

## EXILE EPISODE 4

**MANDY PATINKIN:** So I want to take you back. Back to May 1940. Europe is at war. Cities are bombed out. Citizens are exhausted. Western Europe is collapsing beneath the Nazi onslaught. Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland are gone. Belgium and the Netherlands are falling into Hitler's hands. And the Nazis have just begun their lightning invasion of France.

*(CLIP - WORLD WAR II RADIO BROADCASTS)*

**EDWARD R. MURROW:** *News of Hitler's criminal invasion came rolling into London...of five nations.*

**WILLIAM SHIRER:** *Good evening, this is Berlin. The decisive battle of the war has begun...*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Nestled in the mountains along the French and German border lies neutral Switzerland. Here, German exiles and refugees - artists, activists, leftists, and Jews - watch and wait.

One of those exiles is a German-born Jew named Kurt Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld managed to stay a few steps ahead of the Nazis. Through his struggle for life and freedom, he's come to realize that his best weapon against his oppressors is art. Specifically, theatre.

**WENDY ARONS:** He had an artistic mission in life that also coincided with his times, that turned him into somebody who had a kind of visionary impact on the field.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Hirschfeld is the Dramaturg of Zürich's beloved Schauspielhaus. One of the most important theatres in the German-speaking world. And, at the time, one of the only theatres that the Nazis didn't control.

**WENDY ARONS:** And it's at a moment of real danger in Switzerland. The Swiss think that they are next on the list to have the Nazis march across their border.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** For years, Hirschfeld had been playing a dangerous game, programming subversive productions - fearlessly political and pointedly moral. Plays that he knew would anger the Nazis who were watching from afar. He was risking his life and the lives of his colleagues.

On the evening of May 12, 1940, German forces rolled through recently invaded Belgium. They were overtaking the Netherlands, Luxembourg and France. The scale of the calamity - and their peril in once-safe Switzerland - was growing more clear.

**WENDY ARONS:** The entire company like has their bags packed backstage and people are listening to the radio while the production is happening because, you know, there's this fear that they're going to have to evacuate the theatre and go into hiding at any moment.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Despite the danger on its borders, Hirschfeld and company make a bold choice. They put on Goethe's second part of the famous play, "Faust", a story of good vs evil.

*(CLIP - GOETHE'S FAUST)*

**VOICE ACTOR:** *Solch ein Gewimmel möcht' ich sehn,  
Auf freiem Grund mit freiem Volke stehn.*

**WENDY ARONS:** There was just this sense in the theatre that they were all in it together in terms of their kind of sense of endangerment and their solidarity of kind of what the kind of political message of this play was at that moment, which was a message of the little man against the machine that was about to come and devour it.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Later Hirschfeld would speak about the significance of this night. He said:

"That night we knew, we learned, and we would never forget what theatre can be. An audience that understood every second of Goethe's Faust."

Faust is about a man who makes a deal with the devil for unlimited knowledge and everything he wants on earth. But that night, the audience understood a deeper meaning - that it was about unholy political partnerships. And with Switzerland teetering on the brink of war, Hirschfeld understood that in this moment, at this time, theatre was a very powerful weapon.

*(OPENING THEME)*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Welcome to Exile - a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism.

Kurt Hirschfeld and the choice he made for art and truth, is a story about how far a person will go, how willing they are to risk their life for what they believe in.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** It's June 29th, 1934. A disheveled, toothless man steps off a night train in Badenweiler, Germany. The station is empty. It's pouring rain. You wouldn't know it from his appearance, but Wolfgang Langhoff used to be a dashing leading man. Thirteen months in a concentration camp has left its mark.

Just a year and a half before, Hitler had been made Chancellor of Germany. Within weeks, he had centralized his power, and began eliminating his political enemies. Communist Party members, left-wing intellectuals, Jews and artists were being rounded up by the thousands and thrown into prototype concentration camps. Among them was Wolfgang Langhoff.

**WENDY ARONS:** Okay, so Wolfgang Langhoff who he was born in 1901. He was a handsome and charismatic actor-director. He was one of Germany's most popular leading men and he was arrested and imprisoned the day after the Reichstag fire. And this was shocking. Imagine if, like Lin-Manuel Miranda or Billy Porter or Leonardo DiCaprio were arrested and imprisoned, like what kind of an uproar that would cause within, you know, the theatre community.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Wendy Arons is a professor of dramatic literature at Carnegie Mellon University. Like Hirschfeld, she's also a professional dramaturg - someone who helps guide the production of a play by offering context and critical feedback to the director and the actors as well.

**WENDY ARONS:** So Langhoff is arrested and imprisoned and I don't think that the theatre community knows this at the time, but he is also brutally tortured while he's in basically what is a concentration camp or an early concentration camp.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In a bizarre twist of fate Langhoff is released in 1934 - part of Hitler's so-called "Easter Amnesty" program. Toothless and frail, but free...at least for the time being. Because the truth is Langhoff's life is still in danger.

Enter stage left: Kurt Hirschfeld.

Both men theatre professionals, and enemies of the Nazi state. One, a communist, had spent more than a year in a concentration camp - the other, a Jew, had escaped to

Switzerland just in the nick of time. Both men are well aware of the gathering Nazi storm and they know they aren't safe.

**WENDY ARONS:** So Langhoff takes a train to the German Swiss border near Basel, and Hirschfeld goes to Basel and arranges for two friends to go across the border and smuggle him over the border into Switzerland. The three men get drunk on schnapps at a pub on the other side of the border in Germany, both to fortify themselves and also to provide themselves with a kind of cover story for their late night crossing the border. And according to the history, the three men slip across the border, past the border guards in heavy rain. And it turns out that it's just in the nick of time because the evening that they cross the border is June 30th 1934. This is the Night of the Long Knives when Hitler has all of his, you know, henchmen assassinated and the borders around Germany are hermetically sealed, like an hour after these three men cross.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The Night of the Long Knives. A purge of perceived enemies that included high ranking members of the Nazi Party. Cementing Hitler's power.

Langhoff owes Hirschfeld his life. And he'll never forget it. As a German-Jew living in exile, Hirschfeld would have had an intimate understanding of what Langhoff had gone through to get to Switzerland.

**WENDY ARONS:** In March 1933, the Nazi party took control of the German government and it began its purge of communists and anti-fascists and Jews from all sorts of levels of life, but in particular from the theatre. And Hirschfeld, who had already been kind of warned that he was going to be— he was on a blacklist and that he was in danger, had already moved out of his apartment and into a hotel, and he arranged to have himself spirited out of Darmstadt to Berlin.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Both Langhoff and Hirschfeld came of age in a very different Germany than the one they ran from.

After World War I and before the rise of the Nazis, Germany - and Berlin in particular - was buzzing with a kind of artistic renaissance. Today, ideas of what life was like in the Weimar Republic live on in our popular imaginations, in musicals like Cabaret and Bertolt Brecht's, Threepenny Opera. Hirschfeld would have surrounded himself with artists of all types. And it was here that his ideas about the power of theatre began to form. He explained his theory like this:

“The audience cannot simply ‘go along.’ It continually finds itself confronted with situations that pose questions. And through this, the theatre fulfills its mission to be a forum.”

And don’t forget - radio and cinema were still in their infancy. Theatre was the great popular and intellectual art form, drawing huge crowds from all walks of life. Ideas were presented. Politics debated. Controversies exposed. And if you were in that world at that time, you were part of an evolution.

As a Jew with a platform and a political cause, life for Hirschfeld in Germany became more and more untenable and he knew his life was in danger. A job offer, as dramaturg of the Schauspielhaus, would save his life. But it would mean he would never go home again.

**WENDY ARONS:** It was also difficult for the artists working in the theatre in Switzerland because they were also constantly being sort of watched by the Nazis, particularly through factions within Switzerland who were friendly to the Nazi party and who kind of wanted to see Swiss theatre align itself more with fascist ideology with Germany. It was a tricky and difficult kind of situation to navigate.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The notorious chief of propaganda for the Nazi Party, Joseph Goebbels, threatened to send Hirschfeld and his colleagues to a concentration camp if they crossed the border into Germany again.

*(JOSEPH GOEBBELS SPEAKING)*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** One can imagine hearing the broadcasts from Germany - a constant reminder of the danger just over the border.

*(JOSEPH GOEBBELS CONT'D)*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** But Hirschfeld wasn't going to let the threats hold him back. As part of the 1933/1934 season, the Schauspielhaus produced several new works by exiled German writers and contemporary international playwrights. All carefully chosen for themes that struck directly at the madness of the time.

November 8th, 1934. The Schauspielhaus is packed. Friedrich Wolf's provocative new play, “Professor Mannheim”, is to receive its worldwide German-language premiere. It's hugely controversial. For Kurt Hirschfeld, that is precisely the point. The play is about the persecution of a Jewish doctor under Nazi rule. News of the production sparked a

protest. In front of city hall, protestors chanted for the cleansing of Switzerland from all immigrants.

The lights go dim. The audience hushes and the curtain rises. The actors take the stage. But just minutes after the play begins, a crowd storms into the theatre. They hurl makeshift stink bombs and Jewish slurs. Outside the theatre, protesters and police clash, leading to dozens of arrests. Despite the violence, the threats, once the theatre is cleared, the play goes on. A newspaper later reported:

“The audience was clapping and trampling several times during the play, especially when someone on stage attacked the Third Reich.”

The Schauspielhaus had become a theatre that provoked conversation, critical thought, and a full spectrum of emotion - from awe to anger. But Hirschfeld's work had just begun. In 1938, Hitler had swallowed Austria, turning it into a province of the Third Reich. The question was - would Switzerland be next?

**WENDY ARONS:** There were forces within Switzerland that would have been all too happy to have the Germans come and annex Switzerland just as they did Austria and Czechoslovakia. So even though Switzerland actually never did come under Nazi control, when the Cultural Ministry of the Third Reich began to pursue its policy of cultural conformity across the German-language territories, it put the Swiss-Germans and particularly Swiss-German theatres under a lot of pressure to steer clear of work that would be critical of Nazi policies. They did it through infiltrating Swiss theatres with Nazi sympathisers and through a lot of diplomatic pressure at the top level of government.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Hirschfeld was aware this was happening and was under pressure to comply. He just knew he needed to find a different way to push back. He'd find the answer in the classics. Plays like Lessing's "Nathan the Wise" and Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell". The Nazis would not easily be able to complain about these plays. But, still, these inoffensive choices contained timeless messages of hope, freedom, and humanity.

This decision impacted his audiences more than Hirschfeld could have ever imagined. As Hitler expanded his grip on Europe, Hirschfeld put on Goethe's 1773 drama "Götz von Berlichingen", a story about a German knight who defied the absolute powers of the monarch. In the play a famous line is read, "Long live freedom". Normally this line prompts thunderous applause. But during this particular spring evening, the audience remained dead silent. The silence itself was a message.

But it's what happened next that theatergoers would remember forever. When the main character performed his famous soliloquy about when absolute power and tyranny are finally defeated...the audience erupted. In an interview years later, lead actor Ernst Ginsberg talked about how he never forgot that moment. He said:

"These are moments in the life of an actor when you realize that our profession has not only an aesthetic, but an absolute meaning."

Hirschfeld and company premiered dozens of original works - constantly challenging themselves and their Swiss audiences to confront the reality of what was happening right next door. One of the most famous was the world premiere of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage" - arguably the greatest anti-war play ever written. It's considered a prime example of the kind of theatre Hirschfeld fought to preserve - and its style is a combination of the high and the low, the beer hall and the cabaret, hearkening back to a happier time.

Today we know that Hitler never invaded Switzerland. But in the fog of war, there was widespread fear in Switzerland that an invasion was imminent, making Hirschfeld's choice, to push back against fascism with art, even more astonishing.

(CLIP - VE DAY RADIO BROADCAST)

**QUENTIN REYNOLDS:** *Good evening, this is Quentin Reynolds reporting. Today is VE day, plus 350. 350 days since we smashed the Nazis into submission. In those 350 days since VE day, peace has come to America. And whether the opportunity for a lasting peace this time...*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Hirschfeld and the Schauspielhaus had survived the war but not without unimaginable loss. Much of the family whom he left in Germany were gone.

**BERNIE BLUM:** In World War II, there was an effort to get my grandfather and my step-grandmother out, unsuccessful.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Bernie Blum is Kurt Hirschfeld's nephew. He's also a trustee of the Leo Baeck Institute.

**BERNIE BLUM:** And they died in the Holocaust. They went to Riga, which was just a death camp. Period.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** By the end of May, Germany had entered into an unconditional surrender with the allied forces. Europe was broken. And there was a long road of rebuilding ahead. Hirschfeld played his part.

**WENDY ARONS:** After the war was over, the Schauspielhaus was in a position to essentially jump start theatre in Germany and Austria. They had scripts that had been translated and actors apparently stayed up through the night typing scripts so they could send them off to colleagues in Germany and Austria. So what that meant is that the repertoire that they had staged during the war years was replicated almost immediately throughout Germany and Austria.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In 1950, the mayor of West-Berlin wrote to Hirschfeld, asking him to be the new director of the Schiller-Theater - an offer he turned down. He wrote that the opportunities he got and the connections he made in Zürich had created an obligation and a bond, and that he intended to stay. For nearly 20 years, from his home in Zürich, Hirschfeld produced hundreds of plays from all around the world.

**BERNIE BLUM:** He did Tennessee Williams, "A Streetcar Named Desire", months after the premiere in New York. And that gives you a sense of who he was and what he did, that he saw the quality of the work, he had the communications with the playwright, and he was able to put it on the stage in Zürich.

**WENDY ARONS:** Many of the works that he programmed went on to achieve canonical status in the theatre history repertoire during the 20th century. In hindsight, he has this terrific track record in selecting plays that would later become 20th century classics. I don't think it's too great a stretch to propose that Hirschfeld's activity in programming this international repertoire helped to shape and determine the mid 20th century Western dramatic canon.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In 1963, one year before he died, Kurt Hirschfeld did go home. He went back to accept a major cultural award and staged a play in Hannover, near the town where he was born. During the Nazi reign, Bertolt Brecht wrote an essay about the five difficulties in writing the truth. As we look back at Hirschfeld's life and legacy, you have to wonder if he too read these words:

"Nowadays, anyone who wants to fight lies and ignorance and write the truth...must have the courage to write the truth, even though it is suppressed everywhere...the cleverness to recognize it, even though it is concealed everywhere...the skill to make it fit for use as a weapon...the judgment to select those in whose hands it will become effective...and the cunning to spread it amongst such people."



*(CLOSING THEME)*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The Kurt Hirschfeld Collection in the archives of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York includes Kurt's correspondence, notebooks, director's scripts, photos, and set designs. The entire collection can be viewed at [www.lbi.org](http://www.lbi.org).

**VOICE ACTOR - TEASER:** On the next episode of Exile...

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Now, everything has been turned inside out. She's freshly divorced. She's walked away from a cushy life and is embarking on an 18-month long trip from Venice to China, retracing Marco Polo's famous route. Radical choices for a woman in 1926. And another radical thing: somewhere on this massive ship is a traveling companion - her new lover.

**VOICE ACTOR - TEASER:** A controversial Berlin artist blows up her world - unknowingly preparing for an inspiring life in exile, where beauty and art are the only constants.

**VOICE ACTOR - LENE SCHNEIDER-KAINER:** All the longing within me turns into prayer. If one has suffered, one has the right to rejoice again.

**VOICE ACTOR - TEASER:** Lene Schneider-Kainer...on Exile.

**VOICE ACTOR - CREDITS:** Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions.

It's narrated by Mandy Patinkin.

Executive producers include Kathleen Goldhar, Stuart Cox, Katrina Onstad, and Bernie Blum. Senior producers are Kevin Sexton and Debbie Pacheco. Associate producers are Hailey Choi, Jacob Lewis, and Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf. Sound design and audio mix by Mitchell Stuart with help from Philip Wilson. Theme music by Oliver Wickham.

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