

New York, 1946. Banished from Germany by the national socialists, Paul Abraham stands in an lively street and starts to conduct an imaginary orchestra.*

This last “concert” by the former most successful operetta composer of the whole world, called the “operetta king of Berlin”, marks the bitter end of his fruitless attempts of making a living in the “New World”. A little bit later he was admitted to the biggest insane asylum of the whole world.

*There are not any eyewitnesses of this incident, but it became an iconographic symbol of the tragic fate of Paul Abraham and his exiled contemporaries.

The biographical homepage of the operetta composer

PAUL ABRAHAM (1892-1960)

The tragic king of operetta

by Klaus Waller (Translation: Nardina Alongi 2014, update Louis Breitsohl 2017)

From Apatin to Budapest

Paul Abraham was born as Ábrahám Pál on 2 November 1892 in the provincial town of Apatin (in modern Serbia), which at that time belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire of the Habsburgian monarchy. We know close to nothing about his childhood. It seems certain that his mother, a piano teacher, introduced him to the world of music - as well his father as a businessman, had influenced him with his profession - for both his interests, for music and for financial business, he tried to unite when he was a young man.

After attending the Swabian village school of Apatin and an economic school in the nearby Zombor, Abraham arrived in the early 1910s in Budapest, accompanied only by his mother, because of his father's early death and the induction of his brother, who died soon as well.

Budapest was at that time a culturally vivid urban centre with a great deal of ethnic German population. Numerous inhabitants of Budapest turned towards Austria or Germany during the first third of the 20th century and some of them even emigrated to there - Paul Abraham was among them.

Top grades, but no degree

Paul Abraham started to study composition at the Franz-Liszt-Music-Academy (1913-1917) in Budapest. His professor was Victor von Herzfeld. Although he had gained top grades, he made no degree – for unknown reasons. Later in Berlin Abraham told (for reasons of self-dramatisation), that he had earned a professor-degree and worked as a professor in music academies. Both information aren't true. The only certificate he earned is a so-called “Absolutorium”, a certification of the taken courses and the marks of the single examinations he passed.

Not much is known about his early compositions. As part of the studies, a Hungarian Serenade (1915), a cello concert and a string quartet (both 1916), written by Abraham, was performed at the Academy. Further works and performances (Abraham talked about a mass and a requiem) can not be verified and it is possible that they never existed. Paul Abraham often claimed to performed at the Salzburg Festivals with a string quartet. This performance never took place in the official part of the festival.

Actually a minor opera, 'Etelkas Herz', composed by Abraham, has been performed by the Budapest puppet theatre in 1917. The opera was highly praised by Lazlo Bus Fekete, who became a worldwide successful comedy writer afterwards.

Thereafter Abraham's compositional creative work ended for a long time.

First money-making

Few reports on Paul Abraham's life are preserved from the post-war period. It seems ascertained that he committed at first intensively to the financial business, respectively he worked as a commercial worker.

Later people said he was living out "the dark side of his mind. Indeed it seems that Paul Abraham was a notorious gambler. From contemporary newspaper reports, which have recently appeared, we know that he speculated for himself and others on the stock exchange, earned a lot of money there, then slid into the bankruptcy. In a newspaper report, it was said that the young "hopeful composer" had opened a stock exchange office and speculated on the stock exchange among others for many artist friends (who themselves were partly destitute). In the bear market in 1924, he then had to file for bankruptcy. Because many small investors did not want to agree on a settlement, there was filed a criminal complaint and was imprisoned to the Budapest Detention Center at Markó utca for embezzlement. He himself reported on a partner who had brought him into the matter. This is not the case in these reports. Nor is the judgment known.

The years to his employment as a conductor of the Budapest Operetta Theatre, are mostly veiled in darkness. Abraham socialised in coffee houses and in the upcoming jazz cellars, where he conducted bands and chapels from time to time. There is not much known about the way he earned his living at this time.

Abraham told different versions about the awakening of his interest in the light muse.

'When I was a young, ideally talented musician, I wrote string quartets which yielded no profit. My best sonatas and fugues failed to produce the slightest payment. One day I was in a record shop where a terrible kitsch was played, 'Ich küsse Ihre Hand, Madame'. Yet the shop assistant told me that one and a half million records of this had already been sold. Thus I began to compose crooning. However, I smuggled some minor fugues into each operetta, for I had always enjoyed myself a lot when after the opening night some or other serious music buffs thankfully shook my hand because of that.'
(Magazine "Tonfilm, Theater, Tanz")

This episode Abraham varied in different interviews in relation of staff and music and compositions.

The first great results

In 1927, Abraham began conducting the Budapesti Operettszínház (operetta theatre). His first success in composing was the operetta 'Zenebona', to which he contributed four tunes. They hit so effectively that a full operetta was ordered from him. This was 'Der Gatte des Fräuleins', based on a stage play by Gabor Drégely. In this musical comedy, which was played for the first time in 1928, there was 16-year-old Marta Eggerth performing besides established colleagues girl who was promoted as a wunderkind, and here began her international career as operetta singer and actress.

Then a soundtrack that was written in 1929 initiated Paul Abraham's breakthrough. The motion picture 'Melodie des Herzens', produced in Hungary, had been originally intended as a silent film. However, just at that time the technical possibilities for sound film were developed – at short term it was decided to turn 'Melodie des Herzens' into a musical film. Catchy music had to be found. Abraham and other composers were appointed. He 'recycled', among others, a tune written for 'Der Gatte des Fräuleins'. Willy Fritsch sang in this film Abraham's song, 'Bin kein Hauptmann, bin kein großes Tier', which became a hit in Germany.

When also the operetta 'Viktoria' (after a stage play by Imre Földes) was successfully performed in Budapest, Abraham could no longer be restrained to Hungary. By request of Erich Pommer, a producer of the German motion picture company Ufa, he went together with his wife Sarolta (Charlotte) Feszelyi, to Berlin, which was at that time the capital of European hedonism.

Living in a frenzy

Abraham's entry to Berlin was anything but triumphant. Bernard Grun wrote in 'Kulturgeschichte der Operette': 'He hardly gave the impression of a consolidated man, looking rather absent-minded, uprooted and helpless.'

Abraham could almost dive in money a few months later. The fact contributed that on Robinson's recommendation he got involved with the leading operetta librettists of that time, Alfred Grünwald and Fritz Löhner-Beda. They perfectionised his operetta 'Viktoria', which was published in Germany as 'Viktoria und ihr Husar', and they were also the essential support of the subsequent operettas.

'Viktoria und ihr Husar' was for the first time in Germany performed at the Leipzig operetta festival on 7 April 1930. It was a great success with the audience.

Success in entire Europe

The ultimate breakthrough came then in the Berlin Metropol Theatre. Abraham had for this production invited a soubrette, Rosy Barsony, and a buffo, Oskar Dénes, both from Budapest, and from then on they would become favourites of the German audience. Abraham himself was conducting the opening night - wearing fine, white gloves as usual - at the conductor's stand. A triumph! Songs such as 'Meine Mama war aus Yokohama', 'Do-do-do', 'Mausi, süß warst du heute Nacht' and 'Pardon, Madam' became popular tunes over night.

The composer is said to have earned half a million Reichsmarks (today just 1,67 million euros) just from 'Viktoria und ihr Husar'. Within one year, 'Viktoria' was performed at more than 300 theatres all over Europe!

Life in a double frenzy followed. One being that success which made nearly everything possible, also in terms of material goods. The other being Abraham's simultaneous working frenzy. He composed countless soundtracks and also performed them with his orchestra.

In addition, he celebrated in Berlin. The composer bought a house in Fasanenstrasse 33 (on the basis of pension), just near the Kurfürstendamm, and in the swiftly collected ambient of valuable paintings, carpets and porcelain he celebrated several evenings per week his famous 'goulash parties', inviting 'tout Berlin'. Moreover he worked there with a lot of employees.

"He got sixty suits and 300 silk shirts at once. He let bring champagne and caviar for his friends. And, tender-hearted as he was, he helped everybody who would ask him." is said in the film portrait by Janos Darvas.

However, overpowering success also had its dark side. At night Abraham often could not sleep, was wandering through the city streets and trying to get distracted in bars and gambling houses. Neither got his wife acquainted to the rapid speed: Charlotte Abraham moved back to Budapest – at least for some time...

Farewell with chancellor and ministers

'Viktoria und ihr Husar' was soon performed everywhere in Germany. In 1932, the operetta was filmed (as were his next ones), supported by Abraham's musical conduction. But 'Viktoria' was only the beginning. Aforesaid soundtracks followed (including an aria for the worldwide renown tenor, Jan Kiepura, in 'Die singende Stadt') and above all, in 1931, the new operetta 'Die Blume von Hawaii', which even excelled the success of 'Viktoria'. The operetta was performed for the first time in Leipzig on 24 July 1931 and immediately celebrated triumphs, also in Leipzig. It was a 'top-of-the-range revue operetta'. Some of the included songs like 'Bin nur ein Jonny', 'My golden Baby', 'My little Boy' or 'Du traumschöne Perle der Südsee' became evergreens until the present day.

Then the opening night of 'Ball im Savoy' took place on 23 December 1932, just in Berlin. It was the ultimate cultural event in the last days of the Weimar Republic. Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher was present, also his ministers and everybody else of name and fame in Berlin. Gitta Alpar, Rosy Barsony and Oskar Dénes impressed on the stage. The songs - as for example 'Es ist so schön, am Abend bummeln zu geh'n', 'Wenn wir Türken küssen' or 'Toujour l'amour' - were cheered, the applause was unceasing. 'After midnight, Gitta Alpar and the whole ensemble are moving with coloured lamps through the arena-style auditorium - and everybody sings together the song "Toujour l'amour".

Escape from the National Socialists

However, such a sensitive feeling for the zeitgeist of the early 1930s could hardly ignore the clouds that were gathering all around the operetta stages of Berlin. Fascistic extras unabashedly attacked Paul Abraham in the film studio, other Nazis denied him the admission to the 'Ball im Savoy' at the Theater "Großes Schauspielhaus".

'The more frantically he delved into his various projects or night after night into the distractions that were offered by bars, cafés and gambling casinos or into sexual adventures, meant to drive out his latent depressions.' Moritz Pirol, a journalist, wrote so.

Kurt von Schleicher resigned only about one month after the sensational premiere of 'Ball im Savoy', on 28 January 1933. On 31 January, Adolf Hitler assumed the office of Prime Minister. Abraham and his wife, who had meanwhile returned to Berlin, had to escape in a hurry to Budapest. Though there were in March and April still the German film opening nights of 'Die Blume von Hawaii', Abraham's opera were soon after prohibited. His property was confiscated by the National Socialists.

The often quoted episode that Abraham gave his chauffeur, whom he trusted, the key of his safe in which he kept 200 unpublished compositions, which were sold by the chauffeur bit by bit to 'aryan' composers (so they were published under different names.), is not verified.

Contemporary history - frivolously commented

Paul Abraham lived after his escape from Germany in 1933 again in his Hungarian native country. There the Nazis had (yet) no word, and there he could, as in nearby Vienna, take other opera on the stage, as well as work for the film business. With regard to his work, thus, there was nothing different to report, nor of its amount. But the time of grand triumphs was over. Though the Viennese premieres of his operettas 'Märchen im Grandhotel' (1934), 'Dschainah, das Mädchen aus dem Tanzhaus' (1935) and 'Roxy und ihr Wunderteam' (1937) were quite successful. But all of this did not match the triumphant results of his time in Berlin.

Anyway: His operettas also commented on current events. By creating the parodistic-frivolous 'Roxy und ihr Wunderteam', he made fun of the new German ideals of purity, virtue and race, just one year after the Olympic Games in Berlin. The title is an allusion to the so-called Austrian Miracle Team. The national football team had in 1931/1932 gained several sensational victories. Some players of the team even appeared on stage then during this very first 'sports operetta'.

Via Paris and Havana to the USA

Political realities caught up with Abraham in Budapest in 1939. Austria was already 'returned home into the Reich', now the fascistic machinations had also reached Hungary. Paul Abraham went to Paris- without his wife, who remained in Budapest and whom he would see again only more than 15 years later. Yet he appeared in Paris in female company – that of Yvonne Louise Ulrich. Abraham introduced her there among the groups of emigrants to Robert Stolz, whose fifth wife she would later become (Stolz gave her the nickname 'Einzi').

Abraham could live and work in Paris quite peacefully for a year. Compared with his former amount of work, the contracts remained scarce, though: He received (from film director Jean Boyer) merely the order for the soundtrack of one French motion picture, Serenade (starring Lilian Harvey and Louis Jouvet).

But Abraham had to flee also from Paris before the Nazis. Via Casablanca and Havana, where he stayed nearly one year, he finally reached Miami. From there he went by rail to New York. 'This was eight vital dollars cheaper than the direct ship passage.' Abraham, cut from all profits, was so impecunious that his Hungarian friend, Paul Alexander (Alexander Pál), had to deposit the security of 500 dollars, without which Abraham's entry into the USA would have been impossible.

There was no need for Abraham...

However, the USA became a persistent disappointment for Abraham. He who was acknowledged in Europe as one of the most modern popular composers of his time, he got here, in the motherland of jazz, no hold at all.

Although Jacob J. Shubert, the theatre magnate, had already acquired the rights for 'Ball im Savoy', he did not intend to actually perform this operetta or other plays of Abraham at the Broadway. All attempts failed to gain success with new projects. In 1945 he wrote, together with Alfred Grünwald, librettist, one further operetta, named 'Tamburin'. It was never performed.

Slowly, but certainly, the symptoms of mental disease became apparent. An episode which Robert Stolz told later is typical. One day in 1943, Abraham invited all his friends for the next day into the hotel, because he would marry there the famous Hollywood star of Hungarian origin, Ilona Massey. When the friends showed up the next day, bringing flowers, he knew nothing about it any more ...

Ten years in Creedmoor psychiatry

On 5 January 1946, his illness achieved a climax. Paul Abraham attracted attention in the hotel after letting the liftboy ride 42 times up into the 17th floor and back, persistently shouting 'Faster, even faster'. At another time Paul Abraham stepped out on Madison Avenue, as was told, in ragged clothes but, as usual, wearing white gloves, positioned himself on a socket in the central reserve of the roadway and started to direct an imaginary orchestra.

On 5 January 1946 Abraham appeared in the New Yorker Bellevue Hospital, accompanied by his friend Geza Herczek, and was introduced to the Creedmore Psychiatric Centre of Long Island a little time later. The diagnosis: 'Psychosis with Syphilitic Meningo Encephalitis' (the fourth stage of protracted syphilis). The medicine was able to heal the physical symptoms of the disease, the mental illness continued.

Paul Abraham would spend ten years in this largest psychiatry of the USA, in which about 6000 patients were treated at the same time in 1950 (today there are even more of them). Naturalisation was according to American law out of any question, on account of his illness, as was any consideration of how he would leave the country without help by third parties. His stay in the clinic was financed by shares in profits that now again had increased.

It was his friend Alexander Paal, a photographer from Hollywood, who became active. He informed Walter Anatole Persich, a writer from Hamburg, about the condition of his friend. Persich and others (such as the young publisher Andreas J. Meyer) founded a 'Paul Abraham Committee', which in co-operation with the Federal Government of Germany enabled Abraham to leave the USA. On 30 April 1956, the composer and 51 other ill emigrants landed by a collective aeroplane transport on the Frankfurt airport.

The emigrant and his NS doctor

Monday, 30 April of 1956: 'On the apron', thus Hans-Jürgen Fink, journalist, describes the setting, 'a dark, spacious Opel drives close to the plane from New York which has just landed. Three young men get out: two assistant doctors of the Eppendorf hospital and Andreas J. Meyer, who just became publisher of the small Northern German Merlin publishing company. About 50 ill people who had fled from Hitler's regime returned by that plane from the USA. ... The seriously ill composer is taken down the gangway. A few photographers make pictures, then doctors take him inside the car.'

Andreas J. Meyer remembers the first impressions, 'the whole journey back to Hamburg he sat inexpressively in the rear.'

First, Abraham is appointed to the psychiatry of the university hospital of Eppendorf and is treated there - another little piece of the puzzle of Abraham's 'mad' life - just by Dr. Hans Bürger-Prinz, the chief doctor. While Abraham had to live in emigration, this physician had made his career among the National Socialists. After 1933, he became member of all relevant NS organisations (NS-Ärztebund, NSDAP, SA etc.) and in 1944 he even advanced to be 'scientific adviser' of Karl Brandt, authorised NS representative for health services and personal physician of Adolf Hitler.

The last years in Hamburg

Paul Abraham was put under tutelage, in view of his manifest insanity, and received a tutor, Johannes Meyer, the father of the publisher Andreas J. Meyer. He was a top-rank lawyer, dismissed by the National Socialists.

Abraham remained for 16 months in the psychiatry. A senior physician of that time remembered, according to János Davras's portrait of Abraham, that Abraham had arrived almost completely 'cured' from New York. There was little left both of syphilis and the psychosis it had caused. According to his statement, Abraham was only 'slightly demented,' which does not seem to agree with the fact that the patient believed at this time, and continued to do so to the end of his life, to be in New York, regularly announcing in letters to his friends forthcoming premieres of his opera at the Broadway.

In the meantime, Abraham's wife Charlotte had also arrived from the People's Republic of Hungary. She took care of him from 1957 on for the rest of his life in a five-room flat in Hamburg. Abraham received from the German state 500 DM of 'recompensation pension'. Finally, also his back fees and shares in profits were paid.

Paul Abraham had to be admitted again to the university hospital in 1960. A 'black cancer' had struck a knee joint and produced metastases. It was too late. Paul Abraham died on 6 May 1960, as a result of the surgery. He was interred on Hamburg's celebrity cemetery.

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