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RETHINKING JEWISHNESS IN WEIMAR CINEMA

Edited by
Barbara Hales and Valerie Weinstein



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Chapter 12

"A CLARION CALL TO STRIKE BACK"

Antisemitism and Ludwig Berger's
Der Meister von Nürnberg (1927)

Christian Rogowski

On 7 October 1927 one of the largest movie theaters in Germany, the newly built Phoebus Palast, with more than 2,000 seats, was supposed to open in Nuremberg. Its owner, the Berlin-based Phoebus Film A.G., had selected what it deemed a suitably glamorous film for the festive opening, a film with a local connection, Ludwig Berger's *Der Meister von Nürnberg* (*The Master of Nuremberg*). Yet in the run-up to that opening, Berger's light-hearted historical costume drama, loosely associated with Richard Wagner's most popular opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868), became the target of a vehement propaganda campaign, prompting protests from the southern German city and from right-wing groups elsewhere. Two days before the projected opening, representatives from various cultural organizations in the Franconian city published an *einmütig* (unanimous) Nuremberg Protest against the film that in the eyes of the signatories defiled Wagner's masterpiece, that *deutscheste* (most German) of German cultural achievements.¹ The agitation prompted the Phoebus company to replace it with what it hoped would be a more innocuous feature. What was it that made Berger's film such a thorn in the eye of German nationalists in general, and the burghers of Nuremberg in particular?

The polemical campaign surrounding the film took place in the context of various political and cultural currents in the Weimar Republic—including discourses of highbrow art versus popular culture,

film versus opera, cosmopolitan Berlin versus provincial parochialism, Prussian federalism versus Bavarian particularism, national(-ist) tradition versus modernity, adherence to convention versus creative license, ethnic "purity" versus outside "contamination," a vehemently anti-Weimar Republic cultural conservatism, and the peculiar significance of Wagner in post-World War I German culture. Most importantly, the polemics were triggered by issues of antisemitism festering below the surface of the supposedly quiet middle period of the Weimar Republic—between the economic consolidation in the wake of hyperinflation (1923) and the onslaught of the Great Depression (1929). Jewish-born director Berger and his film got caught in a web of various minor social, political, and cultural crises facing its production company as well as other contextual issues that affected its reception. What was at stake with Berger's film, I will argue, were questions about what (and who) was German: who did and who did not belong to certain definitions of a national community, and who did and who did not have the right to speak for a nationally defined culture. Ultimately, as I will show, Berger's film raised questions about the position of Jews within the Weimar German national community and culture.

In many ways it is surprising that the planned screening of Berger's film in Nuremberg provoked such controversy. Its production company, Phoebus, had what seemed to be impeccably patriotic credentials. In the summer of 1927, when the company announced its program for the upcoming season, the trade journal *Film-Kurier* noted the "purely German character" of its roster, singling out Berger's project as the presumed crowning highlight.² That same summer, however, Phoebus became embroiled in a scandal that casts a somewhat sinister light on the patriotic films produced by the company. In August of the year, a liberal Berlin daily, *Berliner Tageblatt*, broke the story that Walter Lohmann, a captain of the German naval transportation division, had used Phoebus as a front to funnel money into clandestine armament projects for the German Navy and Luftwaffe, such as submarine or aircraft design, illegally circumventing restrictions imposed by the Versailles Treaty. Secret infusions of money arranged by Lohmann had propped up the ailing film company, on condition that Phoebus "produce films of a 'national' character designed to stimulate the 'fatherland consciousness' of the German people."³ As we shall see, the fact that the right-wing self-appointed protectors of German culture chose as their target a film produced by a company that had ostensibly been only too eager to contribute to making Germany great again, was not the only irony surrounding the propagandist campaign.

When Berger's *Der Meister von Nürnberg* premiered on 5 September 1927, at the glamorous Capitol Theater in Berlin, in a special charity event to benefit the Bühnengenossenschaft (an organization of theater artists), there were no signs of impending trouble: the film scored a huge success with the audience and was greeted with enthusiastic accolades by the press. Even reviewers who voiced certain reservations, such as Felix Henseleit of the *Reichsfilmblatt*, who thought that Berger had delved too much into *Einzelheiten* (details), conceded that "everywhere one could sense the hand of a tasteful, accomplished director."⁴ Most reviewers acclaimed Berger's film precisely for what they regarded as its uniquely German qualities. *Film-Kurier* hailed the Berlin gala premiere on its title page as "another great day for Phoebus" as well as "a day of honor for German film."⁵ Similarly, the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* called it "a German film, a pleasure because what is German about it is genuine and not contrived," and *Abendpost-Nachtausgabe* proclaimed Berger's film to be "the best and grandest film of the year" (this in a year that also saw the release of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis!*).⁶ Even communist critics conceded, grudgingly, that although it was a bourgeois film, it was "*sehenswert*" (worth seeing).⁷

Across the political spectrum critics were unanimous in their praise for Rudolf Rittner, the actor who portrayed Hans Sachs and who was one of the coauthors of the film script. A veteran of stage and screen who had brought some of acclaimed playwright Gerhart Hauptmann's most significant characters to life, Rittner provided German audiences with a "model of German manliness"—"good, loyal, straightforward and, when necessary, heroic and noble in renunciation"—that German youth should flock to and emulate.⁸ The film was subsequently shown with equally great success in other major German cities such as Frankfurt am Main, Dresden, and Cologne, as well as in the Austrian capital, Vienna.⁹ It ran for several months throughout the German provinces, continued its "triumphal march through Europe" and was successfully exported to various countries.¹⁰

To a certain extent, the presentation surrounding the film's Berlin premiere, as well as aspects of the film itself, invite a misreading of the film as a mere rendering of Wagner's opera. At the Capitol Theater premiere, for instance, leading singers from the Berlin Staatsoper, including legendary dramatic soprano Frieda Leider, presented arias from various operas. Acclaimed Heldentenor Fritz Soot sang Walther's "Preislied" from *Die Meistersinger*, and the film was launched to the sounds of the chorus of the Städtische Oper singing the "Wach auf" chorus from the opera. The film revolves around episodes in the life of Nurem-

berg's shoemaker-poet Hans Sachs that were invented by Wagner, and it borrows all major characters from the opera as well as several plot lines and dramatic conflicts: Sachs is attracted to Eva, the daughter of goldsmith Veit Pogner; Walther von Stolzing, a young aristocrat, appears in town and falls in love with Eva; Sixtus Beckmesser, a pedantic town scribe, schemes to prevent this union, because he also harbors designs on Eva; Sachs has an apprentice, David; and Eva has a friend and companion, Magdalene. Some critics, perhaps understandably, thus actually mistook the film's title to be *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.¹¹ Moreover, the music created for the premiere by Willy Schmidt-Gentner mixed Wagnerian themes with a pastiche taken from various sources, including Haydn and Schubert.¹²

So how did the controversy get started? The perceived closeness to the Wagnerian original provoked the ire of a prominent Berlin-based music critic, Hugo Rasch, who launched an indignant attack in the *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* against "that exploitative frivolity that now flickers by at the Capitol theater night after night." The film, he argues, maliciously distorts the image of Hans Sachs, a universally beloved figure, who, in the Wagner opera, "displays genuine German virtues." Interestingly, Rasch frames the issue in terms of copyright legislation. Italy and Czechoslovakia, he notes, had just passed legislation to protect significant works of art beyond the expiration of a certain time limit. Berger's deplorable film, Rasch claims, makes it clear that similar legal protection is necessary in Germany, too, where ruthless hands have appropriated a "masterpiece that is the envy of the entire globe, that is the common property of the German people and that is, or should be, subject to protection as a national treasure—Wagner's *Meistersinger*." In barely controlled outrage, Rasch calls for protective measures that shield important works of art from *Verunstaltung* (disfigurement) and *Verstümmelung* (mutilation). Rasch's moralistic rhetoric echoes much of the disdain of film as a mass medium that characterized the *Kinoreform* debates of the 1910s and 1920s. Rasch refrains from spelling out whose hands he is referring to, adding the cryptic phrase, "hands, which unfortunately however I cannot call out by their proper name without making myself subject to being charged with libel."¹³

Rasch's ranting against reckless *Geschäfts-tüchtigkeit* (business 'acumen') that "tramples our most precious possessions" (Rasch 958) recalls the dog-whistling code that extremist right-wing circles used in their critique of the German film industry after World War I. When one considers that Rasch in 1931 joined the National Socialist (Nazi) party and would become music critic for the Nazi paper, *Völkische Beobachter*,

the subtext of his polemic about an insidious threat that is already operating from within is clear: without saying so directly, Rasch insinuates that it is the Jews who are assaulting one of Germany's most significant "national cultural treasures."¹⁴ The film's director, Berger (1892–1969), and one of his co-script-writers, Robert Liebmann (1890–1945), were of Jewish extraction; the Capitol Theater in Berlin was owned by David Oliver (1880–1947), who hailed from Galicia. Rasch's incensed rhetoric implies that these Jews had maliciously appropriated Wagner's masterpiece not only for personal gain but also in order to undermine German culture as a whole.

In his polemic zeal, Rasch conveniently overlooks many crucial aspects of what, perhaps not entirely disingenuously, was billed not as a version of Wagner's opera but as a "Hans Sachs Film." As a medium bereft of sound, silent film could not possibly render a four-and-a-half-hour musical drama on the screen in a straightforward manner—even Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal made substantial changes to their film version of *Der Rosenkavalier* (1926) to accommodate the different logic of the medium, altering the musical score for the live orchestral accompaniment and adding scenes that round out and illustrate the background of the main action. Various efforts at producing film operas, mostly as early-twentieth-century short films that combined live singers in the auditorium with images of actors on screen lip-synching the *Tonbilder* (score), had failed, sometimes for technical reasons, but also on account of the unsuitability of the spatially restricted stage dramaturgy of opera for the movie screen.

From the outset, Berger's film introduces locations not featured in Wagner's opera and outlines the respective psychological dispositions of the main characters before the plot proper sets in: in the film, Eva tries to escape the pressure her father puts on her to marry town scribe Beckmesser by seeking help from Hans Sachs, who loves her, too, but who recognizes that he is too old for her as a partner and wisely refrains from exploiting her emotional vulnerability. Likewise, the film's Walther runs away from his ancestral castle when his family council tries to force him into marrying a drab relative—the oddly named Edelgundis von Katzenellenbogen. By way of creating a prehistory for the two young lovers, Berger's film provides a motivation for their susceptibility to falling in love with one another at first sight. Their meeting at a church service in Nuremberg, which starts the opera, is delayed until the middle of the third of the film's eight reels. Moreover, the gist of the central conflicts is modified: the film revolves around a rivalry between goldsmith Pogner and shoemaker Sachs for the post of mayor of

Nuremberg in upcoming elections. The annual singing contest among art-loving guild members that the opera hails as a long-standing local tradition, is eliminated and replaced by a spontaneous poetry competition that Beckmesser suggests to Pogner as a political expediency to win over votes and that is rigged to ensure that it will be Beckmesser who gets the prize—Eva's hand. In fact, what is perhaps most striking about this film supposedly based on Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* is that it contains no "Meistersingers" at all! In the film there is not a single reference to the existence of an association of citizens who practice poetry and song and who compete with one another for the advancement of art. There is no conflict between the adherents of established rules and the forces of artistic innovation. In the opera, Beckmesser's heavy-handed insistence on tradition is contrasted with Walther's impulsive creative genius, put into stark relief in the first act in David's lengthy explanations concerning the complex regulations that govern the Meistersinger guild's craftsman-like approach to the manufacture of poetry. In Wagner's opera, Sachs mentors Walther to channel the young maverick's raw creativity into appropriate form, enabling Walther to produce the *Preislied*, with which in the third act he wins a singing competition by public acclaim. In Berger's film it is Sachs who writes a superior poem and gives it to Walther, encouraging him to claim it as his own, thus helping the young aristocrat win a poetry competition and Eva's hand (figure 12.1).

Hans Rudolf Vaget has highlighted the appeal that Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* had for *völkisch* circles in early twentieth-century Germany: Wagner's opera offers a seductive, utopian vision of an organic, classless community (*Gemeinschaft*) as a countermodel to contract-based, conflict-ridden forms of polity (*Gesellschaft*). Wagner's world is centered on the voluntary, spontaneous submission to a charismatic leader (Hans Sachs), whose authority is based on his personality and validated by public acclaim (rather than subject to electoral rules and regulations). That this self-governing community necessitates the marginalization or elimination of undesirable individuals—the exclusion of the pedantic Beckmesser—is something the inhabitants of Wagner's Nuremberg willingly accept for the affirmation of the common good. In the context of the political conflicts and socioeconomic crises that riddled the Weimar Republic, Wagner's opera could be seen as foreshadowing the Nazi notion of a classless, homogeneous ethnic community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), united under a charismatic leader who delivered the ailing nation to political, economic, and, above all, spiritual redemption.¹⁵

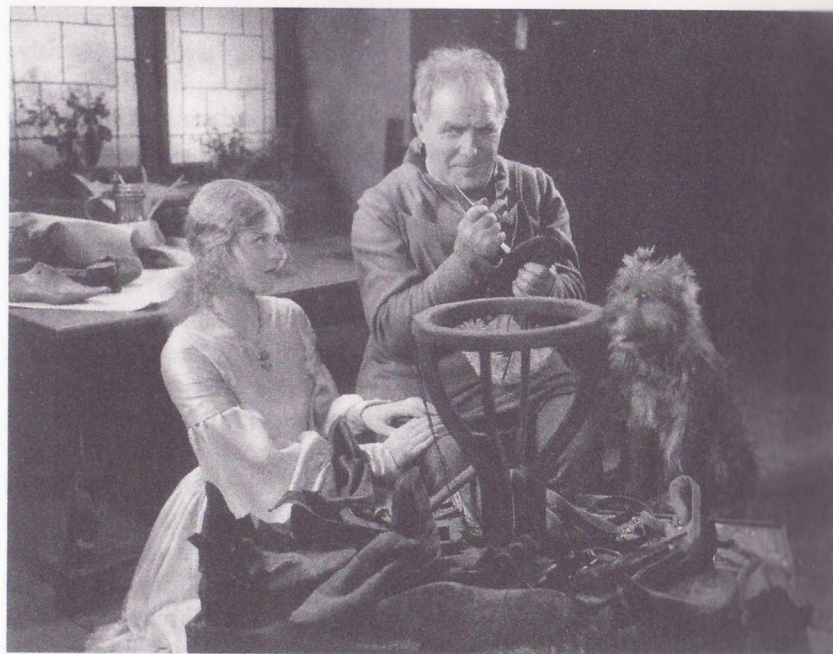


Figure 12.1. Evchen (Maria Matray) appeals to Hans Sachs (Rudolf Rittner) for support. *Der Meister von Nürnberg* (1927, dir. Ludwig Berger). Courtesy of DFF—Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, Frankfurt.

Berger's film undercuts such quasi-religious idealizations of Renaissance Nuremberg. It starts with a visual joke: after the opening credits, we see a title card that reads, "Nuremberg was awaiting a mayoral election." We then see what looks like the inside of an assembly room with a large table, which we assume is where a meeting of the city council is to take place. Suddenly, someone's—shockingly big—arm reaches into the frame from top left, placing figurines of councilors on the chairs at the table. What we took to be a long shot of a council chamber is revealed to be a close-up of a kind of doll house filled with toy-sized figurines. A puppeteer appears, jovially chatting with children who gather around him. The whimsical gesture, reminiscent of the opening of Ernst Lubitsch's silent film comedy, *Die Puppe* (*The Doll*; 1919), introduces the motif of manipulation, setting the stage for the political machinations surrounding the mayoral elections that follow. Wagner's backward-looking utopia of a self-regulating community united by a common devotion to culture and art is replaced in Berger's film by a world of political maneuvering and corruption, where petty, narrow-

minded people jostle for power and prestige, governed by self-interest and ambition.

Rasch's polemic, then, paradoxically finds fault with the film precisely for what it did not set out to be, simply a rendering of Wagner's opera. The film's treatment of the figure of Beckmesser is a particularly significant deviation from Wagner. The pedantic, conceited, and scheming town scribe has often been taken as a "most blatantly anti-Semitic" caricature.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, the film removes the reference to the antisemitic German fairy-tale, "The Jew in the Brambles" that in the opera occurs in reference to Beckmesser in Walther's first attempt at song writing in act one.¹⁷ While Berger's Beckmesser is still a buffoon and an intriguer (and is played by German-Jewish comedian Julius Falkenstein), the film casually makes the point that he is as good and upstanding a Christian burgher as anybody else: he is the central figure sitting at the table during the first actual council meeting we see in the film, and he is placed in one of the pews during the church service at which Eva and Walther meet; a Roman Catholic service, no less—somewhat incongruous in arch-Lutheran Renaissance Nuremberg. The film's character Beckmesser is thus shown as an integral part of the fabric of the tight-knit local elite, an elite that is outwardly righteous but internally corrupt. Here, Beckmesser is in cahoots with Nuremberg's civic leaders, Veit Pogner (Max Gülstorff), the goldsmith who aspires to become lord mayor, and with the president of the city council (Hans Wassmann), who agrees to mark Beckmesser's submission to the poetry contest with an "x" so that it can be picked as the winning poem—an arrangement that becomes necessary when the council is inundated with so many submissions that the councilors find it impossible—or, after looking at a few dismally inane samples, even not desirable—to read them all.

Berger's tongue-in-cheek comedy eliminates the opera's self-reflective debates concerning the nature and function of art and creativity and replaces them with a gently indulgent portrayal of a fundamentally flawed and latently corrupt community. The sets created by Berger's brother Rudolf Bamberger (1888–1945) convey a sense of theatrical artificiality—not a single scene is filmed in a real outdoor location. Bamberger's Nuremberg, with its narrow, crooked lanes and dark interiors, is reminiscent of the medieval fantasy architecture familiar from Paul Wegener's *Golem* films, as well as other period dramas filmed entirely in studio settings, such as F.W. Murnau's *Faust* (1926) and Hans Kyser's *Luther* (1928). Some critics compared the film's evocation of an idyllic if somewhat claustrophobic past to nineteenth-century *Biedermeier* period

paintings artists such as Carl Spitzweg.¹⁸ Like Spitzweg, Berger points without harsh judgment to the foibles of the characters in this provincial world, in a gentle satire akin in spirit, as critics noted, to the ironic portrayal of German myopic philistinism in August von Kotzebue's comedy, *Die deutschen Kleinstädter* (1802).¹⁹ Nuremberg's liberal daily, *Nürnberger Zeitung*, noted matter-of-factly that Berger's film, instead of sharing Wagner's idealized vision of an ideal, art-loving community in a kind of utopia turned backward, shows the city "as it really could have been," with all its human—all-too-human—limitations.²⁰

The film parallels the plot of Wagner's opera most closely in what is the equivalent of Act 2—Beckmesser's abortive nighttime serenade to Eva and the general mayhem that ensues, as crowds of burghers appear in the city's narrow lanes and engage in an all-out public brawl. Berger's Walther is no untrained artistic genius whose creativity has to be molded into the proper channels but instead shows himself to be a reckless, impulsive young cad who, after the brawl, ends up in prison, for his attempt at running away with Eva. Berger's Sachs is no philosopher poet—there is no equivalent of the famous "Wahn-Monolog" from the beginning of Act 3, in which Wagner's hero reflects on the outbreak of violence of the previous night. And Berger's Sachs is not above bending the truth a bit to achieve his ends—donning a monk's habit, he smuggles a love poem he has written into Walther's prison cell and urges him to pretend that it is own so that the young knight can win the competition and be united with Eva.

Significantly, the film differs most pronouncedly with regard to its handling of the denouement: what would be the third act in the opera is transformed and stripped of the national(istic) undertones conveyed by Wagner's communal festivities: Berger eliminates the sun-drenched festival meadow (*Festwiese*) celebrations in which the various city guilds march to assemble outdoors in a display of civic pride and wealth and during which the townspeople are won over by the brilliance of Walther's entry into the song contest. Instead, the rigged poetry competition takes place in the dark and foreboding space of the city council's assembly hall, where Sachs unmasks the collusion between Beckmesser and the city officials and helps Walther win Eva's hand. Perhaps most importantly, gone are the infamous musings of Sachs from the opera's finale, in which the shoemaker-poet exhorts his fellow-citizens to honor German traditions and their German masters (*Ehrt Eure deutschen Meister*) and guard everything that is "German and genuine" (*deutsch und echt*) against "foreign frivolousness" (*welschen Tand*). Berger's film dispenses both with the celebration of a German cultural community and

with the paean to “sacred German art” (*heilge deutsche Kunst*) that culminate in a rousing chorus that ends the opera on a gloriously sonorous final chord of C major. Instead, Berger’s film ends on a quiet note with a wistful Sachs, who has sacrificed his own happiness by bringing Eva and Walther together, at home admonishing his apprentice David to close the shutters so that he can be alone in silent resignation.

It is perhaps the removal of the celebratory tone of the opera that right-wing critics of the film such as Rasch found most unsettling. Berger’s film does not buy into the idealization of a self-regulating *Volksgemeinschaft* that is united by a common interest in the arts and willingly accepts the “leadership principle” (*Führerprinzip*) based on public acclaim. Nor does the film subscribe to quasireligious fantasies of German cultural superiority in a Wagnerian apotheosis of sacred German art. Instead we see a polity ruled by a codified system of laws and populated by individuals not averse to violating rules and codes when it serves their own interests. Under the heading, “Schutz dem Urheber!” (Protect the Copyright Holder!), Hugo Rasch railed against what he viewed as the willful distortion of Wagner’s idealizing portrayal of Renaissance Nuremberg. Conflating the historical Hans Sachs (1494–1576), who was always shown sporting a beard, and Wagner’s cobbler-poet-turned-national-hero in *Die Meistersinger*, Rasch bemoaned that Berger’s film portrays Sachs as a “thoroughly mendacious, clean-shaven comedian,” that goldsmith Pogner “appeared repugnant beyond all measure,” and that the plot revolved around “disgusting bribery” among Nuremberg’s city officials.²¹

Rasch’s charge that Berger had deliberately and cynically set out to exploit a treasured piece of German musical high art was, to say the least, somewhat baffling: born Ludwig Bamberger in 1892 in Mainz, Berger came from a highly assimilated, upper-middle-class Jewish family that played a prominent role in the cultural and civic life of that southwest German city. His mother was a classically trained pianist who had been a student of Clara Schumann; his father was a local politician and a passionate amateur violinist; Ludwig himself played the piano and was an excellent cellist. In 1914 he had obtained a doctorate at Heidelberg in art history with a dissertation on an eighteenth-century German painter. His 1915 theater debut was with a performing version of Mozart’s early opera, *Die Gärtnerin aus Liebe*, which he and his brother Rudolf had edited. In his early days as a theater director in Mainz and Hamburg, Berger had directed several shrove tide farces (*Fastnachtsspiele*) by Hans Sachs, suggesting that he perhaps knew the historical Sachs, with his robust, often bawdy, sense of humor, better

than many of his critics who viewed the figure through Wagner’s idealizing lens. A gifted playwright himself and an experienced film director with several critically acclaimed and commercially successful films to his credit, Berger had, over the years, also directed a number of operas, canonical plays by Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, and Shakespeare, and modern dramas by Ibsen, Strindberg, von Unruh, and Zuckmayer at some of Germany’s leading theaters. With such credentials, Ludwig Berger could credibly claim that he approached Germany’s cultural patrimony with the requisite respect and sensitivity, and—more importantly—that he had every right to consider himself a fitting representative of German high culture. Yet all these qualifications count for nothing in Rasch’s antisemitically tinged broadside attack.

The gauntlet thrown down by Rasch in the *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* some two weeks after the Berlin premiere of *Der Meister von Nürnberg* was picked up by a Nuremberg-based colleague, Wilhelm Matthes, an occasional contributor to the same musical journal. His main job was as music critic for the right-leaning local paper, *Fränkischer Kurier*. In an article published on 29 September 1927, Matthes excerpts much of Rasch’s text, adding an introduction that frames Rasch’s argument in explicitly ethnic (*völkisch*) terms. Under the alarmist heading, “Another Defilement [*Neue Schändung*] of a German Cultural Monument,” Matthes complains that Berger’s film is only the latest, most egregious, example of what he views as a concerted effort of the so-called destructives to undermine German culture.²² Cultural Bolsheviks had, Matthes suggests, deviously appropriated seemingly innocuous forms of popular culture such as illustrated magazines, newspaper articles, novels, and theater plays in a systematic effort to weaken the German spirit. In Matthes’s estimation, Berger’s film is a particularly devious effort to sully *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*—“the most popular [*volkstümlichste*], the most German work of Richard Wagner,” by using the popular mass medium of film to indoctrinate the German populace. Something must be done, Matthes warns, before these subversive forces have completely destroyed “all that the *Volk* [people] has until now held as sacred ideals.”

Lest there is any doubt concerning his ideological allegiances, Matthes uses key concepts familiar from post-World War I German right-wing agitation: in speaking of “insidious backstabbing” (*heimtückischen Dolchstöße*) destroying German culture, he creates a cultural version of a familiar political myth, the stab-in-the-back legend (*Dolchstoßlegende*). The tropes Matthes uses center around the same notions of compromised health (*eingekimpft*), pollution (*verseucht*), and sexualized violence

(*Schändung*) that dominated the paranoid rhetoric of right-wing ideologues who argued that Germany had been defeated not on the battlefield but through treason, subversion, and sabotage from within. Like Rasch, Matthes does not explicitly name whom he deems responsible, yet his coded references to the “greedy destructive furor of these reckless businessmen” mobilize tropes from the repertory of antisemitism. Rasch had called for legal measures to protect German works of art through comprehensive copyright legislation. Matthes argues that the time has come for more-concrete action, for the nation to resort to self-help (*Selbsthilfe*): “Let us take this monstrous crime against the *Meistersinger* as a clarion call to strike back. The pushback has to originate from Nuremberg!”²³

Matthes’s feverish call to arms, with the notion of striking back that emanates from a sense of victimhood at the hands of an international conspiracy, reflects a politically charged situation in his hometown: a few weeks before he penned his broadside, the Nazis had for the first time (after Munich in 1923 and Weimar in 1926) held their Reichsparteitag in Nuremberg, which would become an annual event in the city. In an oblique reference to the “Wach auf” chorus from Wagner’s *Meistersinger*, the rally’s opening day, Friday 19 August, 1927, was declared a day of awakening. The Nazis eagerly adopted Nuremberg as the site where the alleged need to defend an imperiled Aryan race through mass action was being articulated.²⁴ In this context, Matthes’s incendiary article, though still phrased in largely metaphorical terms, acquired an all-too literal subtext, insinuating that the time had come for the imperiled *Volk* to defend itself through the use of physical violence.

In a manner reminiscent of the spread of current-day memes—unsubstantiated claims that go viral online—the impassioned call for militancy by Matthes exploded via the social media of the day—the various clubs, corporate entities, and social groups involved in Nuremberg’s cultural life. Matthes’s invective resonated among local elites with prejudices long held among the Bildungsbürgertum—the educated German upper-middle class—against modern mass media in general, and against film as an uncouth, frivolous form of mass entertainment in particular. A sense of the cherished high culture of personal cultivation and education (*Bildung*) under threat from smut (*Schund*) aligned with a sense of precious regional traditions being trampled on by unscrupulous Berlin-centered business interests. More broadly, Matthes also spoke to fears concerning the potential negative economic repercussions that Berger’s supposedly distorted representation of the city might have for Nuremberg’s tourist industry. Within days, the

appeal for a revision of copyright law to protect German cultural products beyond a thirty-year limit was endorsed by large segments of Nuremberg’s cultural elite, across a broad political spectrum. Under the heading “Nürnberger Protest,” and subtitled, “A Unanimous Spiritual Uprising,” some twenty local corporate entities and cultural associations endorsed the initiative in Matthes’s paper, *Fränkische Kurier*.²⁵

On 5 October Nuremberg’s city council debated a motion brought forward by council member Fritz Schuh on behalf of Fraktion Schwarz-Weiß-Rot—the right-wing Deutsch-nationale Volkspartei—that the city issue an official declaration condemning the film. In presenting the motion, Schuh reminded the council of its duty to protect Wagner’s “most German” and “most valuable” opera from the “denigration” (*Verunglimpfung*) by the film. He approvingly noted that Phoebus had actually already withdrawn Berger’s film from the planned opening of the Nuremberg Phoebus Palast and replaced it with a film version of the comedy *Die Hose* (The Underpants). This prompted the sarcastic interjection, “by a Jew by the name of Sternheim” from fellow city councilor Julius Streicher, who was the notorious editor of *Der Stürmer*, the Nazi propaganda paper based in Nuremberg.²⁶ In response, councilor Max Süßheim, the Jewish-born representative of the majority Social Democratic Party and an experienced professional lawyer, wryly noted that, while he shared the esteem for Wagner’s masterpiece, he found it odd that the council was asked to judge a film that none of its members had seen, a task that anyway lay outside its jurisdiction. Schuh insisted that what was at stake here went beyond mere legal considerations—it was an emotional matter (*Gefühlssache*) for Nuremberg and “a question of honor that concerned every art-loving German” (Stadtarchiv Nürnberg C7/IX, no. 412). All the same, Süßheim’s countermotion prevailed that the council defer its collective judgment by taking up Phoebus-Film’s offer for a private screening of Berger’s film at a later date, and a decision concerning Schuh’s motion was postponed.

Even without the official intervention, the controversy spread to Munich, the Bavarian state capital, where Matthes found support from various cultural organizations ahead of the film’s Munich premiere scheduled for 6 October. The film was discussed by Munich’s city council, and the protest received the endorsement by many of the city’s leading figures, including Lord Mayor Karl Scharnagl (Bayrische Vaterlandspartei), Clemens von Franckenstein (director of the Bavarian State Opera), and conservative composer Hans Pfitzner.²⁷ Yet the protest also prompted resistance in Nuremberg itself, for instance with the liberal *Nürnberger Zeitung*, the newspaper with the highest local circulation

(90,000). The paper argued, in an article published the same day as the Munich declaration, that given that none of the critics had actually seen the film, the agitation campaign ran the risk of exposing the city to ridicule. In the paper's opinion, the attacks only revealed the ignorance of the local dignitaries, especially concerning the caliber and standing of the film's director, Ludwig Berger: "He is—and outside the city of Sixtus Beckmesser there is general consensus—a top-notch director, he is the man who created Germany's most beautiful films."²⁸

Phoebus-Film, for its part, did not take the assault from self-appointed guardians of German culture lying down. The company launched legal action against the *Fränkische Kurier* for malicious libel and issued a press release that defended the film as a thoroughly patriotic effort, stating that it "sprung from the serious desire to produce a purely German film" and that the Berlin censorship board had officially recognized it as "culturally valuable" (*kulturell wertvoll*, a designation that exempted the film from entertainment tax).²⁹

While Matthes was still collecting signatures for his petition, the Bavarian protests were unmasked as largely disingenuous: newspapers noted that the film had actually been screened to Munich's cultural leaders as early as August, when they had found no fault with it, weeks before they joined the Nuremberg petition.³⁰ Papers also raised the question of who exactly initiated the controversy, offering various speculations: Was it forces at Wagner's stronghold Bayreuth or fanatically *völkisch* orthodox Wagnerians in Munich, or did it involve a conspiracy by right-wing media mogul Alfred Hugenberg, head of Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA), aimed at discrediting the Phoebus Film company as an unwelcome competitor?³¹ Outside Bavaria the quixotic anti-Meisterfilm campaign raised eyebrows, too. Oscar Geller, writing for the *Österreichische Filmzeitung*, mocked the Nuremberg controversy as a manifestation of an irrational anti-Prussian "particularism of the royal republic of Bavaria."³² Berger's film differed so substantially from Wagner's opera, Geller argued, that the controversy missed the point. Moreover, the protests were logically inconsistent: either Wagner's opera was a work of such grandeur that it could not be diminished by a mere film, or, if the film posed such a challenge to the work, then Wagner's opera could not be the timeless, sublime work of art it was hailed to be.

For his part, Ludwig Berger, who in early October 1927 was preparing to follow a call to Hollywood, was clearly taken aback by the vehement backlash against his film. Before his departure to the United

States, he defended himself against his critics in an open letter published in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*: after pointing to the enthusiastic reviews the film had received in Berlin and elsewhere, Berger takes issue with the fact that none of the signatories had actually seen the film, singling out Nuremberg's liberal Lord Mayor Luppe and Ernst Heinrich Zimmermann, director of the city's Germanisches National-Museum, as men of reason and science, for abandoning the academic ideal of basing opinions on evidence rather than mere hear-say. Berger's letter culminates in an interesting rhetorical flourish that turns the tables against the protestors. In their day, Berger claims, Wagner's innovations had faced resistance on the part of self-appointed, philistine guardians of the status quo similar to the criticism leveled against his own efforts at advancing film as an art form: "One consolation: it is the sons and grandsons of those who used to boo Richard Wagner and fell over themselves reviling him in his ardent endeavors on behalf of the nature and renewal of German opera. Today, the nature and development of German film is at issue. And the naysayers promptly report for service again!"³³

In the German press the polemical campaign against Berger's film had become a matter of considerable public ridicule. To put the controversy to rest for Nuremberg, the liberal paper *Nürnberger Zeitung* sent a critic to Munich to view the film there. Upon his return, on 12 October 1927, the paper published the apodictic verdict: "Result: The Nuremberg Protest against the film—which one hadn't seen!—was totally unjustified." Much of the opposition to Berger's film, the critic claims, stemmed from a general middle-class bias against film as a viable art form and from the mistaken assumption that Berger's film aimed at merely rendering the opera: "The very fact that a Wagnerian work was put on film was itself viewed as a desecration." When pointing out that film of necessity has to differ from a stage work, the reviewer argues that once the concerned citizens of Nuremberg were to see the film, they would have to agree that, "in filmic terms, everything turned out excellently, from beginning to end. Hans Sachs, the actual Hans Sachs did not live in some heavenly land [*Elysium*] but in little dung lane [*Kotgäßlein*] in Nuremberg. As he does in the film."³⁴

Mainstream newspapers, if critical of the film, did not openly disclose the antisemitic subtext underlying the propaganda campaign, instead relying on coded language couched in patriotic sentiment. The *völkisch* press, however, was less squeamish: the *Münchener Beobachter* (the local precursor of the Nazi paper *Völkischer Beobachter*), for instance, com-

plained that Berger's film did not feature a "German" Hans Sachs, but a "Jewish" one, a fact noted by Rudolf Kurtz, the editor of the trade journal *Lichtbild-Bühne* and author of the first study of filmic expressionism, who intervened in the debate. Interestingly enough, Kurtz chose as his venue the *C.V.-Zeitung*, the official newspaper of the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens, the largest organization representing Jewish Germans. Echoing many of the points made in the liberal *Nürnberger Zeitung*, Kurtz suggests that the campaign's vitriol was aimed at a director who is "suspected of not being one hundred percent Aryan." To counter such antisemitic prejudice, Kurtz emphatically and approvingly points to the central role that Jews had played in the growth of the German film industry from the very beginning.³⁵

Perhaps it was Kurt Pinthus, writing for the Berlin *8-Uhr-Abendblatt*, who most succinctly summarized some of the many layers of irony that surrounded the campaign against Berger's film. In Pinthus's opinion, Berger, "the most musical of all film directors," had done more than almost any other director to elevate German film to the level of an art form. While *Der Meister von Nürnberg* may not be without flaws, Pinthus notes, it was particularly vexing that it was Berger of all people who had now, alongside his coscript writer and main actor, Rudolf Rittner, come under attack from reactionary circles: "So the grotesque situation has come to pass that Nuremberg's 'Beckmessers' are hurling abuse at the most German of all actors, Rittner; the most idealistic and most artistic German film director; the film that the entire Berlin press had deemed to be typically *deutsch* [German], indeed all-too *deutschtümelnd* [hyper-German]—for "denigrating German art," for "most recklessly violating Wagner," for "denigrating Nuremberg in the basest fashion."³⁶

The disingenuous clamoring for copyright legislation to protect works of art against supposedly willful distortion, Pinthus argues, disregards the differences inherent in each art form, which necessitate that the transposition of an opera onto the screen has to involve changes specific to the filmic medium. Germans should bemoan the fact that Berger has been lured away to Hollywood rather than subjecting one of their most accomplished directors to a racially tinged smear campaign, especially when most critics, by their own admission, had not actually seen the film. It is necessary to protest against the Nuremberg protest, Pinthus proclaims, to come to the defense of the "now defenseless Berger" and "the freedom of German art."³⁷

It is easy to dismiss the controversy surrounding Berger's film as a proverbial tempest in a tea pot. The hysteria was quickly unmasked

as an absurd cocktail of misinformation, misinterpretation, and (racialized) prejudice, and, once debunked, it seemed to have little immediate effect. Not everybody who signed on to the protests and petitions can be labeled racist, antisemitic, or right-wing extremist. Yet the sense that traditional high cultural values were under threat from commercial mass culture for subversive ends obviously resonated with many signatories, even those with no direct sympathies for *völkisch* causes. The controversy exposed major fault lines within the political culture of the Weimar Republic and it was a symptom of the contested status of people of Jewish descent in Germany, characterized by an increasing marginalization and demonization of a minority defined as alien, years before the Nazis came to power.

By 1937 it was no longer necessary to use code to attack people of Jewish descent. In an openly antisemitic diatribe, entitled, *Film-"Kunst," Film-Kohn, Film-Korruption*, Berger's contributions to German film in general, and his *Meister von Nürnberg* in particular, were dismissed: he was declared—as a Jew—fundamentally incapable of tackling a German topic on account of his "racially conditioned sensibility" (*rassisch bedingten Empfindung*), that inevitably had turned his film into a "cynical affront" (*zynische Herausforderung*).³⁸

The mindset that manifested itself in nascent form in the controversy over Berger's film in 1927 had real, and tragic, consequences: Berger, who returned to Germany in 1931 after his stint in Hollywood, lost his job at UFA film in 1933, as part of a purge of Jewish talent. Forced into exile, to Amsterdam, he miraculously survived the German occupation. Robert Liebmann, the coauthor of the film script, was also dismissed by UFA in 1933 and fled to France. He was arrested in 1942 and murdered in Auschwitz in July 1942. Berger's brother Rudolf Bamberger was arrested in Luxembourg, where the Bamberger family owned a brewery, in 1944, and deported to Auschwitz, where he was killed in January of 1945.

The symbolism surrounding the city of Nuremberg came full circle in 1949, when the victorious Allies chose the city as the site of the trials that sought to hold leading Nazi officials accountable for the genocidal madness of the Third Reich, attesting to the constantly changing status of the city, described by Stephen Brockmann as "an imaginary space in which conceptions of Germany and Germanness came into being over many centuries."³⁹ The controversy surrounding Berger's *Der Meister von Nürnberg* of 1927 suggests that, for some, the conception of Germanness did not include German citizens of Jewish descent.

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Notes

1. L.W., "Der Nürnberger Protest gegen den Film *Der Meister von Nürnberg*. Eine einmütige geistige Erhebung," *Fränkischer Kurier* (5 October 1927).
2. "Deutsche Großfilme!" *Film-Kurier* 178 (30 July 1927): 1.
3. James H. Belote, "CIA-Report: The Lohmann Affair," *Studies in Intelligence* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1960): A35. See also "Die Phoebus-Affäre," *Österreichische Filmzeitung* 48 (26 November 1927): 12.
4. Felix Henseleit, "Der Meister von Nürnberg," *Reichsfilmbblatt* 36 (1927): 45.
5. "Wieder ein großer Tag der Phoebus—der gleichzeitig ein Ehrentag für den deutschen Film bedeutet: die Uraufführung des *Meisters von Nürnberg* im Capitol," *Film-Kurier* 210 (6 September 1927): 1.
6. Press review quotes taken from an ad in the trade journal, *Lichtbild-Bühne* 217 (10 September 1927), 3: "ein deutscher Film, eine Freude darum, weil das Deutsche an ihm echt ist und nicht gewollt" (*Berliner Lokalanzeiger*); "der beste und größte Film des Jahres" (*Abendpost-Nachtausgabe*).
7. B., "Die Filme der Woche," *Die rote Fahne* 10, no. 214 (11 September 1927).
8. Henseleit, "Der Meister von Nürnberg," 45.
9. L.W., "Eröffnung des Gloria-Palastes. Saisonbeginn in Frankfurt a. M.," *Film-Kurier* 219 (19 September 1927): 2; "Der Meister von Nürnberg-Film als Festvorstellung in Köln," *Film-Kurier* 224 (22 September 1927): 2; "Der Meister von Nürnberg," *Österreichische Filmzeitung* 49 (3 December 1927): 16.
10. Press-clipping entitled "Meistersinger-Film mit zweisprachigen Titeln," *New Yorker Staatszeitung* (undated, presumably, after the December 1929 U.S. premiere), Ludwig Berger Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, folder 18.
11. For instance, Oscar Geller, "Münchener Notizen," *Österreichische Filmzeitung* 43 (22 October 1927): 32.
12. A.W., "Der Meister von Nürnberg. Festvorstellung im Capitol," *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* 66, no. 416 (6 September 1927): 1–2.
13. Hugo Rasch, "Schutz dem Urheber!" *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* 38 (23 September 1927): 958.
14. See Gerhard Splitt, "Richard Strauss und die Reichsmusikkammer—im Zeichen der Begrenzung von Kunst?" In Albrecht Rietmüller and Michael Custodis, eds., *Die Reichsmusikkammer. Kunst im Bann der Nazi-Diktatur* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015): 21.
15. Hans Rudolf Veget, "Das Meistersinger-Land," "Wehvolles Erbe." *Richard Wagner in Deutschland. Hitler, Knappertsbusch, Mann* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2017): 175–80.
16. Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 84.
17. "Der Jud' im Dorn" was published in the first edition of the Grimm's famous collection of German fairytales, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1815). See Veget, "Das Meistersinger-Land," 176.
18. L.H., "Capitol: Der Meister von Nürnberg," *Berliner Tageblatt* 56: 435 (11 September 1927); and Herbert Ihering, "Der Meister von Nürnberg," *Berliner Börsen-Courier* (6 September 1927).
19. Ernst Jäger, "Film-Kritik. Der Meister von Nürnberg. (Capitol)," *Film-Kurier* 210 (6 September 1927).
20. "Reise zum Meister von Nürnberg." *Nürnberger Zeitung* (12 October 1927).
21. Rasch, "Schutz dem Urheber!" 958.
22. Wilhelm Matthes, *Der Meister von Nürnberg*. Neue Schändung eines deutschen Kunstdenkmals," *Fränkischer Kurier* 269 (29 September 1927): 3.
23. "Doch nehmen wir dieses ungeheure Verbrechen an den 'Meistersingern' als endliches Signal zum Losschlagen. In diesem Fall muß der Gegenstoß von Nürnberg kommen!" Matthes, *Der Meister von Nürnberg*, 3.
24. Alfred Rosenberg and Wilhelm Weiß, *Reichsparteitag der NSDAP Nürnberg 19. /21. August 1927* (Munich: F. Eher, 1927).
25. "Der Nürnberger Protest," *Fränkischer Kurier* (5 October 1927).
26. Stadtarchiv Nürnberg, Stadtratsprotokolle C 7/IX, no. 412 (5 October 1927), item 19.
27. "Auch München protestiert gegen den Film *Der Meister von Nürnberg*. Schärfster Einspruch des Münchener Theaterausschusses und Musikbeirates. Forderung eines gesetzlichen Schutzes für deutsches Kulturgut," *Fränkischer Kurier* (6 October 1927).
28. "Skandal in einer kleinen Residenz?" *Nürnberger Zeitung* (6 October 1927).
29. "Die Phoebus A. G. klagt." *Nürnberger Zeitung* (7 October 1927).

30. L.W., "Nürnberger Chronik. Lampe gibt seine Unterschrift zu einer lächerlichen Angelegenheit?" *Fränkische Tagespost* (6 October 1927).
31. There is no mention of Berger's film or the propaganda campaign in the official organ of the Bayreuth Festival, *Bayreuther Blätter*, in the 1927/28 period.
32. Geller, "Münchener Notizen," 32.
33. "Ein Trost: es sind die Söhne und Enkel derer, die Richard Wagner auspfeifen und nicht genug schmähen konnten, als er sich heiß um das Wesen und die Erneuerung der deutschen Oper bemühte. Heute geht es um das Wesen und die Entwicklung des deutschen Films. Und die Pfeiffer stellen sich wieder pünktlich ein!" Quoted in "Reise zum Meister von Nürnberg."
34. "Reise zum Meister von Nürnberg."
35. Rudolf Kurtz, "Der Meister von Nürnberg. Völkischer Protest gegen die Nürnberger Uraufführung," *Central Verein-Zeitung* 41 (14 October 1927): 582.
36. Kurt Pinthus, "Nürnberg gegen die Meistersinger. Ludwig Bergers Abschied," *8 Uhr-Abendblatt* 236 (8 October 1927): 234.
37. Pinthus, "Nürnberg gegen die Meistersinger," 234.
38. Carl Neumann, Curt Belling and Hans-Walther Betz, *Film-"Kunst", Film-Kohn, Film-Korruption; ein Streifzug durch vier Film-Jahrzehnte* (Berlin: Hermann Scherping, 1937): 38–39.
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