

11 The Ultimate Irony

Jews Playing Nazis in Hollywood

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At a major charity event during World War II, the exiled film writer Robert Thoeren joked:

In two hundred years a clever child will raise its hand in class and ask the teacher, 'What did the Nazis look like?' When they go to the archives and show contemporary motion pictures, they will find that the Nazis were a purely Semitic tribe, because they were portrayed in Hollywood films by Fritz Kortner*, Sig Arno*, Curt Bois*, Alexander Granach*, Felix Basch*, Kurt Katch* etc.¹

During the Third Reich, German-speaking Jewish actors who were forced to leave Germany or Austria by the Nazis ended up playing Nazis in Hollywood films. As Alfred Polgar put it in 1942, they became 'portrayers of the bestiality of which [they themselves] were victims'.² In this chapter, I want to investigate how and why so many German actors went to Hollywood, what problems and opportunities they encountered in the labour market, how things changed with the production of anti-Nazi films and how the refugees from Nazi Germany reacted to playing Nazis. Was it a case of humiliation, revenge or political opposition for them, or was it simply a way of making a living?

The Kohner Files as Primary Source

To answer these questions, I have used the correspondence between a selected group of German-speaking actors who played Nazis in Hollywood and their agent, Paul Kohner.³ In addition, I have used interviews with actors conducted by different researchers in later years. Since these interviews are reflective judgments and therefore less involved in day-to-day concerns, they show, more thoroughly than most of the Kohner files, how the actors reacted to playing Nazi roles.

Paul Kohner was the main agent in the USA for German and Austrian exiles. He was born in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and came to the USA in 1921, following an invitation by Carl Laemmle, head of Universal. Kohner was put in charge of the then new foreign publicity department, and a few years later he became the director of German Universal, which produced films in Berlin from 1928 to 1934.⁴ After working for MGM and Columbia for a short period of time, he finally set himself up as a Hollywood agent in 1938, selling his clients to the major companies.

On the initiative of Gero Gandert, the Berlin Film Museum bought all extant files after Kohner died in 1988. The so-called 'Sammlung Paul Kohner' contains about 155,000 pages of correspondence, contracts and the like.⁵ The correspondence is bilingual: most of it is in English, but there are letters in German, too. When working with this collection, one should keep in mind that not all Kohner's documents have been preserved. Some were lost due

Anti-Nazi pictures ironically provided German-Jewish actors in exile with regular work in Nazi parts: Kurt Katch appeared, among many such films, in *Berlin Correspondent* (1942), *Counter-Espionage* (1942) and *The Strange Death of Adolf Hitler* (1943)

to water damage, some had already been sold before the Berlin Film Museum bought the archive. In addition, communications were not always conducted in writing. Although the telephone was very important for Kohner, unfortunately no records of these phone calls are extant. Nonetheless, the Kohner files – which have not yet been used systematically in relation to the history of film exile – are a unique source for studying the German-speaking actors in the USA.

Based on my own viewing and a variety of written sources,⁶ I have selected an unbiased, random sample of male actors who are representative of the range of German-speaking actors who played Nazis in anti-Nazi films. They are: Rudolph Anders* (aka Rudolf Amendt, Rudolph Amendt, Rudolf Anders, Robert O. Davies, Robert O. Davis, Robert Davis), Ludwig Donath* (aka Louis Donath), Carl Esmond* (aka Willy Eichberger, Charles Esmond), Arno Frey*, Frederick Giermann* (aka Fred Gehrmann, Fred Giermann, Frederick Gierman), Oscar Homolka* (aka Oscar Homolka), Hans von Morhart*, Otto Reichow*, Sig Ruman* (aka Siegfried Ruman, Sig Ruman), Hans Schumm*, Reinhold Schünzel*, Tonio Selwart*, Walter Slezak*, Ludwig Stössel* and Wolfgang Zilzer* (aka John Voight, Paul Andor). Since nearly every German-speaking actor who worked in Hollywood during World War II played Nazis, the sample should even be typical of all German-speaking actors who worked in Hollywood at the time.

The 'Sammlung Paul Kohner' contains files on all of the selected actors except Anders, Frey, Giermann and Reichow. Only two of the remaining eleven actors, Sig Ruman and Walter Slezak, were not under contract to Kohner. Thus, nine out of fifteen, or 60 per cent of these actors had a contract with Paul Kohner, which clearly demonstrates his high status as an agent for German-speaking film personnel.

There are further difficulties in categorising my sample. Although all the actors in it spoke German, not all were Jewish, nor were they all political exiles or even Germans. In his autobiography, Slezak did not define himself as Jewish; furthermore, he was Austrian and he was not a political exile (he went to the USA in 1930 because he had been contracted by J. J. Shubert for a Broadway show). In the case of von Morhart, we have no information. Of the remaining fourteen actors, eight were born in Germany (Anders, Frey, Giermann, Reichow, Ruman, Schumm, Schünzel, Selwart), five in Austria (Donath, Esmond, Homolka, Slezak, Stössel), and one in the USA (Zilzer was born in the USA, the child of German parents who later returned to Germany). Apart from Slezak, Anders, Frey, Ruman and Schumm also went to the USA before the Nazis took power. However, this does not mean that these actors would not have been forced to leave their country after the Nazis seized power had they stayed in Germany. For example, Slezak would definitely have been persecuted as a Jew, since the Nazis defined his mother as Jewish.⁷

A list of German-speaking exiles from the film industry compiled by Günther Peter Stracheck⁸ identifies nine actors from my sample as political exiles: Donath, Esmond, Giermann, Homolka, Reichow, Schünzel, Selwart, Stössel and Zilzer. However, this list is not wholly reliable: for example, Esmond claimed that he left Austria voluntarily after 1933, because he preferred to work in Britain and later in Hollywood.⁹ As a rule, though, most of the Germans and Austrians who were forced to leave their countries had to do so because they were persecuted as Jews by the Nazis. Nazi anti-Semitic policies defined a Jew as a person with at least one Jewish grandparent, regardless of whether such a person defined him- or herself as a Jew.¹⁰ In addition, many Jews' relatives left their country when, for example, their husband or wife was unable to get work because they were persecuted as a Jew. The files of the former Berlin Document Center, now part of the Bundesarchiv, show that out of my sample only Ludwig Stössel was persecuted as a Jew by the Nazis, which does not necessarily mean that the others would not have been, had circumstances been different. Those who hid from the Nazis or left the country even before the Nazis took power do not appear in the Nazi files.¹¹ However, according to Stracheck's analysis, 95 per cent of the exiled film personnel left the country because they were persecuted as Jews (the percentage of political persecution in other occupational groups, such as writers or academics, was even higher).¹² Thus, when I classify an actor as 'Jewish' in

according to their ideology; in other words, Jewishness would have been the relevant motive for exile. Furthermore, many of those who had not defined themselves as Jews in Germany began to do so after they had been forced into exile through Nazi persecution.

Going to Hollywood

In addition to the question of Jewishness discussed above, there were a variety of reasons why German-speaking actors went to Hollywood. Many went voluntarily, because they harboured expectations of economic and professional advantage; in our sample, this can be said of Anders, Esmond, Frey, Ruman, Schumm and Slezak. But when the Nazis took power in January 1933, within a couple of weeks, they enforced policies de facto prohibiting Jews from working in the film business. As a result, about 2,000 film workers fled to neighbouring countries and to the USA.

Most of the exiles first sought refuge in the neighbouring countries of Austria, Hungary, France and the UK before trying to flee to the USA. This is true for five of seven actors of my sample: Donath went first to Austria, then to Switzerland in 1938, then to the UK in 1939, before finally reaching the USA in 1940; Homolka went to the UK in 1935, before going to Hollywood in 1937; Reichow went to France in 1936, before emigrating to the USA in 1937; Stössel went to Austria in 1933, to Britain in 1938 and one year later to the USA; Zilzer left Germany for France in 1933, returned to Germany in 1935 and ultimately emigrated to the USA in 1937. Only two actors in my sample emigrated directly to the USA: Selwart in 1933 and Schünzel in 1937.

Austria could only be a transitional stage, not only because it was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938 but because its film industry was always completely dependent on the German market. France and the UK were the two most important European asylum countries for German-speaking exiled film personnel, because their film industries were experiencing a period of dramatic growth at that time and because they had a substantial distribution market.¹³ However, Continental European countries proved to be only an intermediate station for most German-speaking film personnel, partly because these countries' domestic film industries were in the end too small to absorb large numbers of new workers, and partly because the Nazis' influence steadily increased in these territories. In 1940, Germany occupied wide areas of France. Those who were captured by the Nazis died in concentration camps. The popular character actors Kurt Gerron and Otto Wallburg, for example, both died at Auschwitz.¹⁴

The USA was, for various reasons, the most popular place of refuge for German-speaking exiles. Hollywood, which at that time was a cartel controlled by eight companies, constituted the largest film industry in the Western world and produced a great number of films for the international market. To make American films more successful on other national markets and to address specific segments of the multicultural American market itself, Hollywood was always on the lookout for foreign creative talent. Paul Kohner's agency could fulfil this demand by offering European film personnel. As a rule, German and Austrian exiles had no problems receiving a visa in the USA as long as they had a job offer from an American film company. Therefore, it was easier to work in the USA than in Europe, where an exile had to get a work permit from the state before being able to work. In addition, the standardised Hollywood production methods were not unfamiliar to the German-speaking exiles, since the principal German production company, Ufa, had adopted similar methods in 1927 and, in any case, many Germans were already working in the USA, from directors such as Ernst Lubitsch to moguls like Carl Laemmle. Last but not least, the USA was also the safest place geographically to escape capture by the Nazis.¹⁵

Before World War II, only about 15 per cent of the total number of German-speaking exiled film personnel went to Hollywood. Many of them came to the USA with contracts from American film companies, especially directors, producers, cameramen and musicians such as Joe May, Erik Charell, Erich Pommer, Theodor Sparkuhl and Werner Richard Heymann. For actors, however, it was nearly impossible to get a contract in advance. In August

1938, Kohner's collaborator Fritz Keller described the problem to Ludwig Stössel, who was staying in Switzerland at the time:

Dr Otto Preminger forwarded to me your letter of July 23rd, and although I know the situation in Europe very well, and am most anxious to do everything possible for my old friends in Europe, I have to tell you it is utterly impossible to do anything for you here in Hollywood as long as you are not here personally.

Please don't tell me that all the big studios here in Hollywood would be able to judge your capabilities, by screening one of your pictures which you made in Europe. These gentlemen here simply don't listen. They want to see the person; they want to talk to him and want to have the impression from the living personality. They will not judge from – what they consider beforehand as being – a bad picture and badly directed, because it was made in Europe.

You know that I estimate your qualities as a fine actor, very highly, and I would like very much to do something for you, but unfortunately as explained above, I am not in a position to do anything as long as you are not here.¹⁶

After 1938–9, the stream of refugees to the USA increased dramatically. As a consequence, it became 'much more difficult . . . to place [an actor] who is not here, even if we have some very good photographs'.¹⁷ Without a contract in advance, refugees needed a guarantor to give an affidavit that they would support the refugee financially if he or she was unable to earn enough money. Kohner founded the European Film Fund to get film personnel out of Nazi Germany and to support exiles financially.¹⁸ In addition, he negotiated contracts with American film companies for well-known German writers, such as Alfred Döblin, Heinrich Mann and Alfred Polgar. Such initiatives allowed about 450 Germans and Austrians to move to Hollywood.

The Labour Market for Exiled German-speaking Actors in Hollywood

Unlike exiled writers, who continued to address a German-speaking public even though they had no chance of getting their work published in Germany or Austria, German-speaking exiles in the film industry did not make films for a German-speaking audience. On the contrary, they aimed their films at the audience of the country in which they were working and at the audiences of those countries that were not collaborating with, or occupied by, the Nazis.

Since they did not work in their mother tongue, language was therefore a problem. Lotte Palfi*-Andor explained in retrospect:

I was under the illusion that I would be able to work as an actress again there. I said to myself that America was a melting pot. So many nationalities met there and spoke different varieties of English that my German accent would not be an obstacle. I never made a greater mistake.¹⁹

Indeed, in contrast to other occupational groups such as producers, directors or cameramen, exiled actors needed the ability to speak English on a level that was acceptable for English-speaking audiences. However, most of the German-speaking actors spoke English with a heavy accent, if at all. Albert Bassermann*, for example, spoke no English and refused to learn it. For his first film, *Dr Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), he had to learn 'his lines by rote, rehearsing phonetically'.²⁰ Thus, compared to other occupational groups of German-speaking exiles, actors had the greatest problems in adapting to the American film market, due to the importance of language.

Because of their accent, German-speaking actors were not considered suitable for all roles. Even the most popular or critically acclaimed actors and actresses, such as Marlene Dietrich*, Luise Rainer* and Paul Henreid*, usually played foreigners, not necessarily from their own native country but any European country, or even 'exotic' locations such as China. However, having a foreign accent was not necessarily always a handicap, since

– and German-speaking actors made such characters believable. Thus, the actors' German accent was their major 'cultural capital' as well as their greatest handicap, thereby limiting the range of possible roles and their chance to become stars. When Wolfgang Zilzer was asked, 'Would it be an exaggeration to say that in this country you were only offered roles that justified the accent?' he answered, 'Yes, that was almost always true for film roles. And when I didn't do the accent enough, I was promptly asked: "Where's the accent?" so I had to put a little effort into it.'²¹

After 1938, when German-speaking actors began to flood the market in Hollywood, there were not enough of these roles around. Kohner certainly wanted to help his countrymen, but this became increasingly difficult, because the supply of actors far exceeded the demand. As a rule, actors eagerly sought contracts with Kohner, but among the actors in my sample, only in the case of Sig Ruman did Kohner take the initiative to offer a contract.²² Since there were many more German-speaking actors than Hollywood needed, the studios usually signed contracts only on a film-by-film basis (Walter Slezak, who received a long-term contract, was an exception). In economic terms, it did not make sense to contract these actors on a one-year basis, as Sidney Buchman of Columbia Pictures explained to Ludwig Donath:

There is a company policy against carrying character people on contract. They feel, with very few exceptions, that they cannot write off such charges in the year easily and that they would prefer paying even more to such a man when they need him. [Harry] Cohn made this explanation to me and after a certain point I could not urge him to change his company policy. This was true in the face of the fact that he has an extremely high regard for your work.²³

German-speaking actors who were well known and formerly highly esteemed in Germany or Austria, but unknown to American audiences, expected to get leading roles in Hollywood or at least roles that were more than a walk-on part, but they were often disappointed.²⁴ For the exiled actors, this situation was frustrating, as evidenced by a variety of letters to Kohner:

The point I want to make is that I feel the above mentioned assignment must be a first class job with a substantial part and not a 'fill in' job such as the one in *Panama Hattie* [1942] which I would accept (providing it is offered to me) because I want to keep going and keep in work as I feel it is better to be working than to be idle.²⁵

Kohner was not always able to fulfil the hopes placed in him. Confronted with this situation, he sometimes resorted to making his clients believe that they were going to play more substantial roles than they actually would. This occasionally upset the actors, as Ludwig Donath complained to Kohner:

You as my representative should instead fight for what we have to ask for like a lion. A full week I am now waiting for an answer from you. . . . Last week, when I got the call from Paramount about Dr Wassel, I saw you. You told me that they asked for Bassermann for this part and that you told them, he couldn't do it, but you have 'another very good actor . . . (me) etc.' It will be at least a two weeks job. It is a three days bit part and nobody at Paramount had ever the idea to ask for Bassermann. When I asked them about it, I was laughed at and told, 'Somebody made a fool of you'. Why do you do that to me?²⁶

Anti-Nazi Films as a Solution

When anti-Nazi films started to be produced in Hollywood in great numbers during World War II, more than 130, or about 65 per cent, of all German-speaking exiled actors finally got a chance to work – including Jewish actors. Paul Kohner's brother and biographer, Frederick Kohner, described the new situation thus:

Paul knew that their time would come. And it did come, sooner than he had anticipated, with the flood of anti-Nazi pictures . . . Suddenly the industry needed Prussian generals, bullnecked SS officers, Fuehrers, Stuka fliers, Austrian zither players, Jewish scientists, U-boat captains, revolutionaries, spies and counterspies. Paul supplied them all. Actor Fritz Kortner went to work, as did Ernst Deutsch*, Alexander Granach, Carl Esmond, Felix Bressart*, Curt Bois, Sig Arno, Ludwig Stössel.²⁷

The anti-Nazi films conveyed an anti-Fascist message via traditional genre films such as spy thrillers: *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), *Man Hunt* (1941); melodramas: *The Mortal Storm* (1940); and comedies: *To Be or Not to Be* (1942). American companies did not produce anti-Nazi films immediately the Nazis took power, since the industry did not want to hurt the feelings of any nation in the world, regardless of its politics,²⁸ and since America's public opinion initially followed a policy of isolationism. In addition, most of the American studios wanted to avoid offending the Nazis in order to keep a foothold in the German film market. In 1934, Warner Bros. was the first company to close its German branch, and in 1938, it became the first major company to produce an anti-Nazi film, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*.²⁹ When Jewish shops were destroyed, synagogues burned down and Jews were humiliated, terrorised and killed in Germany during the night of 9–10 November 1938 (what the Nazis called *Reichskristallnacht*), the USA's public opinion began to change from isolationism to interventionism. Furthermore, by the end of 1939, the share of the German market held by those US companies that were still distributing their films in Germany, MGM, Fox and Paramount, was dwindling. Consequently, more and more Hollywood studios began producing anti-Nazi films. In reaction to this, the Nazis prohibited American companies from distributing their films in Germany. If a studio produced a single anti-Nazi film in the USA, it was forced to close its foreign branch in Germany (Paramount was the last to leave in October 1940). After the USA entered World War II in December 1941, the production of anti-Nazi films became a patriotic duty and the number of such films increased.³⁰

Anti-Nazi films were therefore the big break for German-speaking exiled film personnel, in that they created a large number of jobs. According to Jan-Christopher Horak, about 180 such films were produced in the USA between 1939 and 1946. German-speaking actors participated in 90 per cent of these films and German-speaking producers, directors and screenwriters in 30 per cent.³¹ The number of supporting and even leading roles for German actors thus grew significantly: only 45 per cent of these roles were still walk-on parts (16 per cent of roles were not credited). For German actors, therefore, anti-Nazi films offered the best opportunity, since they regularly included roles for which they were an exact fit – Germans with heavy German accents. Given their military slant, these films of course offered hardly any roles for women. For example, while Wolfgang Zilzer regularly found work, his wife, Lotte Palfi-Andor, only got bit parts from time to time, such as a nurse in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and the wife of a Resistance fighter in *Underground* (1941). She had to wait several months, sometimes years, between films.³²

Actors in exile occasionally played refugees on screen: for example, Ludwig Stössel as Mr Leuchtag and Wolfgang Zilzer as the man with expired papers (both uncredited) in *Casablanca* (1942). They also played resistance fighters, such as Paul Henreid in the same film. But more often than not they had to play Nazis. The Nazi characters of the anti-Nazi films are portrayed, as a rule, as stereotypical anti-democrats: SS or Gestapo men subordinate to the totalitarian control of the 'Führer'. They are often characterised as brutal and stupid, ridiculous figures who do not argue: they obey if they are subordinates and never speak without shouting if they are officers. Last but not least, all these Nazi characters have a heavy German accent, even more exaggerated than in other roles; some of them, such as Hans Heinrich von Twardowski*, who played Reinhard Heydrich in *Hangmen Also Die* (1943), even spoke only German.

There are too many anti-Nazi films with actors from my sample to mention them all, so one role for each actor must suffice as an example: Rudolph Anders played a Gestapo agent in *To Be or Not to Be* (uncredited); Ludwig

Donath portrayed Hitler and his double in *The Strange Death of Adolf Hitler* (1943); Carl Esmond played the Nazi commander Major Paul Dichter in *First Comes Courage* (1943), avoiding the typical Nazi clichés; Arno Frey played a concentration camp commandant in *Escape* (1940) (uncredited); Frederick Giermann played Heinrich Himmler, one of the political leaders responsible for organising the concentration camps, in *The Strange Death of Adolf Hitler*; Oscar Homolka was the opportunist Lev Pressinger in *Hostages* (1943); Hans von Morhart and Otto Reichow played Gestapo men in *The Man I Married* (1940) and *Invisible Agent* (1942), respectively (both uncredited); Sig Ruman appeared as Colonel Erhardt in *To Be or Not to Be*; Hans Schumm was a Gestapo officer in *Escape*; Reinhold Schünzel played Gestapo inspector Ritter in *Hangmen Also Die* and Tonio Selwart the Gestapo commander Kurt Haas in the same picture; Walter Slezak played the ship commandant Willy in *Lifeboat* (1944); Ludwig Stössel was the opportunistic town mayor Herman Bauer in *Hitler's Madman* (1943); Wolfgang Zilzer played Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi's propaganda minister, who was responsible for organising the film industry, in *Enemy of Women* (1944).

Exiled Actors' Reactions to Playing Nazis

In studying the relevant sources, it became clear that the main hypothesis I started with in this research – that the actors hated or resented playing Nazis – was not supported by the evidence. Surprisingly enough, there are no complaints at all from the actors in Kohner's files about playing Nazis. On the contrary, Schünzel, who had been one of Germany's critically acclaimed directors, as well as an actor, even asked Kohner whether he could get him the role of prominent Nazi Himmler in *The Hitler Gang* (1944) (Luis Van Rooten got the part, his first).³³ Thus, for the refugees, playing Nazis does not seem to have been humiliating.

Playing Nazis may have been a moral and political undertaking for some actors, but, as far as I can see, this was not the case for those in my sample. There is no hint that these actors felt that playing Nazis was a form of revenge or an act of political resistance. When Zilzer was asked, 'Did you feel that with this role [Goebbels in *Enemy of Women*] you could get even with the Nazis?' he answered, 'Revenge? No, I never felt that way about it. When I play a role I have to try to make it as believable as possible.'³⁴

Certainly, actors were often resentful of the limitations of the parts and were forced to accept the roles offered to them because they needed the money, as Carl Esmond complained to Kohner:

My present role – which I had to accept only because of the money – and which is completely insignificant in artistic or professional terms, only confirmed my prior experience that I am only offered roles which have as their most important requirement the knowledge of the German language. I do not see how I will ever get a leading role or at least an artistically valuable one that way.³⁵

However, the most interesting point revealed by the archival material is that the exiled actors' reaction to a Nazi role depended mainly on their professional self-definition. During this period, a connection with the theatre was an essential aspect of a German-speaking actor's identity. A study of actors' biographies shows that in 1926, 86.1 per cent of the German-speaking actors claimed to have an artistic background, with 77.9 per cent of the actors stating that they had started out in the theatre (in other words they had either theatrical training or they had begun their career in the theatre), and 8.2 per cent in ballet or opera.³⁶ Only 13.9 per cent said that they had begun work directly in film. In the 1930s, a theatrical background had become even more important due to the transition to sound. In a 1936 survey, 94.9 per cent of the actors refer to an artistic background, with 87 per cent stating that they had started in the theatre, and only 5.1 per cent directly in film.³⁷

The German-speaking actors' professional self-definition was thus firmly based in the theatrical tradition and its concepts of 'good roles' and 'good acting'. These actors had been professionally trained, and in their work they defined themselves solely as artists, not as political victims. As individuals, however, many did take political action

against the Nazis, for example by joining the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. Since Hollywood also needed more theatrically trained actors after the transition to sound, and was working to similar standards of professionalism, German-speaking actors had no problems in adapting to Hollywood conventions in this respect.

Since art was autonomous in the German-speaking actors' view, it was irrelevant for character actors whether the character they were to play was good or evil. As Carl Esmond put it, 'I played a very good part [in *First Comes Courage*] although I was a Nazi.'³⁸ Wolfgang Zilzer, when asked whether he had hesitated to accept the role of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in *Enemy of Women*, answered, 'No, I love to play any good role. Otherwise, who would want to play a character like Franz Moor?'³⁹ To Zilzer, it was of primary importance that the role was a leading one, and not a supporting or a walk-on part, as most Nazi roles usually were.

But the exiled actors' idea of a 'good role' was not only its importance in terms of narrative or screen time but also whether it offered the chance to portray an interesting and complex character. As a result, and since the actors defined themselves as character players, they strongly disliked being typecast. Zilzer told Hans Heinrich von Twardowski:

Finally, each time I appeared in a film everyone knew right away that I would either be the Anti-Nazi or the opposite. . . . And when I wanted to play something else, it was doomed to failure from the start, because people thought that's the Nazi, or the Anti-Nazi, but what does he want, now he's something completely different – nobody would buy it.⁴⁰

In addition, 'good acting' meant a chance to immerse oneself in a part completely, to act in a psychologically convincing manner so that the audience would forget about both the actor and the acting. If the illusion was not complete for the audience, the actor had failed to reach his goal. Zilzer felt very bad about Ernst Deutsch playing a Nazi, since in his opinion everybody could see that Deutsch was Jewish: 'He never looked as Jewish as he did in that Nazi-costume, it was terribly embarrassing.'⁴¹

There were a few German-speaking exiled actors who refused to accept Nazi roles, despite the fact that they needed the money and would even have liked to play these roles. One of these, Carl Esmond, said: 'There was a wonderful part in a very anti-German film, *Nurse Edith Cavell* (1939), and I turned it down. Then there was an anti-Nazi-picture, *Escape*, and I said I can't do it.'⁴² Esmond rejected these roles because he wanted to protect his family, who were still in annexed Austria. Therefore, Kohner was glad that Esmond already had a job when 'Warner Brothers called me about you for *All Through The Night* (1942) – the Nazi part.'⁴³ Others did accept Nazi parts and changed their names to protect their families. Wolfgang Zilzer, for example, changed his name to John Voight to be able to appear in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* without endangering his father, who was still in Germany. But it was in vain: Zilzer was recognised and his father died at the hands of the Gestapo.

Conclusion

During the Third Reich, German-speaking Jewish actors, who had been forced by the Nazis to leave their countries, flocked to Hollywood. They preferred the USA to other European states, since Hollywood was not only the largest film industry in the Western world but also the only one that was always on the lookout for foreign talent due to the multicultural nature of its home audience as well as its international markets. Compared to other occupational groups such as directors, foreign actors had the greatest problems finding work, since the potential range of roles was restricted to foreign characters because of language. As long as the number of exiles did not exceed the number of suitable (foreign) roles, which were a cornerstone of European-themed productions, the actors' German accent was their major 'cultural capital'. But when the number of exiled actors exceeded the demand, their 'cultural capital' became their greatest 'cultural handicap', excluding them from screen acting. However, when anti-Nazi films were produced in great numbers during World War II, increasing significantly the need for performers with German accents, male actors finally got a chance to act. Despite the

fact that these new roles were mainly Nazi characters, the exiled actors' professional self-definition ensured that their identity as political victims did not interfere with their role as actors. Thus, for the refugees, apart from making a living, playing Nazis was neither an act of humiliation nor of political resistance. How the actors reacted to these roles depended mainly on their professional self-definition, which was based in the theatrical tradition and its concepts of 'good roles' and 'good acting'. A Nazi role was a 'good' one, if it was a major part, one that portrayed an individuated and complex character. The acting was 'good' if the actor managed to embody the character in such a manner that the audience could entertain the illusion of being confronted with a real Nazi and not with an actor. As contemporary documents and retrospective interviews show, there is no difference in terms of the actors' reactions to playing Nazi roles, whether they were political exiles or whether they came to Hollywood voluntarily, because both groups shared the same concept of professional and artistic identity. However, as individuals, the refugees indeed defined themselves as political victims who were fortunate to have survived the Holocaust in a free country, as the actor Hans von Morhart remembered after the war in a letter to Paul Kohner:

Even if I didn't achieve professionally what I had once hoped for, I did manage to adapt to the new situation, and I was satisfied to be able to earn my living, albeit with varying success, in pleasant surroundings far away from the Nazi-terror, which would surely have cost me my life. I have learned very much here and am grateful to have lived in freedom in a democratic country.⁴⁴

Translated from the German by Annemone Ligensa.

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Notes

1. Walter Slezak, *Wann geht der nächste Schwan?* (Munich: Piper, 1964), p. 324. This is an enlarged edition of Walter Slezak, *What Time's the Next Swan?* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962). As far as I can see, the quotation is not included in the English edition of Slezak's autobiography.
2. Alfred Polgar, 'Leben am Pazifik', in *Aufbau* vol. 8 no. 36, September 1942, p. 21, reprinted in Marcel Reich-Ranicki (ed.), *Alfred Polgar: Kleine Schriften, Band 1* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982), pp. 463–6 (originally in German).
3. On Kohner, see: Frederick Kohner, *The Magician of Sunset Boulevard: The Improbable Life of Paul Kohner, Hollywood Agent* (Palos Verdes, CA: Morgan Press, 1977); Frederick Kohner, *Der Zauberer vom Sunset Boulevard: Ein Leben zwischen Film und Wirklichkeit* (Munich: Droemer Knauer, 1974). Originally written in English, the book was first published in German and translated by Karl Otto von Czernicki, who cut references to the Nazis. See also: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek (ed.), *Film Exil, #1/1992* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1992); see also the ZDF/arte-feature television documentary, *Der agent vom Sunset Boulevard: Paul Kohner und das amerikanische Filmexil/L'agent de Sunset Boulevard: Paul Kohner et l'exil américain du film allemand*, written by Heike Klapdor, broadcast in 1996.
4. See Erika Wottrich (ed.), *Deutsche Universal: Transatlantische Verleih- und Produktionsstrategien eines Hollywood-Studios in den 20er und 30er Jahren* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2001).
5. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek (ed.), *Sammlung Paul Kohner Agency: Inventarverzeichnis*. (Berlin: Eigendruck, 1994).
6. Jan-Christopher Horak, *Anti-Nazi-Filme der deutschsprachigen Emigration von Hollywood 1939–1945* (Münster: MAkS, 1985); Christian Cargnelli and Michael Omasta (eds), *Aufbruch ins Ungewisse, Bd. 2: Lexikon, Tributes, Selbstzeugnisse* (Vienna: Wespennest, 1993).

7. Gerd Albrecht, *Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik: Eine soziologische Untersuchung über die Spielfilme des Dritten Reichs* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1969), p. 208.
8. Deutsches Filmmuseum (ed.), *Von Babelsberg nach Hollywood: Filmemigranten aus NaziDeutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1987), pp. 7–22.
9. Carl Esmond: 'Ich war nicht keen, nach Amerika zu gehen', in Christian Cargnelli and Michael Omasta (ed.), *Aufbruch ins Ungewisse Bd. 1: Österreichische Filmschaffende in der Emigration vor 1945* (Vienna: Wespennest, 1993).
10. First supplementary decree of the Nürnberg Laws from 14 November 1935.
11. Letter from the Bundesarchiv, Berlin, to the author, 18 January 2002.
12. Jan-Christopher Horak, *Fluchtpunkt Hollywood: Eine Dokumentation zur Filmemigration nach 1933* (Münster: MAKS, 1984), p. 38, n. 2.
13. On German exiles in the film industry in Britain, see: Günter Berghaus (ed.), *Theatre and Film in Exile: German Artists in Britain, 1933–1945* (Oxford, New York and Munich: Berg, 1989); Kevin Gough-Yates, *Somewhere in England: British Cinema and Exile* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000).
14. Ulrich Liebe, *Verehrt, verfolgt, vergessen: Schauspieler als Naziopfer* (Weinheim and Berlin: Quadriga, 1995).
15. Horak, *Fluchtpunkt Hollywood*, pp. 2–37; John Russell-Taylor, *Strangers in Paradise: The Hollywood Emigres, 1933–1950* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).
16. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Keller to Ludwig Stössel, 4 August 1938.
17. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Keller to Ludwig Stössel, 11 October 1939.
18. Kohner, *The Magician of Sunset Boulevard*, pp. 109–12.
19. Lotte Palfi-Andor: 'Memoiren einer unbekanntenen Schauspielerin', in Erich Leyens and Lotte Palfi-Andor, *Die fremden Jahre: Erinnerungen an Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), p. 90 (originally in German).
20. Kohner, *The Magician of Sunset Boulevard*, p. 118.
21. Wolfgang Zilzer: 'Ich habe ja meistens die Opfer gespielt', in Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek (ed.), *Wolfgang Zilzer (Paul Andor)* (Berlin: 33. Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, 1983), p. 17 (originally in German).
22. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Kohner to Sig Rumann, 9 October 1939.
23. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Sidney Buchman (Columbia Pictures) to Ludwig Donath, 7 May 1946.
24. For example, Albert Bassermann; see Kohner, *The Magician of Sunset Boulevard*, p. 117.
25. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Carl Esmond to Kohner, 14 July 1941.
26. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Ludwig Donath to Kohner, 6 August 1943.
27. Kohner, *The Magician of Sunset Boulevard*, p. 121. Please note, spelling is as in the original quote in English.
28. Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).
29. Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers – Warner Bros.' Campaign against Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
30. Markus Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz: Der amerikanische Spielfilm im Dritten Reich* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1999), pp. 247–318.
31. Horak, *Fluchtpunkt Hollywood*, p. 28.
32. Lotte Palfi-Andor, in Zilzer, 'Ich habe ja meistens die Opfer gespielt', p. 2; Palfi-Andor, 'Memoiren einer unbekanntenen Schauspielerin', pp. 90, 102–4.
33. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Reinhold Schünzel to Kohner, 30 March 1943.
34. Zilzer, 'Ich habe ja meistens die Opfer gespielt', p. 17.
35. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Carl Esmond to Kohner, 8 June 1939 (originally in German)
36. Calculated on the basis of the 300 biographical entries in Kurt Mühsam and Egon Jacobson, *Lexikon des Films* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1926).

- zwischen *Theater und Film* (Emsdetten: Lechte, 1936), p. 69.
8. Esmond: 'Ich war nicht keen, nach Amerika zu gehen', p. 220.
 9. Zilzer: 'Ich habe ja meistens die Opfer gespielt', p. 18. Franz Moor is the villain in Friedrich von Schiller's play *Die Räuber* (1782).
 10. Ibid., p. 19.
 11. Ibid., p. 17.
 12. Esmond: 'Ich war nicht keen, nach Amerika zu gehen', p. 219.
 13. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Kohner to Carl Esmond, 13 June 1941.
 14. Sammlung Paul Kohner, Von Morhart to Kohner, 23 May 1946 (originally in German).