



The Walter Kaufmann Story

*The Exile Who Invented
All-India Radio's Signature Tune*

This article is the second in a series that touches upon the Jewish experience in India during the Holocaust.

In March 1995, I was honoured to be invited by the Max Mueller Bhavan in New Delhi to a symposium entitled “Central European Jewish Emigration to India 1933-1945”. The proceedings of this symposium were published afterwards in a book edited by Profs. Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voigt and entitled “Jewish Exiles in India 1933-1945”. I myself lectured on the way Indian Jews received the European Jewish refugees in India after they had fled from the Holocaust. To the best of my knowledge, I was the only Jew at the meeting.

The symposium opened my eyes to a whole new facet of India, a country which acted as a haven for Jewish emigres and refugees fleeing the terrible happenings in Europe. Facism had pushed some exiles to India prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. Others came straight to India disheveled and wretched from the concentration camps of Dachau and Auschwitz.

One of the ‘lucky’ ones was the internationally renowned composer and musician Walter Kaufmann. He had correctly assessed the political situation in Europe, and, drawn to the music of the East, he found a refuge in India, where he resided from 1934-1946.

Kaufmann was a Czech national born in 1907 in Karlsbad, today Karlovy Vary. His father, Julius Kaufmann, was Jewish and his mother had converted to Judaism from Christianity when they married. Julius died near the Czech border after they fled Karlsbad under the Nazis, and when his mother returned to the city after

the Second World War, her house was confiscated since it belonged officially to a German.

Wandering through the streets of Karlovy Vary only a couple of months ago, I still found the city inspiring. I attended a stunning concert in a church with a seven-storey organ and listened to some of the best renditions I know of classical music. In the pre-Nazi years, Karlovy Vary must have been a musical paradise. Walter Kaufmann first learned music from his famous uncle Moritz Kaufmann, who was deported from Prague to Theresienstadt and from there to the Treblinka concentration camp, where he died in 1943.

From 1927 to 1933, Walter conducted summer seasons of opera in Berlin, Karlsbad, and Eger, Bohemia. In 1934, his thesis on Gustav Mahler was accepted by the German University in Prague, but when Kaufmann discovered that his supervisor, Prof. Gustav Becking, was the leader of the local Nazi youth group, he wrote to him that he could not accept the doctorate. In Kaufmann’s autobiography based on memoirs recorded in 1934 -but written up in the 1970’s when he was a Professor of Musicology at Indiana University, Bloomington- he wrote: “I carried this letter to the post office, went to the biggest travel agent and bought myself a ticket to Bombay with the money I had received for the operetta (which he had composed)...” On an impulse, Kaufmann set sail on the Conte Verde from Venice and arrived in Bombay a week later, where he stayed with a friend till he found independent lodgings. He was joined by his first wife from Prague, Gerty

Herrmann, the niece of Franz Kafka’s, who was a French teacher.

Once in India, Kaufmann sold his return ticket when he discovered that Indian music would take him some time to learn, and he needed the money. Either way, as Facism took hold of Europe, he could not return and stayed on in India for 12 years until after the Second World War. India saved not only his life but that of his wife as well. They had one daughter, Katherina.

Unlike other exiles in India, Kaufmann showed remarkable flexibility in adapting to the new culture. In 1935, he received the position of Director of European Music of All India Radio (AIR) in Bombay, for which he received a mediocre salary. In 1936, he composed the famous signature tune for All India Radio heard by billions of people all over the world. Kaufmann also founded the Bombay Chamber Music Society, which performed every Thursday at the Willingdon Gymkhana. He formed a string quartet in which he played the viola, and a trio in which he played the piano, with Edigio Verga on the cello, and Mehli Mehta, the father of Maestro Zubin Mehta, on the violin.

Kaufmann was clearly a musical genius and his works display extreme musical versatility. According to Agata Schindler, with whom I corresponded briefly and who has carried out extensive research into this brilliant artist, at first Kaufmann found Indian music “alien and incomprehensible.” However, he soon became familiar with it. As he wrote in his Autobiography: “As I knew that this music was created by people with



heart and intellect, one could assume that many, in fact millions would be appreciating or in fact loving this music...I concluded that the fault was all mine and the right way would be to undertake a study tour to the place of its origin." He managed to grasp Indian systems of musical composition and combine them with Western music. He went on to study other types of Eastern music, including Tibetan, Afghani, Kashmiri and Chinese music. His output and scholarship were amazing.

Early on, he wrote an opera called "Anasuya" for the inauguration of the All India Radio channel, which made its debut in 1939. The theme was European, but the story was transposed to a mythical Maratha state.

Kaufmann also worked in the film industry, cooperating with Mohan Bhavani for Bhavnani Films and for Information Films of India. He wrote scores for operas, orchestral music, ballets, chamber music works and films. His compositions include Ten String Quartets, Three Piano Trios, Indian Piano Concerto, Six Indian Miniatures and Navaratnam. A list of his scores can be found in *Music East and West: Essays in Honour of Walter Kaufmann* (edited by Thomas Noblitt). His books include: *The Ragas of North India*, *The Ragas of South India : A Catalogue of Scalar Material* and *Musical Notations of the Orient: Notational Systems of Continental, East, South and Central Asia*.

In 1939 Kaufmann arranged for his

Czech friend Willy Haas to join him in Bombay. Haas left Europe for India on the Conte Rosse and, upon arrival in Bombay, received a position as a script writer with Bhavani Films. Haas collaborated with Kaufmann on two operas and several film scripts until he left for Europe in 1947.

Kaufmann left India in 1946. He spent a year in England, where he was a guest conductor at the BBC in London, and a composer and conductor at Arthur Rank Films. In 1947, he was named Head of the Piano Department and Professor of Piano and Composition at the Halifax Conservatory of Music, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. From 1948 to 1957, Kaufmann was the Musical Director and Conductor of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Here he remarried, after his marriage to Gerty had dissolved. He also tried living in Israel. In 1957, Kaufmann moved permanently to the United States with his second wife Freda. He joined the School of Music faculty at Indiana University in Bloomington as Professor of Music in the department of Musicology, where he taught till 1977. He died in the United States in 1984.

Despite his prolific and scholarly works, and his personal ties with the intellectuals of the era, such as Albert Einstein, Franz Kafka and Max Brod, Kaufmann is sometimes forgotten in the context of Indian Jewry or European Jews who resided in India.

In 1995, at the New Delhi symposium

on Jewish Exiles in India organized by Dr. Georg Lechner of the Max Mueller Bhavan, the New Delhi Philharmonic Orchestra, performed an unknown piece called *Madras Express* by Walter Kaufmann. Apparently, Kaufmann had spent a few months in Madras absorbing the music and the sounds there. Interestingly, the Delhi Philharmonic was founded by a Bene Israel Indian Jew Ezra Kolet, who was the President of the Synagogue in New Delhi when I was conducting fieldwork among the Bene Israel in India in the 1980's. Kaufmann's composition astounded me with its rich and exotic tone. At the Delhi symposium, the participants were also treated to a rendition of the famous AIR signature tune, which is still broadcast to this day as the opening sequence of all AIR RADIO stations in India, and represents the symbol of India for millions of people. ♪

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