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Fritz Kortner’s Return to Germany and the Figure of the Returning Exile in Kortner’s *The Mission* and Josef v. Bány’s *Der Ruf*

Fritz Kortner,¹ the celebrated actor both on stage and screen, left increasingly anti-Semitic and right-wing Germany in 1932 and moved with his young family from Berlin to Ascona in Switzerland. In his autobiography *Aller Tage Abend*, Kortner describes at length his stubborn refusal to see himself as an exile ‘in irgendeiner Fremde’,² until Leonhard Frank eventually persuaded him of the inevitability of emigration. By the early 1930s right-wing theatre critics were pouring anti-Semitic grime over Kortner with increasing brutality,³ and there is a distinct shift in Kortner’s memoirs from a marked enthusiasm for and rootedness in Berlin with its many cafés and familiar faces to a sense of loss and alienation. Berlin had turned into an alien place and Germany into a strange, enemy nation — ‘eine[] fremde[] und feindlich gewordene[] Welt’.⁴

When Hitler came to power, Fritz Kortner and his wife Johanna Hofer emigrated to Britain (via the Czech Republic, Vienna and Paris), where Kortner managed to work in the film industry until 1937, despite his struggles with the English language.⁵ He then moved to New York, Johanna Hofer⁶ and their two children followed in 1938.⁷ The family finally settled in Los Angeles, where Kortner appeared in nine films, wrote scripts, but worked predominantly as a ‘gimmick man’ (as his

¹ Fritz Kortner (1892-1970) was born in Vienna as Fritz Nathan Kohn. For further information, see the following autobiographical and biographical works: Fritz Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend. Autobiographie* (Munich: dtv, 1976); Fritz Kortner, *Letzten Endes. Fragmente* (Munich: Kindler, 1971); Klaus Völker, *Fritz Kortner. Schauspieler und Regisseur* (Berlin: Hentrich, 1987); Peter Schütze, *Fritz Kortner* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1994).

² Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 321.

³ When Julius Háý’s new play *Gott, Kaiser, Bauer* (1932) was staged for the first time in Berlin with Kortner in the lead, the star actor was described as ‘der schmierigste und übelste [jüdische] Typ, der je auf einer deutschen Bühne gestanden hat’ in Goebbels’s propaganda paper *Der Angriff* (29 December 1932). Like Kortner, Lion Feuchtwanger supported the young communist playwright Julius Háý strongly, while Brecht on the other hand criticized Háý, especially his later play *Haben* (1938), which premiered in 1945.

⁴ Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 323.

⁵ According to Kortner’s memoirs, jobs for himself and other emigrants dried up mainly because Nazi Germany had threatened to boycott all films that starred exiled Germans. Cf. Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 357.

⁶ The German actress Johanna Hofer was born in Berlin in 1896 and died in Munich in 1988. Apart from a short Wikipedia entry and a booklet accompanying the exhibition ‘Die Kortner-Hofer-Künstler-GmbH’ (Berlin: Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste, 2003), there is very little secondary literature referring to Johanna Hofer available.

⁷ Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 358: Kortner is drawn to America, but Hanna and the children have finally settled in London and do not want to leave.

children called it), fixing film scripts for Universal Studios. For Kortner, exile was a ‘zermürender Kampf’, a continuously wearing, exhausting battle,⁸ and he suffered repeatedly from periods of deep depression or ‘wilde Verdüsterungen’.⁹ But despite the many difficulties of exile, and work that was often unsatisfactory, life in Los Angeles for Kortner was at the same time a surprising ‘Annäherung an einen menschenwürdigen Zustand für unsereinen’, as he puts it in his autobiography.¹⁰

Even though neither Fritz Kortner nor Johanna Hofer were able to resume their successful acting careers¹¹ in exile,¹² they had a good, relatively secure life in Los Angeles and were in a position to help other exiles. But Kortner’s ties to Germany remained strong throughout his time in California, even when he chose to become an American citizen. Fleeing Germany for him had always been a flight from a fascist, murderous regime, not from the country or culture he loved. And as soon as an end of the Nazi terror was in sight, he was determined to return to a Germany freed from Hitler.¹³

After two ‘unreal’¹⁴ years of longing to return to Germany following the collapse of the Hitler

⁸ See for example Kortner’s letters to Else Schreiber-Zhdanoff, one written in Stockholm in 1933 and the other written in London in 1934. According to Matthias Brand writing in 1981, ‘Beide Briefe befinden sich im Besitz von Frau Hofer in München.’ See Matthias Brand, *Fritz Kortner in der Weimarer Republik* (Rheinfelden: Schäuble, 1981), 315, fn. 65. In the first letter Kortner writes: ‘Meine Niedergeschlagenheit ist beklemmend. Eine irre Lebensangst. – Der ganz große künstlerische Erfolg, den ich hier hatte, beruhigt mich nicht für Minuten. Wie soll ein so verausgabter Mensch wie ich die Kraft hernehmen für diesen zermürenden Kampf? Wo ist auch nur eine Chance zu sehen? Ich glaube nicht, daß diese Gastspielerei eine Zukunft hat. Ein Name verbraucht sich erschreckend schnell. Ohne Film verschwindet er – diesem Vorgang kann man geradezu zusehen – gänzlich. [...] Wenn du nur ein wirklich ermutigendes Wort für mich weißt, dann sag’s. Ich weiß keins.’ One year later he writes: ‘Ich muß mir jedes Wort aus dem Herzen reißen, eine wirklich erlebte Sprachvorstellung aus Hirn und Phantasie. – Es ist wirklich so als ob ein geliebter Mensch einem hinstirbt, sterbend immer schöner wird. – Ein anderer fremder Mensch wird einem dann als Ersatz aufgezwungen. In einer fremden Sprache aber spielen, das streift oft beängstigend die düstersten Bezirke des Wahnsinns.’ (Both letters quoted by Brand, *Fritz Kortner*, 280.)

⁹ Quoted by Schütze, *Fritz Kortner*, 84.

¹⁰ Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 370.

¹¹ Kortner wrote the screenplay for and played Bauer in *The Strange Death of Adolf Hitler* (dir. James P. Hogan, 1943), he also played the role of Gregor Strasser in *The Hitler Gang* (John Farrow, 1944), Maillard in *The Wife of Monte Cristo* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1946), Dr. Oracle in *Somewhere in the Night* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946), Kosti in *The Razor’s Edge* (Edmund Goulding, 1946), Rudolph Vannier in *The Brasher Doubloon* (John Brahm, 1947), Franzen in *Berlin Express* (Jacques Tourneur, 1948), and Joseph Schwartz in *The Vicious Circle* (W. Lee Wilder, 1948). Kortner was set to play Quasimodo in William Dieterle’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), but Charles Laughton was finally chosen for the part. Some of the parts in the nine films between 1943 and 1948 mentioned above are quite small. Kortner was no longer the star he was in pre-Hitler Germany. Johanna Hofer was offered small parts in three movies: *Hitler’s Madman* (Douglas Sirk, 1943; Johanna Hofer played the role of Frau Magda Bauer: uncredited); *Above Suspicion* (Richard Thorpe, 1943; playing Frau Kleist) and Peter Godfrey’s adaptation of Vicki Baum’s novel *Hotel Berlin* (1945), playing Frau Plotke, again an uncredited role.

¹² Walter Kaul calls Fritz Kortner a ‘titan’ of German theatre, until his career was brought to a violent halt by the Hitler regime. See Walter Kaul, ‘Das Phänomen Fritz Kortner’, in Walter Kaul, ed, *Fritz Kortner, Schriftenreihe der Deutschen Kinemathek Berlin* (Berlin: DKB, 1970), 7. See also Schütze, *Kortner*, 87f. Fritz Kortner and Johanna Hofer enjoyed being part of the exile community in Los Angeles and had frequent contact with Bert Brecht and family, Lion and Marta Feuchtwanger, as well as Ludwig Marcuse, Bruno Frank, Heinrich Mann, Hanns Eisler, Alfred Döblin, Leopold Jessner, Peter Lorre, Ernst Deutsch, etc. In 1944, Kortner became a member of the ‘Council for a Democratic Germany’ with many other exiles such as Bertolt Brecht and Lion Feuchtwanger.

¹³ Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 537; also Schütze, *Kortner*, 88.

¹⁴ Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 458: ‘nach zwei nicht ganz realen Jahren’.

regime, Fritz Kortner finally wrote to Eric(h) Pommer on 26 July 1947. Eric Pommer, the famous former UFA producer of hugely successful films — from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, 1920) to *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930) — , was now film production control officer for the American Office of Military Government in Germany; another exile who had returned to his former home as an American citizen.

In his letter to Pommer, Kortner expresses his hope to discuss potential work and opportunities to aid in the cultural reconstruction of Germany, the latter being a wish that he knows they share: ‘wo uns beide der Wunsch erfuehlt, am kuenstlerischen Aufbau Deutschlands intensivst mitzuarbeiten.’¹⁵ Kortner plans to act at the Deutsches Theater, but would be only too happy to work under Eric Pommer as a director or scriptwriter, and he reminds the film production control officer of his relevant previous experience. He closes the letter with the true reason for his planned return — Kortner is passionately drawn to working again in German, ‘his language’. His return was clearly driven by his desire to aid in Germany’s cultural reconstruction, but also by the desire to work in the language he considered his home — ‘Als man mich damals forttrieb, verlor ich auch die Sprache’, he said in an interview with the Soviet licensed postwar newspaper *Neue Zeit* in 1947.¹⁶

Kortner’s letter arrived at the right time. Film production in the American sector had moved on from a focus on documentary films that were supposed to inform, create awareness, break the silence and clarify to the German people the context, that is the rubble, in which they now lived.¹⁷ Having identified film as a vital tool for reeducation purposes,¹⁸ the American military government in Germany licensed German scriptwriters, directors and actors from 1946 onwards in order to rebuild the German film industry. According to Eric Pommer, it was the US Military Government’s ‘belief & policy that Germans of sincere intent can do more to reorient Germans than can

¹⁵ Fritz Kortner’s letter to Eric Pommer is held at the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; Record Group 260 (Records of United States Occupation Headquarters, World War II), Records of the Information Control Division, Motion Picture Branch. Subsequent references to archival material found at the National Archives in Maryland are cited as NARA and RG (record group).

¹⁶ ‘“Berliner Humor noch nicht ausgebombt.” Interview mit Fritz Kortner.’ *Neue Zeit* 18th December 1947. Author named as ‘a.E.’. This interview is included in the Kortner file at the NARA, RG 260.

¹⁷ In documentary films, especially those addressing the atrocities and mass murder committed by Hitler’s henchmen, the Hitler regime was to be identified visually with the far-reaching and multifaceted destruction the German people now faced. This was in accordance with the Joint Chiefs of Staff directive JCS 1067: See especially section 4 (“Basic Objectives of Military Government in Germany”) of the Directive to Commander-in-Chief of United States Forces of Occupation Regarding the Military Government of Germany of April 1945 (JCS 1067) at <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga3-450426.pdf>.

¹⁸ While not explicitly dealing with film, Jeffrey Olick’s recent study on postwar Germany *In the House of the Hangman* provides a relevant context as it explores the difficulties faced by Allied officials and German thinkers in helping Germans to face the crimes of their recent past, to shape a German post-war identity that accounted for the crimes of the Hitler regime without once and for all damning the idea and character of Germany as a whole, since West Germany was needed as an ally. See Jeffrey Olick, *In the House of the Hangman* (Chicago: U of Chicago P., 2005).

foreigners.’¹⁹

Eric(h) Pommer shared Fritz Kortner’s enthusiasm for film and his conviction regarding film’s potential for mass impact, and the involvement of a former German star actor in a US American licensed picture seemed a perfect opportunity to merge the two successfully. In response to his letter to Eric Pommer, Fritz Kortner received an invitation by the OMGUS motion picture division to come to Germany for two weeks of ‘consultation’, and in December 1947 he took a plane to New York, then to Antwerp and Zurich. Here, the U.S. citizen received a Military Entry Permit ‘into the U.S. Zone of Germany and U.S. Sector of Berlin [...] for a period not to exceed 14 days’, which was cabled by the office of Eric T. Clarke, then the Chief of the Film, Theater and Music Control Branch of the Information Control Division.²⁰

Finally, Kortner was on his way to Berlin on board a U.S. military train.²¹ When checking in his luggage and naming the destination, he writes in his memoirs, ‘I literally doubled up with excitement.’²² Finally arriving ‘in what was left of Berlin’²³ he describes walking through the ‘Schuttstadt’, being recognized on several occasions as the well-known actor of a bygone era. But rather than welcoming the returning exile, most people were shaking their heads at him, wondering what a fool he must be, choosing to return from the perceived safety and comfort of exile in California to this hellhole of hunger, destruction and despair. In an interview with the *Neue Zeit* newspaper (18 December 1947) shortly after his arrival, Kortner explained the reason for his visit and emphasized that although he was now an American citizen, he still felt like a German actor, a German ‘Theatermann’.²⁴

¹⁹ Handwritten addition to an OMGUS film production control officer document (corrective comments relating to the New York Times article ‘German Film Growth decried by U.S. Aid’, 6 February 1947: ‘It has long been Mil[itary] Gov[ernment] belief & Policy that Germans of sincere intent can do more to reorient Germans than can foreigners.’ NARA, RG 260.

²⁰ The request for Kortner’s entry permit was made ‘by Mr. Eric T. Clarke, Chief, Film, Theater, & Music Control Branch, ICD, for conferences on film and theater matters, and Mr. Dubenski, Chief, FTM ID OMG-H, to whom Mr. Kortner will report upon arrival in Germany.’ See Military Entry Permit request 062.2 (FtM) by Lt. Col. Donald T. Jones for the director of the ICD (Information Control Division); (NARA, OMGUS file/RG260).

²¹ See Delbert Clark, ‘Resume of Berlin’s Kortner Market’, New York Times, 21 March 1948, n.p. (NARA, OMGUS file/RG260).

²² Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 458. ‘Ich flog und fuhr stur unaufhaltbar weiter. Als ich bei der Gepäckaufgabe das Ziel der Reise angeben musste, krümmte ich mich buchstäblich vor Erregung. Schließlich kam ich auf einem Vorort-Stadt-Bahnhof im Überbleibsel von Berlin an. Ich ging, mit Blei in den Füßen, durch die Schuttstadt, wurde vielfach erkannt und bestaunt. Daß einer freiwillig in diese Hungerhöhle gekommen war, erregte Kopfschütteln.’

²³ See footnote 33.

²⁴ a.E., “‘Berliner Humor noch nicht ausgebombt’ — Interview mit Fritz Kortner.’ *Neue Zeit*, 18 December 1947. ‘Eingeladen wurde ich schon vor Monaten vom Deutschen Theater, dann trat OMGUS an mich heran, hinzu kam mein eigenes Interesse, und ich flog los, denn obwohl ich ein Amerikaner bin, fühle ich mich doch immer noch als deutscher Schauspieler und deutscher Theatermann.’ —Kortner mentions that OMGUS had approached him, which is not entirely true, since Kortner took the first step with his letter to Eric Pommer.

His return to Berlin is described as highly emotional in his memoirs. Shocked by the rubble city, the hunger, Kortner was the 'other' once more. This time, however, he was not the Jew, now he was perceived as the well-fed exile, the one with the safety net, having come back for a peek at the losers. Although he was at the time slim for his standard, as he said himself, in the eyes of his German acquaintances he was 'ein herausgefressener Amerikaner, der keine Ahnung von den durchgestandenen Höllenqualen haben kann'.²⁵ This perception of exiles among Germans was common at the time, as for example Alfred Döblin, Carl Zuckmayer or even Thomas Mann experienced.²⁶

In conversations with 'inner emigrants', Fritz Kortner was shocked that the fate suffered by the Jews in Germany and Europe seemed to be irrelevant to most of his non-Jewish, former fellow countrymen. He accepted fully that his acquaintances in Berlin were suffering hunger and had experienced loss. Nevertheless Kortner was appalled that polite condolences were the only reaction Germans mustered when he mentioned the eleven members of his family that had been murdered in concentration camps. As the returning exile, Kortner rejected Germans' self-absorbed attitude and he fought for his right to an equal share in the tragedy. Open-minded and seeking reconciliation, Kortner tried to find common ground in the suffering endured. In his view, it no longer mattered if one was Aryan or Jew or which suffering was 'superior' to the other. 'Unser Überleben war etwas gemeinsam Erlebtes, wie auch das Erlittene', he wrote, and emphasized that they were now simply Christian and Jew, and even more importantly, they were both survivors of the same catastrophe. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kortner did not have much luck with his efforts to identify common ground. Most Germans he spoke to remained convinced that their suffering was unique and incomparable to any other.

During the first few weeks of his stay in Berlin, he felt a 'zähes Unbehagen'.²⁷ Nevertheless, in

²⁵ Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 459.

²⁶ Numerous exiles, such as Alfred Döblin or Thomas Mann were outraged at the notion of being the fortunate ones, who only observed the suffering of their former countrymen as if on a theatre stage in comfortable armchairs and from a safe distance. See, for example, the discussion ensuing from Walter von Molo's invitation to Thomas Mann to return to Germany, Thomas Mann's well-known reaction in his 'Offener Brief für Deutschland' and Frank Thiess's essay 'Innere Emigration' and his critical comment about exiles that had witnessed the terror in Germany from the 'Logen und Parterreplätzen des Auslandes'. See Thomas Mann, Frank Thiess, Walter von Molo, *Ein Streitgespräch über die äußere und die innere Emigration* (Dortmund: Druckschriften-Vertriebsdienst, 1946), 3; Reinhold Grimm, 'Im Dickicht der inneren Emigration', in Horst Denkler, Karl Prümm, eds. *Die deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), 406-26, regarding Thiess's precarious position as an inner emigrant (see 410). In film this experience of the returning exile is depicted quite well in Harald Braun's 1947 homecoming film narrative *Zwischen gestern und morgen*.

²⁷ Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend*, 459. 'Erwähnte ich in einem Verteidigungsversuch [...], daß allein in meiner Familie elf Verwandte vergast worden waren, so war die Reaktion darauf kondolenzartig höflich. Ich kämpfte um die Anerkennung meiner Gleichberechtigung am Unglück, am erlittenen Elend. Ich wollte ausdrücken: Wir, die wir da miteinander verlegen herumstottern und mit unserem jeweils erlittenen Elend gewissermaßen wetteifern, wären doch — ob Arier oder Jude — jetzt wieder Christ und Jude, Überlebende ein und derselben Katastrophe. Und unser Überleben wäre

December 1947 Kortner began or continued working on the outline for a film entitled *The Mission* and submitted the treatment to Eric Pommer at the end of January 1948. In this film synopsis, which is also held as part of the OMGUS documents at the National Archive and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland,²⁸ Kortner created another exemplary returnee, a figure that had been repeatedly in the spotlight of German ‘rubble films’ of the immediate postwar period. This time, however, it is neither a returning soldier, as for example in Gerhard Lamprecht’s *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*, 1946), Josef von Báky’s *Und über uns der Himmel* (*And the Sky Above Us*, 1947), or Wolfgang Liebeneiner’s *Liebe 47* (*Love 47*, 1948/49), nor a returning political exile, such as the artist Michael Rott in Harald Braun’s *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (*Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 1947). This time it is a Jewish exile, an intellectual and University professor coming back to educate German youth.

It is ‘the story of Paul Beck, a refugee from Germany, now a professor of philosophy at an American university’, who returns to Germany after 15 years in exile. The film synopsis begins with Professor Beck, the main character of the narrative — ‘in his forties, highly successful and respected in his profession, a man of magnetic personality, very popular with his students’²⁹ — who receives an ‘urgent appeal from a German university to come back. So strong is the appeal that he is torn between his two allegiances and cannot resolve the conflict in his mind and emotions.’ It is the choice between ‘the comfort and security of his new life in America, which he loves as his own land, and the struggle and uncertainty of establishing himself again in Germany from which he had been forced to flee fifteen years before.’ ‘Deeply affected by the nature of the appeal’ it is Beck’s American student Cynthia who convinces the Professor that it is his duty to go back and support the intellectual development of the young generation in devastated, post-war Germany. Not only does she provide her mentor with the necessary clarity, but in order to support his return, ‘she and some of his graduate students decide to accompany him and enroll in the German university’, emphasizing the American commitment to the international effort required in rebuilding Germany and Europe. The film was planned as a two-language, transnational endeavour, itself situated between languages or indeed becoming part of both English and German language and culture. As Kortner noted, the bilingual and transcultural elements of the film synopsis were to provide opportunities for ‘comedy [sic] relief as well as bring out some of the differences in feelings and outlook of typical Americans and typical Germans.’

etwas gemeinsam Erlebtes, wie auch das Erlittene. Ich schien mit dieser Argumentation nicht viel Glück zu haben. Die meisten verharrten in dem Gefühl, kein Leid reiche an ihres heran.’

²⁸ The typescript of Kortner’s *The Mission* is dated by the OMGUS film section (Film, Theater, Music [FTM] branch) 26th January 1948 and held at the NARA, RG260.

²⁹ Page 1 of ‘*The Mission*’, film synopsis by Fritz Kortner, NARA file (RG 260), dated 26 January 1948.

The synopsis outlines the many obstacles the Professor faces when back in Germany, from his struggles with bureaucracy to, especially, the latent anti-Semitism among some students and staff. Once more, as is typical for films of this era, the rubble becomes symbolic of the material as well as the emotional, cultural and spiritual devastation caused and experienced. For the returning exile, the sight of this all-encompassing desolation causes the Professor to question once again his decision to come back to Germany, a feeling shared by Kortner himself as he had wandered through the 'Schuttstadt' Berlin for the first time after his return: 'As Professor Beck arrives in Germany and sees the terrific physical destruction, as he begins to realize the tremendous obstacles in reconstruction, particularly for an educator, he wonders if he has made a mistake in leaving behind his comfortable home and position in America, to come back to a country that had disowned him and where he still, 15 years later, meets anti-Semitism.' But, as before, Cynthia and her fellow American graduate students persuade their mentor of the significance of this task and 'help him to maintain his belief that he has done the right thing.'

And although his return is difficult on a personal level — he manages to meet with his ex-wife, but fails to find out what happened to their son — his success as an educator is almost immediate. His lectures are 'very popular with students', and especially one student, Walter Stein, seems 'greatly fascinated and deeply aroused by the message of the professor's philosophy'. Walter Stein, however, turns out to be a member of a group of underground Nazis, who plan to 'nip in the bud any attempts of returning Jewish exiles to pollute the German youth again'. Walter even volunteers to do away with Professor Beck, whom the group considers a 'particularly dangerous enemy because of his growing influence over his disciples'. The aim of the Nazi group is not merely to eliminate one influential teacher, but to stop once and for all Jewish intellectuals from returning to Germany.

Not surprisingly, Walter is neither immune to the teaching of the Professor nor to the 'keen mind and beauty' of Cynthia. His political motives become intermingled with his jealousy of the Professor, whom Cynthia adores, and his desire to 'free this beautiful girl from the repugnant Jew.' While in this *Beauty and the Beast* tale the monster does not turn into a good-looking prince, the beauty of Professor Beck's teaching reveals itself in Cynthia, 'as a living example'. Slowly, Walter loses his determination to carry out his mission — until his mother reveals to him his true identity: 'She and Professor Beck with whom she had been married agreed many years ago when Hitler came into power that it was best for Beck to leave Germany and for her, his non-Jewish wife, to stay and for the sake of their child to deny Beck as the father.' Walter, the child in question, is utterly horrified at this news. 'The thought that he himself should be the son of a Jew is about to

make him vomit with disgust.’ Kortner’s narrative twist shakes the Nazi to his very core and he emphasizes the violence of his reaction: ‘His Nazi mind and soul are turning in convulsions as under torture and, in utter madness, he alternately threatens to kill his mother, ‘this Jewish whore’, and himself, ‘this Jewish bastard, and finally rushes out determined to rid himself of the Jew in him by killing his father, before anyone else can find out the truth.’

But his father, the ‘repugnant Jew’ with his intelligence, honesty and winning personality once again lets Walter’s determination crumble. In the end, Cynthia and Beck’s ex-wife save the day, rescuing Walter ‘from the madness of his Nazi comrades who are just about to eliminate the traitor’ for failing to murder the Jewish Professor. We are left with the hope that Walter, the former Nazi and avid anti-Semite, is indeed a changed man and now reconciled with his Jewish father. He is in love with the American student Cynthia who has come to his rescue, and the synopsis indicates a happy end with the love between the successfully re-orientated German and the intelligent and courageous American student pointing to a happier future. The Jewish professor has returned and continues to educate German youth, although Kortner sheds no light on the suggested content of Beck’s philosophy lectures.

The narrative thread of this synopsis focuses on the ambivalent return journey of the Jewish exile and is driven by a strong criticism of the significant remnants of anti-Semitism among Germans, even among the intellectual elite. The narrative reaches its climax when the Nazi is suddenly revealed to be a Jew, and this inversion or, rather, his unconditional, violently irrational self-loathing threatens to eradicate him and his parents. Here the existential dimension of reorientation and reeducation is revealed. Walter’s darkest moment exposes the destructive effect of anti-Semitism, which can only lead to a continuation of the physical and moral devastation that still enfolds both the returning exile and his students in postwar Germany. Surrounded by rubble, the possibility of survival and growing awareness through education go hand in hand, the planned film is supposed to tell postwar audiences. Kortner’s treatment displays a thoroughly positive assessment of education and a strong belief in the power of independent thought. It is by returning and educating that the Jewish exile contributes to an eradication of anti-Semitism in post-Nazi Germany, challenging categories of group identity defined by nationality, religion or even shared traditions and experiences. Kortner’s *The Mission* foregrounds the exile’s nostalgic longing for home and the difficult but eventually successful fight for understanding, denazification, (re)integration and the possibility of building a community and a future together. The synopsis indicates that the film is to conclude, in Hollywood fashion, with a happy end.

For Kortner, the planned film was not only an opportunity to express his gratitude to the country that had been his home for fifteen years, and to support the re-education efforts of U.S. military government in Germany, which has enabled him to return to the place he had longed for all these years, but also to contribute to the cultural understanding between Germans and Americans, as well as between all surviving Christians and Jews. Education, or rather re-education, in Kortner's *The Mission* is not only paramount to the happy conclusion of the narrative, but clearly and centrally important to the successful integration of the exile in Germany, as well as Germany's future reintegration in the international community.

The topic of the Professor's philosophy lectures that eventually formed part of the film *Der Ruf*, under the direction of Josef von Báky in 1949, was in my view developed in cooperation with Stuart Schulberg of the Documentary Film Unit (OMGUS). While Kortner was working on the plot for *The Mission*, Schulberg was planning a documentary film about education in Germany that involved Fritz Kortner. In the introductory note³⁰ that accompanied his treatment on *German Education*, which Stuart Schulberg submitted on 4 February 1948, he states that 'the Documentary Film Unit has long been seeking some approach to a film about education in Germany today. An idea has now been suggested³¹ which, I believe, could be developed into a strong and valuable reorientation film particularly suitable to our purposes'. He emphasizes that 'the script and direction of such a picture demand a highly intelligent person familiar with German history and German psychology [...]', and he recommends Fritz Kortner as the ideal person to fill that role — based on his 'experiences in writing, direction and production' and his 'long and brilliant record on the stage and in film.' Aware of the re-education potential and reorientation aims of postwar films, he is convinced that 'Mr. Kortner's association with us in this venture would result in a motion picture of the highest quality and the greatest persuasion.'

According to the synopsis, Schulberg's planned documentary film opens

in a lecture hall of a German University about 1932-33. An elderly professor is lecturing. The theme of his speech is: '...Nothing can happen to Germany as long as its people are not afraid to think and honestly search for the truth. True thought and real truth must be the aim of every man. It may be easy to find a philosophy custom-built from party programs or a political outlook snatched from the newspaper headlines. To think is harder; to think — and to stand by the ideas which thinking provokes — requires courage. It is this courage to think for yourself that must now be instilled in Germany.....' As he speaks, we hear the sound of boots in the streets outside the lecture hall. As the boots grow louder, they drown out the voice of the professor which finally drops to a whisper and dies. At the same time the shot fades out leaving the screen black as the sound of boots reaches a terrible crescendo.³²

³⁰ Stuart Schulberg, German Education treatment and introductory note; see OMGUS documents at NARA, RG 260.

³¹ By Fritz Kortner, I would assume.

³² Stuart Schulberg's synopsis of his planned documentary German Education (typescript, 2 pages, NARA, RG 260).

After some indication of the ‘coming and passing of war’ the film ‘fade[s] in to the ruins of a German city in 1945. As the camera pans over the ruins, a whisper is heard: “...as I was saying, look for the truth, no matter what party you belong to, no matter what political faith you may embrace. The chance to think, the freedom of free ideas is ours again....”’

As the old professor’s voice grows louder, Schulberg’s synopsis suggests, we see students from all over Europe, living and working as a community and rebuilding a free university in which the courage to think will be fostered once again. The film was supposed to end with the voice-over: ‘Remember, what happened to Germany did not have to happen. It will not happen again if all of you substitute truth for political sham, free ideas for party clichés, honesty for intellectual subservience. It will not happen again if you prize — more highly than any other courage — the courage to think.’ This proposed documentary film, familiar in its lecturing voice-over and somewhat moralizing tone,³³ was never made, but the well-meaning intervention by Stuart Schulberg led to changes regarding the impetus of Kortner’s original film synopsis and is, in my view, responsible for the shift from a return narrative and post-traumatic reconciliation to a focus on the University as a community and site of learning.

It is the freedom of thought and the courage to think that form the core of the Professor’s lectures in the film *Der Ruf*, which was based on Kortner’s treatment *The Mission*. While Kortner is listed as the writer of the film, there is no mention of Stuart Schulberg, despite the fact that he evidently provided important impulses regarding the content of the Professor’s lectures, which Kortner’s synopsis omitted. Fritz Kortner’s *The Mission* indicates that the planned film was originally meant as an integrationist narrative. However, this cannot be said for *Der Ruf* (literally meaning call, reputation and offer of a professorship; but the film was given the telling U.S. title *The Last Illusion*). The film *Der Ruf* represents a Greek tragedy in comparison to the treatment on which it is based, including the denouement in which the hero inevitably dies. The film nevertheless allows for some hope for a better world or — as Ludwig Marcuse called it in his *Philosophie des Glücks* (1949) — eine ‘Welt der kleinen Verbesserungen’.³⁴

On the one hand this change in the narrative trajectory is due to the time Kortner spent in Germany, his increasing disillusionment and frustration with both the Germans and the American authorities. On the other hand, both Stuart Schulberg’s theoretical ideas regarding (re)education and Josef von

³³ Cf. other OMGUS documentaries such as *It’s Up to You* (Wolfgang Kiepenheuer, 1948).

³⁴ Ludwig Marcuse, *Philosophie des Glücks* (Zurich: Oprecht, 1949), 34.

Báky's rather pragmatic estimation of denazification in the American sector contributed to the final film.

Josef von Báky,³⁵ director of the successful postwar film *Und über uns der Himmel* (1947) starring Hans Albers, was licensed to direct an adaptation of Fritz Kortner's original synopsis *The Mission*. Kortner plays the male lead, Professor Mauthner, the Beck of his treatment, and the film opens in sunny California. The journey back to Germany is a difficult and nostalgic one, but it is the Professor's longing for 'home' that is greater than his desire for security and peace. In contrast to the original plot, the Professor in the film is called back to his former place of employment, which implicitly sheds light on the opportunism among members of the faculty, who endorsed racial policies in 1933 and swiftly turned their backs on National Socialism when the war had ended.

Back in Germany, the Professor's inaugural lecture is based on Plato and the question: can virtue be taught? In his lecture, he reminds students: 'You, as heirs of these times, may not observe the dawn of this new epoch passively. Today's challenges will not be overcome on the battlefield, but we shall solve today's problems by the power of our mind, by thinking!' This is clearly reminiscent of the message of Stuart Schulberg's planned documentary film about German education, but also debates shaped at the time by German intellectuals such as Karl Jaspers and leading figures of the early postwar public sphere such as Ernst Wiechert.³⁶ The main difference between the trajectory of Kortner's synopsis and Báky's film is the fact that the returning exile falters under the 'latent nazism in these intellectual realms, [...] continuing "racial" animosities, professional jealousies and a [general] spirit of revenge',³⁷ to quote from a film review in the *New York Times* after the first screening in the USA in 1951. In addition, the Professor here is longing to return to Germany, just like Fritz Kortner did, and does not require the urging of his graduate student. Cynthia, or rather Mary (played by Rosemary Murphy), as she is called in *Der Ruf*, and two other students (Elliot and Spencer, played by William Sinnigen and Michael Murphy) do, however, join the Professor on his journey to Germany and intend to continue their studies at his new University. The ambivalence of

³⁵ Josef von Báky had moved to Berlin in 1927 and soon began working as assistant to director Gea von Bolvary. His own directorial debut began in 1936 with music- and revue-films (*Intermezzo*, 1936; *Menschen vom Variété*, 1939). In 1942 Báky was appointed to oversee the massive UFA production of *Münchhausen* with Hans Albers in the lead, which was to celebrate UFAs 25th anniversary. Báky employed Erich Kästner to write the script, under the pseudonym Berthold Bürger, the Nazis having burnt his books and issued a gagging order. Báky's dark and dramatic *Via Mala* (1945) did not pass the censors and was kept from German screens until after the end of the Nazi era. His efforts for inner emigrants such as Kästner enabled him to receive a license from the American military government in Germany to create Objectiv-Film in 1947 and to direct his first post-war feature *Und über uns der Himmel*, starring again Hans Albers.

³⁶ See for example Ernst Wiechert's *Rede an die deutsche Jugend*, 1945 (Munich: Zinnen, 1945); also Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany: Youth, Reeducation, and Reconstruction after the Second World War* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2007). 131-47.

³⁷ Boseley Crowther, 'The Screen in Review: "The Last Illusion", a Story of Germans' Confusion, Shown at the Little CineMet', *NYT*, 8 March 1951.

a return to Germany is acknowledged but not, as in the treatment, emphasized by the Professor. It is rather the majority of Mauthner's friends — also Jewish exiles in California — who consider such a journey 'madness'. Most of them actively discourage him from a return, reminding him of his wonderful position at the University in Los Angeles, his professional success in exile and the privilege to educate young Americans on the one hand, and of the Holocaust and their murdered friends and family in Germany on the other. But at the same time, they all share not only the German language but also a deep love for German culture.

This rootedness in German culture and language is emphasized repeatedly in the film and structurally frames the return journey of the protagonist. German literature and culture accompany the exile on his travels, and conversations about Goethe lighten everyday life far from home. At a party at Professor Mauthner's residence in Los Angeles, where the film opens, Goethe is a most frequent topic of conversation between some of the exiles present. Heinrich Heine accompanies the returning exile on his way across the ocean, when Professor Mauthner quotes from Heine's 'Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen', thus revealing his destination — to the horror of a fellow Jewish traveller:

Im traurigen Monat November war's,
die Tage wurden trüber,
Der Wind riss von den Bäumen das Laub,
Da reist' ich nach Deutschland hinüber.³⁸

Significantly, references to German culture are only made by exiles in the film, thereby indicating that German culture could be restored to post-Nazi Germany by returning Jewish exiles. The film ends with the *Marienbader Elegie* — Goethe's famous poem about love at old age and the pain of rejection, but also about the importance to love, even if rejected by one's Muse — because once love dies, life is no longer worth living. This longing for one's love cannot be resisted and there is no comfort but endless tears: 'Mich treibt umher ein unbezwinglich Sehnen, / Da bleibt kein Rat als grenzenlose Tränen.'³⁹ In Báky's film, love here refers to both the love for a young woman (Mary) and the Professor's home (Germany), but especially the latter infatuation leads to utter disappointment and, finally, his death.

³⁸ Heinrich Heine, Germany. A Winter's Tale, translated by Joseph Massaad; <http://www.heinrich-heine.net/winter/winterengl.htm>.

³⁹ Wolfgang v. Goethe, 'Marienbader Elegie', Goethe's Werke, Vollständige Ausgabe letzter Hand, vol. 3 (Stuttgart and Tübingen: Cotta, 1828), 28.

The film *Der Ruf* displays a critical and bleak, but accurate⁴⁰ assessment of the reorientation and re-education achievements in postwar Germany. The Jewish professor dies of heart failure and the film ends with his funeral. The only glimpse of hope lies in the fact that Walter walks behind the coffin together with his mother and Mary, and, as the camera focuses on some of the spectators lining the street, one other member of the Nazi group removes himself from his Nazi friends and joins the funeral procession.

While the film was meant to provoke and encourage discussion, it was a box office disaster and a serious setback for Objective Film and Josef von Báky, despite the fact that it was marketed as a ‘confessional film’ of a homesick returning star — Fritz Kortner. In the press, licenced by the military governments in Germany, the film received mostly positive reviews. Audiences appeared to have been moved by the picture and someone shouted ‘Bleib in Berlin, Kortner!’ at the Berlin premiere in April 1949, which was quoted in a number of reviews published in newspapers such as *Tagesspiegel* or *Berliner Mittags Echo*. Kortner’s acting received most of the praise, as did the fact that his Professor Mauthner takes a differentiated view of German guilt. Mauthner’s rejection of a collective guilt assignment reflected in statements such ‘Es gibt weder ein Volk von Verbrechern, noch ein Volk von Helden!’ and ‘Was weiß ich, wie ich mich verhalten hätte, wenn ich hätte drüben bleiben können?’ was quoted frequently and praised unanimously by German critics at the time. But the film was also criticized as ‘Kitsch’ in newspapers such as *Der Abend*, (29.4.49); as fairy tale and cliché in *Neues Deutschland* (22.4.49), and ‘banal’ in *Die Neue Zeitung* (21.4.49). Kortner himself felt his ‘Sprachheimatfilm’ was misunderstood. The film, which meant to contribute to mutual understanding and foster the relationships between Americans and Germans, as well as Christian and Jews, was in his view unjustly discredited by the German public. For Kortner and Johanna Hofer, the rejection of the film impacted negatively on the Kortner family’s homecoming. In his posthumously published memoirs *Letzten Endes*, Kortner writes: ‘Mit dem so erreichten schlechten Ruf wurde der unsichere Grund für mein Zuhause im Neu-Deutschland gelegt.’⁴¹

It was Munich that eventually became his and Johanna Hofer’s new and permanent home. The Kortners travelled to Munich already in June 1948, when the filming of *Der Ruf* had to be transferred to the Bavarian capital due to the Berlin blockade and the lack of electricity in Berlin. Kortner’s play *Donauwellen*, a study of Nazi tendencies and opportunism in Vienna at the end of the war, premiered in Munich’s Kammerspiele in 1949 under the direction of the author. Despite

⁴⁰ Frank Stern, for example, describes how German universities hardly ever called back exiled Jewish colleagues and operated as if nothing had happened. See Frank Stern, *Am Anfang war Auschwitz: Antisemitismus und Philosemitismus im deutschen Nachkrieg* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1991).

⁴¹ Fritz Kortner, *Letzten Endes*, 27-9.

numerous engagements in major cities such as Berlin, Frankfurt and Vienna, it was Munich and especially the Kammerspiele which became Kortner's creative home, and Kortner one of the most important theatre directors of West Germany. In 1967, two years before he was elected Chancellor of West Germany, former exile Willy Brandt wrote to Fritz Kortner: 'Ich sehe Sie [...] als Künstler, der sich niemals von der Politik dispensierte; für Sie bedeutet tragische Schuld niemals Kapitulation vor einem nebulösen Schicksal; als politischer Mensch wussten Sie um die von den Menschen geschaffenen Umstände, die allzuoft als Schicksal betrachtet werden, um die eigene politische Verantwortung zu meiden. [...] Heute zählen Sie zu unseren meisterhaften Regisseuren [...]; ein Visionär, der es mit der Wirklichkeit sehr genau nimmt.'⁴² But Kortner struggled with all the praise and prizes that were so generously offered to him towards the end of his life. In an interview published in the Berlin newspaper *Der Abend* in 1968 Kortner explained his difficulties as follows: 'Meine Schwierigkeit liegt darin, daß ich, ein Gezeichneter, mich so schwer in der Situation des Ausgezeichneten zurechtfinden kann.'⁴³

Fritz Kortner died on the 22 July 1970 as one of the best-known German actors and directors. He is buried on the Waldfriedhof in Munich.

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⁴² Willy Brandt's letter is quoted in Schütze, Fritz Kortner, 151-2.

⁴³ *Der Abend*, Berlin, 9th February 1968. Quoted in Schütze, Fritz Kortner, 125.