner, a white German woman. Theodor was the youngest of their four children.

Martha died in 1926, when Theodor was still a baby, so the children were brought up by Theophilus's circus colleagues and were trained as performers from an early age. After Theophilus died in 1934, Theodor's siblings moved to France. They lost their German citizenship when German officials in Paris confiscated the passport of Theodor's brother James, telling him that 'Black Germans do not exist'. Theodor was only reunited with James and his sister Juliana in the 1960s; he never saw his other sister Christiana again – she died of pneumonia in France.

Theodor chose to remain in Germany, even though Nazi racist policies were making life increasingly difficult for

mixed race children. After leaving school in 1939, he worked as a porter in a Berlin hotel but was soon sacked after a guest complained about his skin colour. He struggled to get other jobs because he was not allowed to join the German Labour Front (the Nazi workers' organisation). However, he unexpectedly found work during the war as an extra in propaganda movies which glorified German colonialism, playing roles such as African servants.

Theodor was conscripted for the German army but was rejected because of his colour. Instead, in early 1943, he was sent with other Afro-Germans to a forced labour camp near Berlin where they worked in a weapons' factory for two years until the end of the war. Theodor later said that his greatest fear in the camp was falling ill – he feared that in hospital he might be sterilized as mixed race children from the Rhineland region had been.

After the war, Theodor was able to resume his education as well as his acting career. He appeared in theatre and on TV, leading him to joke that 'it was the Nazis who gave me my big break'. He also worked as a lecturer, a journalist and an adviser to the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Today he is a respected member of the 'Afrodeutsch' community.