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## Strangers in Purgatory: On the “Jewish Experience,” Film Noir, and Émigré Actors Fritz Kortner and Ernst Deutsch

Marc Svetov April 23, 2017



Ernst Deutsch in *The Third Man* (screenshot)

*An examination of two of these émigrés – Fritz Kortner and Ernst Deutsch, major Central European actors, very well known in their home countries before leaving them in duress,*

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both of whom relocated to Hollywood – offers exemplary lessons of what it meant for artists to be forced to leave Europe.

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Two German Jews are sitting in a Berlin park in the early years of the Nazi rule. One of them is reading the *Völkische Beobachter*, the Nazi rag. The other German Jew is reading the Jewish *Aufbau* and is slowly getting excited. Finally, he asks his countryman, “Why are you reading that Jew-baiting rag?” The first German Jew stares at the floor a few seconds, then replies: “Look here. What’s printed in your newspaper? Everywhere Jews are refugees. They persecute us. They kill us. They are burning down our synagogues, seize our property and ban us from our professions. When I’m reading the Nazi paper, I read: ‘Jews own the banks!’, ‘Jews own all the big corporations!’, ‘Jews are so smart and clever they control the world!’ I tell you it makes me feel great!”

I was reminded of this classic Jewish joke while reading Vincent Brook’s *Driven to Darkness* (2009), about the influence of the “Jewish experience” on film noir.

Brook’s overall question about how the “Jewish experience” infused film noir neglects the crucial fact that there is nothing “Jewish” about persecution and mass murder. Brook has it backward: the European film artists who came to America and contributed to the genre of film noir were defined by the Nazi Nuremberg Race Laws as Jewish – they might not have known they were Jewish (only under the Race Laws *were* they Jewish, e.g., Fritz Lang), might not have cared, might not have liked it – and they were in peril and left. During those years, once Hitler, his legalistic henchmen, and their helpers had defined what a Jew was, there was nothing you could do about it, even if you were blond, had a button nose and no sense of humor whatever. You were stripped of everything but this definition. Mr.



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Brook is not alone in this unfortunate fantasy of an alignment of Jews with death and darkness. In many European bookshops, the scholarly literature on the Holocaust, even on Nazism itself, is exclusively shelved in the Judaica section.



Nazi chart (1935) shows racial classifications under the Nuremberg Laws: German, *Mischlinge* (mixed blood), and Jew. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

It was the circumstances in which Jewish émigrés fled Europe, relentless persecution, imminent death, the fate of friends and family, which might have informed their films. Not their Jewishness. For these émigrés, there was no turning back. They were portrayed with utter hate in Nazi films at the time in order to exemplify all that the Nazis reviled. These film artists became refugees – “strangers in paradise,” washed ashore on the left coast of America, saved from the Nazi storm by the film industry and its various financial harbors, its rescue committees as well as those lone do-gooders who really were doing good. They absolutely *had* to leave their native countries.

For most, it was a race, at the very risk of their lives, out to freedom; some left early, like Billy Wilder and Fritz Kortner; and some, like Max Ophuls and Robert Siodmak, literally left in the final minute on the last ship departing Europe before the Atlantic became infested with German U-boats. Arrival in America wasn’t arrival in Paradise, but it was life, a future.

Brook’s chain of association goes like this: Jewish film artists were alienated, “women’s directors” (Curtis Bernhardt and Max Ophuls), involved in

Expressionism in Germany as an art movement; flocked to Hollywood as anti-Hitler émigrés; made and starred in anti-Nazi films; were distinctively “Viennese” (Billy and Willy Wilder); went to France to make films in the 1930s (Robert Siodmak) – well, that’s fine and dandy, but many people who exhibit the behavior of underdogs are not enamored with strutting about and exemplifying the heroically overdrawn all-American he-man: it’s simply arbitrary what attributes Brook lists as Jewish. Being sensitive, neurotic, paranoid, pathological, overly afraid of violence – this is just trivial stuff compared to what being Jewish meant in Europe under Hitler and why these people left.

Let’s take a breath for a moment and contemplate the truth of the opposite of Brook’s thesis.

Five



Recruitment poster for the Jewish Brigade of the British Army, circa 1939-40

hundred thousand Jews fought in the Red Army against Hitler, 200,000 of them dying on the battlefields; 550,000 American Jews fought among U.S. forces; 100,000 were in the Polish army; 30,000 in the British army, including the Jewish Brigade, who had been recruited from Mandate Palestine during the war; that’s not to speak of the partisan armies battling in Eastern Europe, which

had many Jews among their numbers. I don't know where Brook gets his thesis about how Jews were the sheer embodiment of softer men, "frightened of violence." How is it that they were so significantly different – "alienated" from American society at large, "alienated from the American dream"? He has some image, I suppose, of a nebbish from a Woody Allen movie in mind. How many clichés do there have to be? Since he thinks "Jewish film noir" was about alienation, softer men, sensitivity, whatever, and that all this is necessarily Jewish according to his lights, well, everything that fits, fits, even if it won't fit.

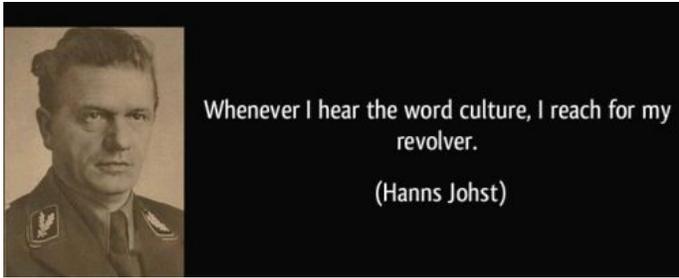
Beside that, Brook gets facts wrong.

To begin with, Brook ascribes a whole bunch of early 20th-century German artists as Jews who were not Jews: Frank Wedekind, Otto Dix, Adolf Loos, George Grosz, Jürgen Fehling, Erwin Piscator. He also identifies several Americans as Jews who were not, for instance the writer L. Frank Baum, the jazz musician Bix Beiderbecke, and actor Richard Whorf. Cornel Wilde, on the other hand, was not an "American non-Jewish actor" but was Jewish. In fact, he was a world-class fencer who decided not to participate as a young man in the 1936 Berlin Olympics due to the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies.

So when the people are Jewish, Brook calls them non-Jewish, and on the other hand hallucinates a whole score of "Jews" who are in fact not Jews at all. He gets other facts about films wrong. For example: *The Student of Prague* (1913) is not lost. (Maybe he hasn't looked on Amazon.com.)

His characterization of Expressionism as Jewish is just plain wrong. German Expressionism was a double-edged sword. Writers such as Hanns Johst and Gottfried Benn belonged to this movement as well as Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, the entire *Blaue Reiter* and *Brücke* group. Expressionism had strong elements of German Romanticism, which itself was not a "liberal" movement but a reactionary response to the modernization kicked in by Napoleon. In fact, it was strongly anti-

Semitic, just as broad swaths of the Expressionist movement were anti-Semitic.



Kandinsky was noted for his anti-Semitic talk. Johst the Expressionist playwright of the 1920s became the Nazi poet laureate, and Benn tried to suck up to the National Socialist cultural bureaucrats and sell Expressionism to them as an originally “German” artistic movement fitting their Nazi ideology, something that Hitler’s artistic philistinism couldn’t abide. Even Goebbels himself had published a novel in the 1920s that was an Expressionist work.

Brook has other rather strange notions. For instance, when discussing Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), Fritz Lang’s *Nibelungen* (1924), *Metropolis* (1927), *Spies* (1928), and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), he fantasizes about characters’ Jewishness based on their names and looks. He claims “Baum,” a common German name, in *Mabuse* is a Jewish name and that Dr. Baum, the psychiatrist, is meant to be a Jew. In Lang’s *Nibelungen*, Brook claims Alberich “looks Jewish” and that the mad scientist Rotwang in *Metropolis* also “looks Jewish.” This is all no use and of no meaning, since Alberich was long ago an anti-Semitic trope used by Wagner in his operas – we know what Wagner meant, that’s not in question – and Rudolf Klein-Rogge, the actor playing Rotwang in *Metropolis*, might have happened to “look Jewish” all right but he wasn’t and became a prominent Nazi actor. Brook claims *Nosferatu* is meant to be a Jew; also that Cesare, played by Conrad Veidt, and Dr. Caligari himself, portrayed by Werner Krauss, in *Caligari* are Jews. There is no indication whatsoever for it. Haghi, the evil character of the clown in Fritz Lang’s *Spies* played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge, is, according to

Brook, a Jew. There is no reason to give this attribute to him, though, and there is nothing in the film to indicate he might be a Jew. We have a genuine proliferation of Jews here. Perversely, Brook claims Lang, Thea von Harbou – Lang’s then wife who later became a 101% Nazi – and Norbert Jacques, the author of the potboiler novel upon which the *Mabuse* film was based, all employed *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious anti-Semitic forgery, for the plot of *Dr. Mabuse*. He refers to the earlier *Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler*, which was released in 1922 in inflation-plagued Germany, and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), the last film Fritz Lang made in his erstwhile homeland. Brook’s musing on the anti-Jewish paranoia inherent in such films makes for a pretty broad claim, and what’s more, it doesn’t make any sense. From the *Protocols* to Hitler to Henry Ford – anti-Semites believed in a *conspiracy* of Jews. They are all in it together. The elders meet and forge out their plans of destruction and world domination. There’s no such thing in both *Mabuse* films. All we have is a genius of crime, an evil ogre, who, while drawing on all sorts of mythological lines, is definitely not a set piece in the vast literature of anti-Semitism.



Rudolf Klein-Rogge as Rotwang in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (screenshot)

Throughout the book, Brook writes that the various aspects he ascribes to Jewishness “could” be seen as such but then takes a step backward to say that it does not have to be Jewish per se. So his thesis is continuously contradicted by his

ambivalence about definitively ascribing the various attributes he gives the diverse directors to the fact they were Jews. If you say something is not particularly Jewish, he will agree with you – essentially he is always covering his tracks, cannot really be pinned down. Brook wants to have it both ways.

An examination of two of these émigrés – Fritz Kortner and Ernst Deutsch, major Central European actors, very well known in their home countries before leaving them in duress, both of whom relocated to Hollywood – offers exemplary lessons of what it meant for artists to be forced to leave Europe.

From his earliest years, Fritz Kortner (1894–1970), born in Vienna, was



Fritz Kortner in 1911. Photo by A. Feuerzeug.  
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

enamored of the theater. He quickly decided upon the profession of actor, pursuing it with a “burning in his soul.” He had a passionate admiration for two major role models: Josef Kainz, a renowned actor at the Burg Theater, Vienna’s most famous house of drama, who died in 1910; and the theater-obsessed Viennese journalist Karl Kraus, who was effectively the dictator of taste and aesthetics for the intelligentsia and Viennese avant-garde elite as well as for the young up-and-

coming ambitious ones like the young Kortner. Karl Kraus is a story in himself, for – despite his endemic spleen, his verbal vitriol against many renowned Jewish personalities in the German-speaking world, both deceased and contemporaneous, including Heinrich Heine, Theodor Herzl, and various editors in chief of the Viennese dailies – he was still seen by his fellow Viennese as what he was: a Jew. Kraus' enemies list was voluminous, but his real hate was mainly for Jewish "enemies." He was typical of a certain type of Austrian cultural personality. A discussion of him is merited, for it provides a snapshot of the times we are speaking of here. Karl Kraus will always remain a shining exemplar of the self-hating Jew. He became a Catholic convert in 1911 and then claimed publicly he was leaving the faith in 1923 "primarily due to anti-Semitism" (his words), stating he had quit owing to his outrage at the use of the Kollegienkirche in Salzburg by Max Reinhardt, who was a Jew, as a venue for theater.

Vienna was the city where the young Adolf Hitler and his ilk lived in 1910. They were avid readers of virulently anti-Jewish pamphlets, an entire army of racist, violent conspiracy-mongers who, prior to World War I, could pass themselves off as mainstream thinkers in the German-speaking countries, even if, in our eyes today, they sounded as though they had crawled out from under a rock. Anyway, the Habsburg Empire was soon thereafter to be torn asunder by the First World War; and things got even worse in terms of agitation and ideology afterward, culminating in an abyss, at least for the Jewish population, with the German annexation in 1938. In Kortner's youth, however, Vienna was still a city with a large population of Jews even if its socio-political culture was permeated with anti-Semitism. Kortner's idol Kraus was unfair, cantankerous, but gave both the byword and the aesthetic-political direction to his adherents; a perverse moralist whose criteria were eccentric but accepted due to the sheer power of his bile-driven, satirical pen; his followers resembled those of a religious cult, where his Word was the guideline to taste, morals, and style in literature, politics, and theater in the

years leading up to the final demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918.

The young Kortner quickly became a sensation in the German-speaking theater world at a comparatively young age. He also worked in Berlin with Max Reinhardt but could maintain his independence from the world-renowned director; as early as 1915, Kortner was busy working in German and Austrian films. The Kortner style was that of a man with powerful, sometimes uncontrolled emotions – his strength and emotionalism as an actor were what he learned to tame, to his great advantage, for if nothing else, Kortner was an *intellectual* actor; he might very well have played from his heart and gut, but what went through these organs was processed and refined by his very active and curious mind and filtered through his aesthetic sensibility. Fritz Kortner could be highly varied in his portrayals. He soon abandoned his practice in his early years onstage of shouting and tearing up the scenery; it was generally acknowledged he had talent in excess, so the *wunderkind* rapidly enough received recognition for his abilities; he quickly learned to discipline himself, though, to pull himself back. The actor always had a complex about his appearance – his bulky body and face; for, at an early age, he had been told he did not have the features of a leading man. Whereupon he made a point of playing exactly those “romantic” roles later in revenge, the ones that had allegedly been denied him due to his “Jewish ugliness” (in the words of Kortner’s Viennese mentor Gregori). He always claimed he lacked self-confidence and was ashamed of his looks.



Fritz Kortner in *The Hands of Orlac* (screenshot)

During the 1920s, Kortner played leading roles in such classic German Expressionist films as *Warning Shadows* (1923), *The Hands of Orlac* (1923, with Conrad Veidt as Orlac), *The Woman One Longs For* (1929, with Marlene Dietrich as “the woman”), *Pandora’s Box* (1929, with the American actress Louise Brooks, directed by G. W. Pabst); then in the lead-up years to Hitler’s power grab in late January 1933, he played Alfred Dreyfus in *Dreyfus* (1930), helmed by Richard Oswald (the father of Gerd Oswald), as well as the main role in *Danton* (1931). Kortner, in *Dreyfus*, was notably held back, even suppressed in his title role. He plays a character who initially does not comprehend he has been betrayed and accused of treason for no other reason than the anti-Semitic sentiments of a few high-ranking French officers who want to suppress a scandal in the general staff and accuse him of selling French military secrets to the Germans. In Kortner’s portrayal, Alfred Dreyfus gives no speeches. His one outburst is screaming “I am innocent!” as he is taken away to a cell, which echoes throughout the military prison. As a man framed, judged, and then martyred on Devil’s Island for no reason, Kortner’s Dreyfus has an inadvertent nobility in his averageness – a portrayal that is a great contrast to Kortner’s usual powerful and often violent manner, his use of dynamic movements, for he had an overpowering stage presence, being a “scene stealer” in whatever part he played, no matter how minor (compare his later noir

characterizations). Dreyfus is shown as just a normal man, somebody who loves and misses his family, who had served in the French army honorably. The actor does not play the part of a “great personality,” as somebody who has to live up to being a political rallying cry for and against everything that people then saw in him. France is a country to which he remains loyal despite the false accusations. One might mention that Heinrich George, of all people, played Emile Zola in the film. George later became one of the most prominent and honored actors in Nazi Germany, also incidentally having a huge role as Karl Alexander, the Duke of Württemberg, in Veit Harlan’s anti-Semitic agitprop film *Jud Süß* (1940). The role of Dreyfus’ accuser Esterhazy is acted by none other than Oskar Homolka, another future émigré to Hollywood.



Kortner in *Abdul the Damned* (screenshot)

Coincidentally, Kortner was outside Germany when Hitler was handed the reins of government at the end of January 1933. Word got back to him that he had better not return to Berlin. He was a noted opponent of the Nazis, a hate figure for the party prior to their gaining power. He remained abroad, sending for his wife and child to join him. He officially went to England to play in a film in early 1934 and knew he would have to stay; he studied English diligently and soon mastered it well enough to write screenplays in his acquired language and advise other writers on their scripts; as an actor, however, he could never rid himself of

his accent. He claimed he grew bored with the British “reserve,” of polite and ironic understatement in drama and film. During his British sojourn, he played some notable roles, such as a tour de force part as an ultra-devilish Stalin-like Turkish sultan and tyrant in *Abdul the Damned* (1935). Before his departure from England, the Nazis had put great commercial and political pressure on Continental European film companies not to show any films in which German, Hungarian, Austrian, and Czech exiled film people were engaged, even if they were not active anti-Nazis. The émigrés were still working in Europe, but growing Nazi political might and influence were narrowing the options for them. The problem for Kortner was the Nazis viscerally hated him owing to his outspokenness and engagement combating them in the years of the Weimar Republic.

In these



Dorothy Thompson in 1920. Courtesy of  
Wikimedia Commons

circumstances, the actor soon grew despondent of his future. So it was only a matter of time and logic before he would be going to America. With the aid and encouragement of the dedicated anti-Nazi journalist Dorothy Thompson and her husband Sinclair Lewis, Kortner set sail for America. Although his eventual destination was Hollywood, his first stop was New York. Both famous writers met Kortner with open arms at the docks upon his

arrival in New York in 1937. Dorothy Thompson had been active as a journalist in Berlin during the mid-1920s. She knew Kortner and his stage and film work well; so to his great good luck, his reputation had preceded him to New York. But it was another matter for Kortner in Hollywood, where it proved to be far harder for him to gain a foothold as an actor. But by 1939, Kortner was working in the film industry in Los Angeles. His talents were initially deployed for writing screenplays, not acting. By 1942, his ideas and scripts were being realized. He also worked to get Bertolt Brecht out of Europe to safety in America.

Dorothy Thompson proved herself an important person to know, for she had a nationwide reputation as an outspoken public opponent of Hitler and made great efforts to save European anti-Nazis, while agitating in newspapers against Nazi Germany. During those years, Thompson had the reputation of being the second most influential woman in the United States after Eleanor Roosevelt.

A screenplay by Kortner entitled *The Strange Death of Adolf Hitler* was filmed and released in 1943 (directed by James Hogan), in which he also took a supporting role as actor. He had a leading part in *The Hitler Gang* (1944, director John Farrow), playing Gregor Strasser. Kortner became an American citizen during the war years. He saw his acting during his Hollywood years as a way to put bread on the table for his family and didn't think highly of the roles he got. In 1946 and 1947, he took small roles in *Somewhere in the Night* (1946), *The Razor's Edge* (1946), *The Brasher Doubloon* (1947), and *Berlin Express* (1948). Cast as a character actor, his roles – however minor – were memorable ones.

Kortner's screen presence gave intimations of his thespian potential; he literally filled out the role. On-screen, he could be controlled yet potent – akin to actors such as Emil Jannings or Wallace Beery, men whose powerful physical presence showed what needed to be shown in their parts by means of wordless gestures and movements of their

shoulders, their chin or the raising of an eyebrow. This is what Kortner could do – express something that was both menacing and endearing, a charming ambiguity, a latent aggression and at the same time a warmth; he was always more than the role, far more than the cipher, the mere stick-figure he'd been allotted.



Fritz Kortner in *Somewhere in the Night* (screenshot)

In *The Brasher Doubloon*, Kortner plays Rudolf Vannier, a gangster boss who speaks and often acts far more cultivated than one might expect from a racketeer. He has little screen time, however, in this filming of Raymond Chandler's *The High Window* (directed by fellow émigré John Brahm). His next part more than made up for it. As Anzelmo in *Somewhere in the Night*, directed by Joseph Mankiewicz, he plays a half-resigned and bemused minor con man, a criminal and charlatan. Again, Kortner is, in contrast to the despicableness of his character, likable, with something of an essence that is elusive, like someone you cannot dislike even though you know you should, which somehow is caught by the camera. Kortner's Anzelmo has a way of looking away from the camera, smiling to himself, in a throwaway gesture of self-deprecation, perhaps amusement at himself and the role to which he has stooped. We as the audience don't quite know what it is and how he does it, but he conveys something utterly worthy and *dignified* beyond his tatterdemalion appearance, with his slightly mussed hair and unshaven face (which was not

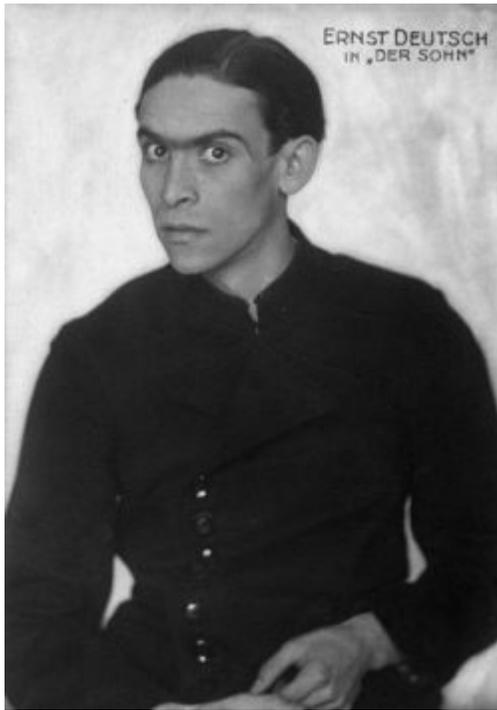
fashionable in the late '40s). He might be dragged down with his partners into crime, but in his twist-around toward his own sense of self-respect, Kortner's on-screen presence seems to say, "Here I might be a little man but still I am *something*." There is the scene late in the film in which Anzelmo, in his alternative guise as Dr. Oracle, gets caught by Larry Cravat (John Hodiak) in a lie during a surprise visit to Dr. Oracle's waterfront "office." What does Anzelmo do? He humorously, with more than a touch of self-deprecation, discloses how pathetic he finds himself as a fake waterfront fakir, nothing more than a con man. He doesn't quite apologize, but we see he is saddened by it. This man has *character*.

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Ernst Deutsch (1890–1969) was born in Prague, which until 1918 was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Deutsch was close friends with writer Franz Werfel, attending the same German-language gymnasium with him (as did, incidentally, Franz Kafka about a decade before). He came from the German-speaking enclave in the Czech city. As Jews, Deutsch's group was small amid the hubbub and whirligig of nationalist agitation in the Habsburg Empire. Deutsch felt himself an Austrian. Yet, when the Habsburg Empire was broken up after the end of World War I, he became a Czechoslovak citizen, which proved to be a blessing. Since he wasn't a German citizen, he ended up not being subject directly to Hitler in 1933, as Kortner was. And due to his citizenship, Deutsch was able to be active as a thespian on the European continent until the late 1930s. After the annexation of Austria and the sell-out of Czechoslovakia in 1938 during the Sudeten crisis, he was finished in Europe in the acting profession.

Ernst Deutsch had become famous initially in 1916 in Expressionist plays. He continued to take on roles in them until the mid-1920s. He lent great life and meaning to basically conceptualized characters invented by the various Expressionist playwrights and filmmakers, characters with abstract names like "The Son." Such roles could

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Ernst Deutsch in “Der Sohn”

symbolic meaning. Deutsch, with his stoic but expressive face and minimalist gestures, brought to such characters a reserved and very powerful stage-and-screen presence, which at times could suddenly burst out in ecstatic gesticulations and shouts, as was the wont in Expressionist drama. With his dark eyes, sunken cheeks, and thick eyebrows, he fit the part of suffering son. His forlorn yet dignified mien and penetrating eyes hinted at latent tragedy, distress, parental and societal misunderstandings, sometimes awe and wonder when the time came to express it. Deutsch looked eminently respectable as a young man. His hair was always neatly combed; he never needed a shave, as Kortner often did. Yet despite his respectability, a glance of his eyes and his tightly pressed lips seemed to say he was starved for “something more,” and Expressionism was nothing if not a youth rebellion in European bourgeois circles. Deutsch was quite tall. He was actually an athlete. He had once considered pursuing a career as a professional tennis player. He had won many tournaments during the early years of his acting career, and choosing an actor’s life wasn’t easy for him. He got a lead role in the Expressionist horror film *The Golem* (1920), directed by Paul Wegener. This was an era of wild

rebellion in art in the German-speaking lands. Deutsch took many roles on Berlin stages as well as in the other German-speaking cultural capitals, while also appearing in a variety of silent films during the 1920s. He was far less of a presence in German film before 1933, however, than Fritz Kortner was.

Deutsch left for America in 1939 and settled in Hollywood. He played in the theater in Los Angeles at first. Quickly enough, by the early 1940s, he was being offered minor film roles, which he often accepted, using a theatrical alias of Ernest Dorian. In those years, ironically, he often played cold and unbending Nazi officers. In *Reunion in France* (1942), he got a chance to do something more in one of the contemporaneous villain roles. Deutsch had played the part of an officer throughout the film as a German martinet, but in one scene, while drunk (in the film), he unexpectedly breaks down emotionally in the presence of Joan Crawford, who plays a pretty French socialite, superficial in all her doings with French wartime politics but who has learned to be a patriot in her now-occupied country. He displays unexpected emotion while he is with her in this scene, but just for a moment; then he quickly regains his Prussian composure. But his breakout from his stoic stance is all the more remarkable since, up to this, he had kept a virtually expressionless demeanor, which with Deutsch always meant implied and latent emotions. In 1945, he got a slightly meatier role in Val Lewton's atmospheric and ur-creepy *Isle of the Dead* as a Greek officer, for which he was again credited as Ernest Dorian.



Ernst Deutsch in *The Trial*

Ernst Deutsch returned to Europe two years earlier than Kortner, in 1947, and played the main part in G. W. Pabst's *The Trial* (1948), based on a "ritual murder" trial of a group of Jews in a Hungarian village in 1882. On the devastated European continent, with its destroyed film life, Deutsch was a revelation as the father of a young Jewish boy who turns crown witness against the Jews of his own village. His son has raised shocking charges against a group of innocents, older men he knows well; the boy had been coddled, fed lies by the local authorities. This takes place in the eastern outreaches of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The authorities in the town, along with the local aristocratic landowner, are quick to seize on an anti-Semitic libel when it offers itself. In the film, one gets a sense of a tragedy unfolding in some godforsaken hole where Jews could easily become hapless victims of their neighbors. In this role, Deutsch is both highly controlled and dynamically charged. His character of the father is struck through with emotion, though still bearing a reserved dignity of a man who cannot fathom that his own son is being used and allows himself to be used as a government tool to persecute innocents, including his own father. The film is a kind of compensation payment (*Wiedergutmachung* in German) by the Austrian director Pabst, who had left Germany during the early Hitler years, had worked in France awhile, finally going to Hollywood. Pabst failed to get the directing jobs he wanted in America and became disillusioned with gaining a

career foothold, whereupon he returned to France. Shortly before war broke out in the 1939, he made it known he intended to go back to America and become a U.S. citizen. Pabst instead crossed the border to Switzerland, traveling on to Austria, allegedly on family business. He then directed two films for the head of the German film industry, Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels. So, after the war, the director of *The Threepenny Opera* (1931) and *Pandora's Box* made a point of directing *The Trial*. His film won the best director prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1948, and Ernst Deutsch drew rapturous praise for his performance.

Deutsch, who was fluent in English, headed for one of his greatest parts as a supporting actor in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* in 1949, set in Vienna. His native Austria was now under Allied control. "Baron" Kurtz – the baron part is most likely a fake title – is a tour de force role for him. The dilapidated, perhaps gay, perhaps ex-Nazi collaborator and definitely slimy criminal, a "child of the muses," is uniquely Deutsch's own creation. Kurtz is restrained; he feigns politeness one minute, with the demeanor of a wolf – a paradox perhaps, but both attributes, politeness and vulpine peril, are in his expression – and there is latent menace the next time in every friendly gesture he makes; when he is caught out, he withdraws in a mendacious, oily Viennese politeness, pretending he had meant "nothing, nothing at all." A cultivated, bald-faced liar whose simulated shame at being discovered playing the violin at tables in the nightclub owned by the Romanian racketeer Popescu (Siegfried Breuer), another Viennese shark, make up only one of any number of the iridescent facets of a film filled with unforgettable performances. Or maybe one should say the performances were all broadly overdone, and that's what makes the film great. Is it because of the time? Because in this particular instance, in this Vienna at this time, the characters are all quite apt. Their being overdrawn is not even an exaggeration in terms of how egregious Europe truly was, once the rock had been lifted and the

heartily jovial, sugarcoated Viennese horrors had all crawled out.



Ernst Deutsch and Erich Ponto in *The Third Man*

Two anecdotes suffice to show what the times were like for émigré artists returning to Europe in the late 1940s. For those more sinister aspects of Vienna as portrayed in *The Third Man*, one didn't have to look far. They weren't invented. The Austrian actor Siegfried Breuer, who played the nightclub owner Popescu, had played the main part in *Linen for Ireland* (1938) as a scheming criminal Jewish businessman, ten years before Carol Reed's film noir, in an explicitly anti-Semitic film made under Goebbels' watchful eye. Three years later, he also played a leading role as a nefarious, diabolical Jewish art dealer in the anti-Semitic Nazi polemic against modernism in art in *Venus on Trial* (1941). Fast-forward seven years: As some interior scenes had to be shot at Shepperton Studios in England for the Alexander Korda-David Selznick production, Breuer traveled with *The Third Man's* film crew to Britain. On the sound stage at Shepperton, Breuer was physically attacked. A woman had run on stage, shouting at him; she had to be restrained. She was Wanda Rotha, an émigré from Austria who had lived in England since 1937. She accused Breuer of being a Nazi, claiming to have seen him in a black SS uniform in Berlin in 1936. She also claimed he had been active as a Nazi Fifth Columnist in her erstwhile native land before annexation. Breuer was quickly exonerated by the British Foreign

Office and allowed to finish. The whiff of scandal lingered.



Hedwig Bleibtreu and Ilse Werner in *Wunschkonzert* (1940) (screenshot)

The second tale, out of many to tell, involves the landlady of Anna (played by Alida Valli), namely Hedwig Bleibtreu, in *The Third Man*. She was a renowned Burg Theater actress in Vienna. Moreover, she had had an important role as a supporting actress ten years before in *Wunschkonzert* (*Request Concert*, 1940), a Nazi propaganda film set during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. *Request Concert* was a home-front film based on a popular radio show in which people, specifically men at the front, could phone up requests. The film ended with rousing music, crashing cymbals, and a men's chorus singing they were going soon to invade England ("Engelland"). In *Request Concert*, Hedwig Bleibtreu had played the aunt of the main female protagonist with great panache: she had frowned, showing consternation and disapproval, with the same half-defiant, disgruntled expression, complaining loudly in the same whiny voice, with exactly the gestures, showing resignation and frustration at her niece's wild ways in 1940 as she would show nine years later as Anna's "respectable" landlady in *The Third Man*.

Such were the ironies and coincidences prevailing in postwar Europe that confronted Jewish émigré artists and to which Deutsch and Kortner had indeed returned.



— **Marc Svetov**

Marc Svetov was born in Chicago, grew up in South Bend, Indiana, and attended college in Boston. He lived in Berlin for many years, returning to the United States in 2012. He has published a novel and a volume of short stories in Germany and film articles in the United States.

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**John F. Colaresi** • 3 days ago

Good article, but I think the caption for the photo of Breuer and Deutsch is wrong. It looks like Eric Ponto, who played Dr. Winkel in THE THIRD MAN, is on the right instead of Deutsch.

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**BLFJboy** Mod → John F. Colaresi • 2 days ago

Thanks for the head's up, John. Fixed it.

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**John F. Colaresi** → BLFJboy • 2 days ago

You're welcome!

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