

Kurt Singer's Shattered Hopes

BY ADAM J. SACKS

The hopes referred to in the above title were twofold: on the one hand those of maintaining German-Jewish culture in the Third Reich, on the other those of transplanting German-Jewish culture to the United States. The medium of German-Jewish culture Singer's hopes were pinned on was the *Jüdische Kulturbund* (Jewish League of Culture). A neurologist and musician, Kurt Singer was the *Intendant* (general director) of the *Kulturbund*. Two letters by Singer, written in Amsterdam in the aftermath of the German pogrom night of 9–10 September 1938 (“*Kristallnacht*”) and appended below in translation, illuminate his attitude. One was sent to his *Kulturbund* colleagues, the other to Hans Hinkel, *Reichskulturwalter* (Reich Administrator of Culture), the Nazi official who oversaw the *Kulturbund* and with whom Singer had a particularly close working relationship. It is worth considering Singer's aims in light of these letters.

George L. Mosse's *German Jews Beyond Judaism*,¹ and Saul Friedländer's more recent *Nazi Germany and the Jews*² have both offered an appraisal of the *Kulturbund*. The arguments in these books make a useful starting point. For Mosse, the *Kulturbund* represented an oasis of Weimar humanism in the desert of Nazi culture. Although, he indicates, the German-Jewish dialogue no longer existed, the Jews nevertheless carried forward and became the sole custodians of Humboldt's ideal of *Bildung*. From this perspective, the German Jews embodied the “true spirit of Germany”,³ raising the banner of *Bildung* high in Nazi Germany. In contrast, Friedländer sees the *Kulturbund* as a Jewish undertaking that suited Nazi plans for isolating the Jews, while serving as a cover for what might have proved embarrassing in executing the policy of exclusion. Friedländer thus sees the *Kulturbund* as foreshadowing the Nazi ghetto, where the pretence of autonomy camouflaged total subjugation. He asserts that the “ongoing misunderstanding of the true meaning of the situation was compounded by the ambition of some of its founders”.⁴ The last sentence of Friedländer's book refers to the “doomed” audience members at a *Kulturbund* performance.

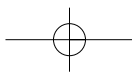
The idealising tendencies in Mosse's reading may be summarised in his characterisation of the *Kulturbund* as the grand last act of Weimar culture, which he defines as largely determined by the German-Jewish dialogue. Yet portraying the participants of the *Kulturbund* as essential vehicles for enlightenment and tolerance does not take into account the complex use the Nazis themselves made of the proponents of

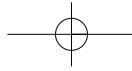
¹George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, Cincinnati 1985

²Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol 1: *The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939*, New York 1997

³Mosse, p.??

⁴Friedländer, p.??





enlightenment. In contrast, Friedländer's hard judgment exchanges a post-Weimar for a pre-Holocaust context. It defines the *Kulturbund* as a *Judenrat avant la lettre*.

This judgment of the *Kulturbund* treats Kurt Singer as something like a "fall guy". In general, one is tempted to explain the sporadic and belated scholarly coverage of this cultural organisation as an implicit verdict of condemnation by neglect. The attempt to discredit the *Kulturbund* begins with Singer and singles Singer out as uniquely responsible. An example is Mark Goldsmith's journalistic work, *The Inextinguishable Symphony*.⁵ In contrast to the author's depiction of the musicians' valiant efforts, Singer is portrayed as ego-obsessed, at times tyrannical, and even as obstructing the efforts of the organisation's members to escape from Nazi Germany.

In actuality, more than any other person involved in the organisation – and his colleagues included Julius Bab and Joachim Prinz – Singer elevated the *Kulturbund* beyond an emergency rescue effort to a cultural movement, one that at times articulated a critique of the culture of emancipation. In this manner, the *Kulturbund* carried forward the German Jewish secular tradition of engaging in aesthetic and cultural pursuits in the face of political disappointments and setbacks. For Singer, the nightmare of the deteriorating conditions of German Jewry had to be turned into an opportunity. His efforts eloquently demonstrated the persistence and will to live of a culture that would not so easily renounce what had been assiduously acquired over decades of emancipation. It is important to recall that at this time Auschwitz was not only unforeseeable but inconceivable.

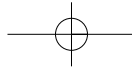
KURT SINGER'S VISION FOR THE *KULTURBUND*

An address by Kurt Singer entitled "*Jüdischer Kulturbund: Rückschau und Vorschau*", delivered at a *Kulturbund* symposium in September 1936, demonstrates the organisation's ambitions, programmatic content, and goals.⁶ In the course of this address, Singer revealed his basic reaction to the isolation of the German Jews – a sense that this predicament needed to be made productive through a fundamental change of attitude. A synthesis was possible, he maintained, between Jewish folk cultures and Western culture. He would attempt to bridge the differences and even harmonise the competing Zionist and non-Zionist visions of Jewish life. He regarded this as a necessity for the continuation of German-Jewish cultural activity in Hitler's Germany.

"Bread and circuses" was Singer's term for the situation the *Kulturbund* initially faced – and even indulged in to some extent. His example was Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, the organisation's first production. Singer viewed the play less as a continuation of Weimar humanism than as a backward glance, lacking constructive content and not reflecting any new Jewish ideas. His message implicitly conveyed a critique of the culture of German Jewish emancipation as unsuitable for confronting contemporary challenges. Singer pointed to the *Habimah*, the Hebrew-language theatre of the *Yishuv*, as an alternative to the theatre of Wilhelminian Germany – an alter-

⁵Mark Goldsmith, *The Inextinguishable Symphony*, New York 2000. See chapter 9, 'Kurt Singer'.

⁶Akademie der Künste, Fritz Wisten Archives (henceforth Adk, FWA, 74/86/5032). The translation and publication of this address is part of a larger research project by the author.



Kurt Singer speaking at the conference of the *Reichsverband der Jüdischen Kulturbünde* in Berlin on 5 September 1936. From left to right: Werner Levie, Benno Cohn, Kurt Singer and Joachim Prinz.

By courtesy of the Jewish Museum, Berlin. Photograph Herbert Sonnenfeld

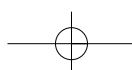
native serving as an ideal closely related to his ideas for the future of the *Kulturbund*. He opened the symposium at which his address was delivered by announcing the dispatch of telegrams of solidarity to both the *Habimah* and the Jewish Palestine-Orchestra of Bronislaw Huberman.

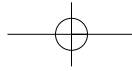
Co-operation, assistance, and a process of mutual learning, not conflict, envy, and obstruction, were to become the norm in relations between the *Kulturbund* and other Jewish cultural institutions.⁷ At the same time, in distinction to an institution such as the *Habimah*, the *Kulturbund* was a vehicle for conserving and preserving two cultures threatened with obliteration: the wider European German-language culture and the specific culture emerging from the German-Jewish symbiosis. Both these traditions suffered grievous damage in Germany during the Nazi period. Singer's vision of progress for future decades included creating an archive of Yemenite and Palestinian (Jewish) folk music, as well as an institute for translating Hebrew and Yiddish texts into German.⁸ Yet at one point in his address, he does allude to the possibly inevitable, gradual embrace of another, unspecified language as the official working language of the *Kulturbund*.⁹

⁷Kurt Singer. 'Die Arbeit der Jüdischen Kulturbünde: Rückschau und Vorschau'. Adk, FWA, 74/86/5032, 26.

⁸*ibid.*, 35.

⁹*ibid.*





TRANSPLANTING GERMAN-JEWISH CULTURE

A few years before Singer tried to transfer the *Kulturbund* to the United States, he made Palestine the goal of a similar effort. Alice Levie has provided testimony showing that her husband, Werner Levie – a Dutch citizen, a Zionist, and General Secretary of the *Kulturbund* – spoke with Hinkel about the possibility of moving the organisation’s technical and administrative personnel and artists to Palestine.¹⁰ She offers a positive portrait of the relationship between her husband and Hinkel. In 1936, on one of several visits by members of the *Kulturbund* to Palestine, Levi spoke with Huberman and Arturo Toscanini about his plan to organise concerts on the model of those the *Kulturbund* sponsored.¹¹ A follow-up visit took place in early 1938.¹² Apparently, Toscanini agreed to direct the first, German opera as a protest against the Nazis. There were also negotiations with the *Habimah* theatre regarding its possible expansion through addition of the *Kulturbund*’s opera company. Alice Levie recalls that she had already rented an apartment for her family for the move.¹³ Upon returning to Berlin in the summer of 1938, the Levies were told by the German authorities that neither funds nor instruments could be taken out of the country.

THE CONTEXT OF SINGER’S AMSTERDAM LETTERS

In October 1938 Kurt Singer travelled to the United States with money from Jewish organisations to help get out more people from Germany, one of his main intentions being to raise funds for the emigration of the *Kulturbund*.¹⁴ A recently discovered message from Singer to *Kulturbund* members, written before his departure on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the group’s first theatrical production, reads like a coded farewell message.¹⁵ The message makes clear that Singer planned the American visit as the first step in a process of emigration by himself and the *Kulturbund*, with the help of American Jews. During his trip, he saw his sister in Boston, gave lectures at Harvard, and discussed the possibility of a teaching appointment with both Yale University and the New School.¹⁶ Against the wishes of his family, Singer insisted on returning to Berlin as he did not want to abandon his colleagues in the *Kulturbund*. Ernst Lenart, a *Kulturbund* actor who had already emigrated, recalls visiting Singer in his New York hotel room the day after “*Kristallnacht*”. His bags were already packed for his return from New York when he learned of

¹⁰See testimony of Alice Levie, ‘Wer ist die blonde Frau? Das ist doch keine Jüdin!’ in Eike Geisel and Henryk Broder (eds.), *Premiere und Pogrom: Der Jüdische Kulturbund 1933–1941, Texte und Bilder*, Berlin 1992, pp. 153–160.

¹¹*ibid.*, p. 156.

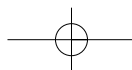
¹²*ibid.*, p. 157.

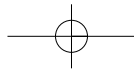
¹³*ibid.*

¹⁴Eike Geisel, ‘Ein Reich, ein Ghetto: Zwei Karrieren’, in *idem* and Broder (eds.), pp. 326–327.

¹⁵Akademie der Künste (ed.), *Drei Leben für Das Theater: Fritz Wisten*, Berlin 1990, p. 83.

¹⁶See testimony of Margot Wachsmann-Singer, ‘Mein Vater hat den Kulturbund so ungeheuer geliebt’, in Geisel and Broder (eds.), p. 196.





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Germany's wide-scale pogrom. But the news appears to have strengthened his resolve to return.

The *Kulturbund's* theatre, located on Berlin's Kommandantenstrasse, was one of the city's few Jewish institutions left unharmed that night.¹⁷ In fact, an armed unit of SS troops guarded the building, with orders to defend it against an SA group from Magdeburg sent to destroy it. After the pogrom, those *Kulturbund* members remaining in Berlin received special orders and protection letters from the propaganda ministry to return to work, along with a promise that colleagues in concentration camps would be released.¹⁸ Hinckel had insisted that the performance of an English comedy, *Rain and Wind* by Merton Hodgson, premièred on 2 November 1938, be resumed; and in one of a number of acts of resistance, the *Kulturbund* used a "deceptive manoeuvre", "in the presence of Hinkel and foreign journalists", to arrange a memorial service for the victims of the November pogrom.¹⁹ The comedy was therefore only performed again ten days later.²⁰ The *Kulturbund* would not be closed down by the Gestapo until September 1941. Hence whereas, in line with the hopes he pinned on America, Singer viewed the "*Kristallnacht*" as necessarily marking the end of the *Kulturbund's* German existence, in actuality the pogrom precipitated not so much the end as a direct abuse of the organisation and those connected with it.

Singer arrived in Amsterdam practically without baggage at the end of 1938. He actually had had no previous intention of going to Holland.²¹ At first, he believed it would be possible to return to Germany. Soon after his arrival, obeying a Gestapo order, some members of the *Kulturbund* travelled to Amsterdam to persuade him to return to Berlin, but news that he would be arrested had been relayed to him by friends and Singer's brother had already been taken into custody. The *Intendant* thus now became a refugee.²²

Singer's commitment to his supporters and co-workers before going into exile evoked Leo Baeck's determination to remain in Germany as long as there were people who needed his help. After some years in Holland – as will be detailed, beyond all hope of escaping to America – Singer may well have clung in solace to his former

¹⁷Stephan Stompor, *Jüdisches Musik- und Theaterleben unter dem NS-Staat*. Schriftenreihe des Europäischen Zentrums für Jüdische Musik, vol. 4, edited by Andor Izsák with the assistance of Susanne Borchers (Europäisches Zentrum für Jüdische Musik 2001), Hannover 2001., p. 142.

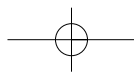
¹⁸*ibid.*

¹⁹In this memorial service, Leo Baeck delivered "an address in memory of the martyrs of Kristallnacht, of the 60,000 prisoners, and of the burning of the synagogues." For this and additional details, all of which have apparently been overlooked, see Kurt Baumann Memoirs, Leo Baeck Institute Archives, New York, pp. 81–83. This memorial service has been often overlooked in the literature on the subject.

²⁰Eike Geisel. 'The Cultural League is Formed', in Sander Gilman and Jack Zipes (eds.), *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096–1996*, New Haven 1997, p. 510. Cf. Kurt Baumann Memoirs, pp. 181–183.

²¹Christine Fischer-Defoy (ed.), *Paula Salomon-Lindberg* [testimony], Berlin 1992, p. 119.

²²Levie and Fischer-Defoy (ed.). There are conflicting versions of this incident. Alice Levie recounts that she herself had travelled to Amsterdam at the behest of her husband and the authorities. Paula Salomon-Lindberg contends rather that Singer had received a telegram from an underground organisation warning him not to return. According to Baumann, p. 93, Singer had actually received a hand-written letter directly from Hinkel urging him to return to Berlin; it contained a guarantee he would not be harmed and would be allowed to prepare for emigration. Singer's letter to Hinkel is a reply to that letter, which remains unaccounted for.



German career of “service” with the *Kulturbund*. Eventually, he would give up, agreeing to board one of the last transports to Theresienstadt on 20 April 1943, with special treatment as a *Prominenter* – one of the *Juden mit Verdiensten* (“Jews who have earned merit”). He was accompanied by Gertrud Ochs, the daughter of Siegfried Ochs who had been Singer’s mentor and the founder of the Berlin Philharmonic Choir. Singer wrote a personal history of Siegfried Ochs and the choir which was published in 1933. He had asked Albert Salomon, former chief surgeon at the Jewish Hospital in Berlin, and his wife Paula Solomon-Lindberg, an acclaimed contralto and one of the *Kulturbund*’s stars, to accompany him. On her knees, Paula Salomon had fruitlessly begged Singer not to leave.²³

In Theresienstadt, Singer gained a reputation as a sort of cultural apostle, offering spiritual nourishment to inmates who were starving for it.²⁴ He gave lectures on music with titles such as “Development of the Sonata” and “Music as Expression of its Creator”, eventually with piano accompaniment. Helped by friends from Berlin such as Kurt Geron, Singer became involved in the “free time” program of cultural activities in what was claimed to be a “model camp.” He issued reviews – distributed on individual sheets of paper – of vocal music performed in Theresienstadt: Verdi’s *Falstaff* and *Requiem* and the children’s operetta *Brundibar*. The reservations he expressed regarding the selection of the requiem attest to the survival of his sense of the *Kulturbund*’s function regarding the promotion of Jewish art. At the same time, they show that Singer was under no illusions about the Jewish situation in Europe under Nazi occupation. He wrote as follows:

Certainly an artistic experience [referring to the performance of Verdi’s *Requiem*], yet unfortunately distant from all that which should concern Jews as long as they live in Theresienstadt. The library of Theresienstadt contains the oratorios “King Salomon”, Esther”, and “Joshua”, all three equally great in conception and powerful in musical design. ... That would truly be a great artistic event and a Jewish event. Did none of those responsible feel this? Did the suggestion not occur to anyone? If not today, then when? If not in Theresienstadt, then where? There is no country and no city in Europe where “Israel” or “Judah Maccabee” could be performed. Only Theresienstadt had this chance. It is not being used.²⁵

Months after his arrival Singer contracted a lung infection. He died in Theresienstadt on 30 January 1944 at the age of fifty-eight. The Red Cross informed his daughter in Palestine soon after his death.²⁶

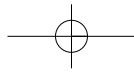
Kurt Singer saw the *Kulturbund* as opening a new cultural era for German Jewry and as an idea that had the potential of outlasting the Third Reich, either in Germany or elsewhere. His failed plans to transfer the group to America represent an unfulfilled chapter in the history of German Jewry’s emigration. Had the plans succeeded, the evolution of German Jewish culture as a distinct phenomenon outside Germany may have followed a different path. Not only would hundreds of dis-

²³Fischer-Defoy (ed.), p. 124.

²⁴Stompor, p. 208.

²⁵Kurt Singer, ‘Musikkritischer Brief nr. 4. Verdis Requiem’, in Ulrike Migdal (ed.), *Und die Musik spielt dazu*, Munich 1986, p. 170.

²⁶Stompor, p. 179.



tinguished artists and scholars have enriched American cultural life, as was indeed the case, but a medium would have been available for a specific type of German-Jewish cultural and communal continuity. A successful transplant of the *Kulturbund* may thus have helped delay the inevitable absorption of emigrated German-Jewish culture into American – and American Jewish – society by at least a generation.

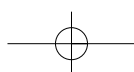
Written in December 1938, Kurt Singer's two letters to Berlin from Amsterdam are addressed to, respectfully, Hans Hinkel – supervisor of the *Kulturbund* and *Reichskulturwalter* of the *Reichskulturkammer* – and the managers of the *Kulturbund*.²⁷ The message in both letters is clear: although he had indeed come back from his American journey with the hope of continuing the *Kulturbund* elsewhere, after “*Kristallnacht*” such a hope was unrealisable, and this had to be recognised. The letter to the *Kulturbund* reveals Singer's keen awareness of imminent danger and calls into question the widespread perception of leading German Jews having kept their eyes shut when faced with catastrophe. The problems are reviewed in both letters: people, financial means, facilities, repertoire. In both, Singer conveys a sense of peril, along with his knowledge that the vision of a post-emancipatory German-Jewish cultural movement belonged to an era before the German-Jewish symbiosis had been destroyed, with the resulting split between German Jewry's culture and Nazi terror. The letters also express Singer's deep dismay and incomprehension at the resumption of activities by the *Kulturbund* after “*Kristallnacht*”.

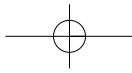
In his letter to Hinkel, Singer explains that his nerves have still not recovered from the pogrom. Nevertheless, his stated reasons for not returning to Germany do not involve concerns for personal safety but rather the view that the *Kulturbund* has no chance of continuing successfully. He bases his decision not to return on official reports in the German press, rather than mentioning his contacts with underground, non-German or Jewish sources. Though clearly aware that no distraction could possibly conceal the terror of a nation-wide pogrom, he merely cites an absence of the audience excitement necessary for successful theatrical performances as a reason for not returning to Germany. He also informs Hinkel of his advice to colleagues that the *Kulturbund* be brought to an end as quickly as possible. Without explicitly mentioning the pogrom, he states that he is suffering together with his coreligionists. He does make one veiled reference to “*Kristallnacht*”, writing that the *Kulturbund* has fallen victim to “circumstances”. It is notable that he refers to his fellow Jews as *Glaubensgenossen*, referring to a shared religion and refusing to adopt the Nazi terminology of race.

Although the valuable work of Alan Steinweis on Hans Hinkel remains a vital contribution to understanding that figure, his role with regards to the *Kulturbund* needs further explanation.²⁸ Hinkel's close relationship with the leaders of the Jewish organisation, in particular with Singer, was as ambivalent as it was singular in the Third Reich. The existence of the *Kulturbund* offered enrichment to this self-serving

²⁷Kurt Singer to *Reichskulturwalter* Hans Hinkel, Amsterdam, 8 December 1938. Bundesarchiv Koblenz, R56P113 Bl. 7. Kurt Singer to the Vorstand des Jüdischen Kulturbundes Berlin, Amsterdam, 8 December 1938. Adk, FWA, 74/86/1276.

²⁸Alan E. Steinweis, ‘Hans Hinkel and German Jewry, 1933–1941’, in *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 38 (1993), pp. 209–219.





and opportunistic Nazi official, earlier a mere school teacher; he could now interact closely with highly cultured Jewish artists. Strikingly, there is much evidence to suggest that Singer and Hinkel enjoyed a cordial working relationship.²⁹ Kurt Singer, it appears, believed in Hinkel's commitment to Jewish culture. In his address two years earlier, Singer had carefully articulated the *Kulturbund's* ambivalent relationship with the state, understood as representing both control and protection. While Hinkel enforced harsh censorship in his feudal enclave, he also fought for recognition of *Kulturbund* activities and the organisation's security.³⁰ It is worth noting that in his memoirs, Singer's assistant, Kurt Baumann, records a general perception of Hinkel as belonging to a left-wing faction of the Nazi party.³¹ Other testimonies, including that of Alice Levie, avoid labelling Hinkel an antisemite. It would appear that the career of Hinkel – an early Nazi Party member and leader of the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur* – in the first five years of the Nazi regime reflect an attempt by the regime to “collaborate”, after a fashion, with some Jews.

In his letter to the *Kulturbund* members, Singer records the losses inflicted on the pogrom night – the artists and audience will soon have to emigrate. Possibly alluding to the destruction of the synagogues, which often served as performance venues, he indicates that adequate performance space no longer exists. He equates returning to Germany to the situation of a captain on a sinking ship, in vain seeking to halt rising waters. For Singer, even maintaining the organisation at a standstill would have been a sign of decline. Prevailing circumstances, he insists, for immediate dismantling. His disappointment with what has become of Germany is shown by the fact that when referring to the country, he is only able to write its first letter.

Singer also confirms his hope of rebuilding the *Kulturbund* outside Europe – hence indirectly his conviction that the *Kulturbund* was a viable expression of a new German-Jewish culture, not merely a temporary response to the extraordinary conditions of the first years of Nazi power. He points to the United States as his desired location for the future *Kulturbund*, a choice confirming his general cultural stance, which had broken with Zionist strictures. To the last, then, Singer's Jewish self-identification remained rooted in religion and shaped by fate. In the letter, he thus exhorts those left in Berlin to continue to hold their Jewish beliefs high.

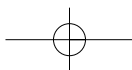
In this note of farewell and thanks in one, Singer lets his former co-workers know that he is ready to write references needed for emigration purposes. This practical gesture points to the resistance undertaken by Singer as not only being of a spiritual or cultural nature. Testimonies by members who survived the Holocaust of the *Kulturbund* refer to several instances where politically persecuted individuals lacking any specific qualifications were given make-shift jobs or otherwise engaged by the organisation in order to avoid their arrest.³² Much of the impetus behind taking amateur or unusually young artists into the group involved providing training to facilitate emigration. Before “*Kristallnacht*”, the *Kulturbund* did not “evolve” according to Nazi plans. At its start, the organisation revealed itself as strikingly “German”

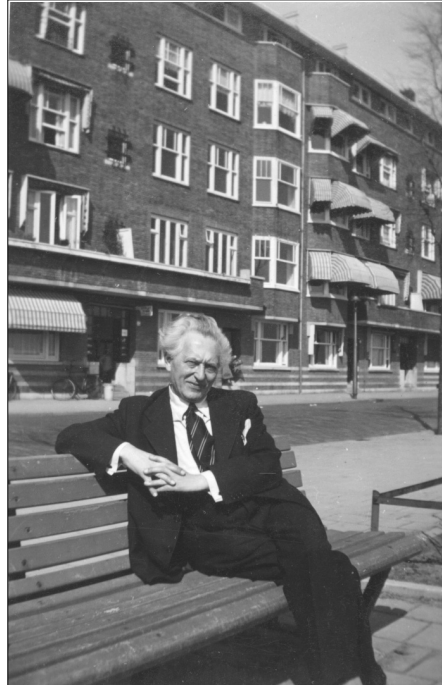
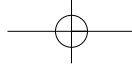
²⁹*ibid.*

³⁰Kurt Singer, ‘Die Arbeit der Jüdischen Kulturbünde’, Adk, FWA, 74/86/5032, 27.

³¹Baumann, p. 35.

³²Fischer-Defoy (ed.), and Geisel and Broder (eds.), p.??





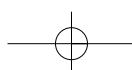
Kurt Singer in Amsterdam

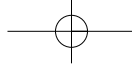
By courtesy of Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Kurt-Singer-Archiv, 20.55.11

when the Nazis expected something “Jewish”. When it did turn to the problem of the “Jewish culture” of German Jews, this was linked with the effort to move elsewhere equipped with a viable program of post-emancipatory German-Jewish culture.

Photographs of Singer in Amsterdam reveal him as prematurely worn and aged. He was met at the Amsterdam airport by the Solomons – Albert and Paula had escaped from Berlin after Albert’s release from Sachsenhausen. Singer and the Solomons would live together in Amsterdam in a double apartment located for them by the director of the Spinoza Gymnasium. In Amsterdam, Singer gave private musical lessons and held literature discussions for children, who included Anne and Margot Frank. His private lectures focused on musical analysis, featuring excerpts from his work on the history of opera, the choir music of Bruckner, and Bach’s cantatas.³³ He also organised a choir, evoking his “doctors’ choir” in pre-1933 Berlin, which practiced regularly. One month before the choir’s last meeting in June 1942, Singer was appointed to Amsterdam’s “Jewish Council” (the *Joodse Raad*), in existence since the German invasion in the spring of 1940. Singer’s specific duty was administering the affairs of the non-Dutch Jews living in the Netherlands – specifically

³³Geisel and Broder (eds.), pp. 328–331.





German Jews and Jews from non-European countries protected by the Swiss government. Documents marked “internal information” addressed to Singer contain references to deportation of German Jews to “work camps in Germany”.³⁴ In addition, Singer oversaw the organisation of Jewish vocational education.

For members of the *Kulturbund* in Berlin, deportation and forced labour began immediately after the organisation’s closure by the *Gestapo* in September 1941. The *Kulturbund* in Amsterdam was allowed a one year reprieve. Kurt Singer refused any leadership position – this role was assumed instead by Werner Levie. At this point, the actors had to appear on stage in Amsterdam wearing the Jewish star. The theatre would later be used as a deportation centre.

After the German invasion of the Netherlands in the spring 1940, all that remained of the hopes of transferring the *Kulturbund* to America were Singer’s own desperate attempts to leave.³⁵ But these attempts were made too late. Born in Danzig, a territory allotted to Poland by the Treaty of Versailles, Singer was assigned to the Polish quota in the birthplace-based administration of American visas. The waiting time for this quota was decades longer than the German one. With references from Albert Einstein and Wilhelm Furtwängler among others, he tried to obtain a “non-quota” visa,³⁶ spending his time filling out dozens of forms while going through various stages of the bureaucracy. He began translating his book on Bach’s cantatas into English, in preparation for his emigration. More than once, in the morass of administrative details, he failed to obtain just one vital document that was still missing. In the summer of 1941, he finally secured permission to travel and obtained a ticket as well as the necessary transit visas. But the American consulate had now closed. His visa never arrived, and his chance to flee Europe had passed.

APPENDIX: TWO LETTERS FROM KURT SINGER

Amsterdam, 8 December 1938

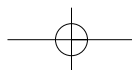
Most Esteemed Herr *Reichskulturwalter*

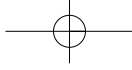
Herr Dr. Levie will have informed you of the reasons leading me to wait for the calming of my nerves here in Holland. Despite all entreaties, I left America to return to my work as head of the *Kulturbund*. It was only in Europe that, based on the official reports of the German press, I became convinced that the continued existence of the *Kulturbund* is no longer possible. We lack the people, the financial means, the repertoire, the performance spaces; in a short time we will also lack the artists who could maintain the ensemble of an orchestra, choir, theatre, or cabaret. We certainly lack the excitement and the atmosphere of the audience, without which effective

³⁴Joodse Raad voor Amsterdam, Interne Informatie 22, 9. December 1942’, Akademie der Künste, Kurt Singer Archives, 1.55.25,1.

³⁵Geisel, pp. 327–331.

³⁶An unlabelled letter in the Kurt Singer Archives, Akademie der Künste refers to his efforts to obtain a non-quota visa through the Chief Consulate in Rotterdam.



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theatre cannot emerge. Therefore I see practically no artistic or economic possibility of reconstructing Jewish cultural work in Berlin or of the Reichsverband in Germany. Therefore my opinion and advice to Dr. Levie is the following: to liquidate the enterprise Jüdischer Kulturbund as soon as possible. If I saw even the slightest possibility of assisting my co-workers and artists, the employees and workers of the *Jüdischer Kulturbund* in Berlin, then I would even now continue to regard my return as a moral duty. Until now, no argument has been able to alter my disbelief and hopelessness in any way. I suffer with my coreligionists and mourn the fact that such work—for which I would have liked to have sacrificed my whole life—must, after such a marvellous beginning, now silently fall victim to circumstances.

I close with the expression of sincerest and highest esteem, and I remain

With devotion:

Dr. Kurt Singer

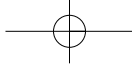
To the Members of the Managing Committee of the *Jüdische Kulturbund* in Berlin

My dear honourable friends!

If I complete this letter without it breaking my heart than I know I have nerves of steel. But I know at this moment and have felt it for weeks: your strength to carry on must be tremendous. And in such a terribly difficult time, when everything threatens to falter, I stand removed from you, even if I am in spirit amongst you! I take no direct part in your work, your troubles, and your distress. Until the end of my days, this will remain for me a secret, a riddle, and a paradox. But no matter how hard I think, I can neither lift the veil of secrecy, nor solve the riddle, nor explain the paradox. Without being able to help, I observe you, my most valuable assistants, from a lonely, wholly isolated distance, helpless like a wild bird with broken wings. The comparison may easily be extended: my heart of hearts has been wounded to the core. The *Kulturbund* without me, I without the *Kulturbund*: that is the end.

I am tied up in knots when I choose to call up the memories of the beginnings of our work, the heroic start, the stormy ascent, the struggles and victories, the moments of failure and encouragement, the initial steps taken, the musings and the wrestling for the spirit and meaning of the work of the Jewish *Kulturbund*. What unity even in contradiction! What courageous self-support, while the ground was shaking! What a collegial, mutual challenge, what a prize for us, even greater for the Jews in their totality! That has become our unforfeitable possession for all times.

We have overcome many crises together, and I would like to express my thanks to you for that. The crises were largely of an economic nature, which sometimes perhaps also touched the goals and the substance. Nevertheless: we mastered them. However the crisis that has now arisen appears to me to be so elementary that I can no longer fathom a solution. My collected, continually active optimism has collapsed. In the face of this elementary shock to our Jewish being, I have become powerless



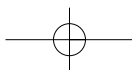
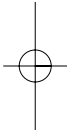
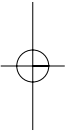
and unsteady. I mourn this work, that had to fall victim to circumstances, and suffer with the people who carry the wreck on their strong shoulders. And so, after a long period of consideration and waiting, I now have to call out to you:

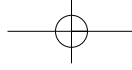
“Take away my glory and crown,
But not the sufferings of which I am King.”

From this distance, I cannot see into your souls. I hope, at least I believe, that all of you still believe in what remains of your task, and that you devote your artistic will to it. I myself have become completely unbelieving and hopeless in the last weeks of my despair. I departed from America to be with you in the hour of hardest struggle and of endurance; departed, although everything held me back, and although I could have remained. In the time of gravest emergency, I could not and did not want to be a private person on safe shores. It was only in Europe that I reckoned with the possibility of the work of the *Jüdische Kulturbund*. The result of this reckoning was crushing. I had to and continue to believe that in a short time, there will be, in Germany, no more Jewish actors—musicians, or artists at all able to form a high-quality ensemble. In the provinces, there are no performance spaces. Every evening there is an absence of people receptive to concerts, theatre, and cabaret. The financial means and the possibilities of support by the Jewish communities are also missing. I see before me a slip into petit-bourgeois primitivism in decorations, scenes, and costumes, and I see a deadly scarcity in repertoire and a lack of performers in all domains. The press remains silent. The resonance amongst the people is missing, as their distress does not permit them to enjoy such performances. Were I to return, that would be like a captain who attempts to remove the water from an already sinking ship with a hollow hand. I do not believe that I would be able to set right what is falling or to raise what has sunk. I do not believe any longer that I could be anything more for the people I lead than a fellow sufferer. Perhaps you may succeed one more time in raising the sinking ship; my blessings accompany a rescue in which I myself cannot participate. Yet I would not like to burden my conscience with the guilt that although having returned, I could no longer make the enterprise function, despite all our efforts and despite summoning up the very last reserves of energy. If the *Kulturbund* perishes—and I see no other image before me—that would not come to pass through your efficiency and courage—, but even your greatest talent cannot maintain it as it once was. Even a standstill would signify decline. But standstill is less the law of the hour, it is regression. The idea of the “*Kulturbund*” now belongs to history. Your names, [those of members of] my managing committee, engraved as if in marble in the great pages of the book I will write.

We want to remain faithful to the idea of the *Jüdische Kulturbund*. Perhaps I will build it up again outside Europe. Then you should be—that I state with celebratory praise—the most important guarantors of the new work, its goals and purposes. And in this new work across the ocean in America—you can see that I believe in this.

Thus though removed from you, I wish to remain amongst you. No longer the leading figure, [I am] rather one of many. I will prepare you and support you and all of our artists, employees, and workers. Let me know [your] plans, wishes, applications, general and personal. I will write recommendations for individuals and





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attempt to give them weight through my name and [the reputation of] my artistic work established over decades. As long as I am in Holland, I will provide honorary service in the cultural department of the committee, [by] remaining attentive, cultivating relations, and conveying your wishes to the various centres of the artistic world. Collect these requests, and send them all to me. I will work, work, work for you. And my soul, which is filled with worry and grief, is lightened by the feeling of being able to work better for you here than I ever could in G.

Thus I do not feel separated from you. And I know: I have not been disloyal. Every sign of thought and memory, of loyalty, trust, and hope, that I have received from you and your co-workers, will enable me to carry on. And this accumulation of spiritual strength will and should accrue to your good benefit.

As soon as I have rest, I will write to each one of you individually. In this hour of external division, accept my thanks, and take my pledge to your, our communal work; take my vow that I won't forget a single person, be they assistants at the box office, wardrobe staff, department heads, artists, musicians, secretaries, actors, or singers. Put these and all the others together, I loved them all. And I [will] treasure this love until my last breath.

If the administration remains the same,¹ if Wisten directs our theatre, Schwarz and Sander our music, Bab our "lectures", Sondheimer the stage—then I am replaced. And I go on calmly with my work.

Farewell! Keep hold of your strength. Remain united. And hold the faith, the Jewish faith up high!

With unswerving loyalty—despite it all: Yours

sign. Kurt Singer

Amsterdam
Minervalaan 82
bei Manasse

¹Fritz Wisten (1890-1962), actor, theatre director and successor to Kurt Singer as general director of the *Kulturbund* in 1939; slave labourer during the Holocaust; in 1945 director of the first post-war theatrical première of *Nathan the Wise*, later *Intendant* of both the *Theater am Schiffbauerdamm* and the *Völkshöhne*. Rudolf Schwarz: (b. 1905), last musical director of the *Kulturbund* (1939-1941); survived Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen and Bergen-Belsen; conductor of the BBC and Birmingham Symphony Orchestras after his emigration to the UK. Julius Bab, cofounder and dramaturge of the *Kulturbund*, emigrated to the United States in 1940. Hans Sonheimer, stage and technical director of the *Kulturbund*, emigrated to the USA in 1939, later worked for Piscator's Drama Workshop and for the City Center Opera of New York City. Berthold Sander, *Kapellmeister* and choir director of the *Kulturbund*, deported and murdered in Auschwitz.

