

Song of Resistance: The Karl Adler Story

Episode 23 of *Exile* with Mandy Patinkin

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MANDY PATINKIN: It's 1933. Fritz Meininger, a former student at Stuttgart's New Conservatory of Music, has requested an emergency meeting with chairman Theodor Bauerle to discuss an urgent matter. Normally, the chairman would expect Karl Adler, the school's director, to be present at such a meeting. But just two days ago, Karl was attacked in the street by a Nazi gang, after months of being slandered in the press for teaching German music as a Jew. Quickly, though, it becomes apparent that this situation suits Herr Meininger. In fact, it's Karl Adler that he wants to discuss.

FRITZ MEININGER: Herr Adler will no longer remain director of the conservatory. Act quickly before it is too late. Soon, there will no longer be negotiations in Germany, only orders.

MANDY PATINKIN: This was the first sign that Karl's role at the Conservatory was in jeopardy. But it wouldn't be the last time he'd have to redefine his place in the music community.

THEME MUSIC

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. Today, the story of a man who sacrificed his own safety to unite a community in song.

THEME MUSIC OUT

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl Adler was born in January 1890 in the small village of Bittenhausen, in the Swabian Alps of southwest Germany. The Adlers were among the oldest Jewish residents in the village. Adler's great grandfather, Jakob, had moved to the area a century before. By the time Karl was born, more than half of the

population of Buttenhausen was Jewish, but it was an area where Christians and Jews had lived peacefully together for a long time. Karl's parents, Louis and Mathilde, ran a clothing shop. They may have expected their only son to follow in their footsteps. But Karl had a special gift.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: Already, as a kid, he was a very good singer, mostly in religious contexts.

MANDY PATINKIN: This is Matthias Pasdzierny, a Berlin-based musicologist.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: Music was one of the few branches of education system in Germany where it was very early possible for Jews to study.

MANDY PATINKIN: When he was 12 years old, Karl's parents sent him to nearby Esslingen to receive training at the teacher's college. At 18, he passed his teachers examination. Shortly after, he became a cantor—a singer who leads a Jewish congregation in prayer. For a short time, he was employed as a teacher and singer at a Jewish school. But Karl wanted to keep learning.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: He decided and was supported by his family to study opera singing. And he studied on this, back then, royal music conservatory in Stuttgart. Somewhere he wrote that he would like to become a part of the court opera in Stuttgart. That was his idea, to become one of these heroes.

MUSIC: Madama Butterfly by Giacomo Puccini

MANDY PATINKIN: In 1912, Karl joined the ensemble of the Stuttgart Royal Court Opera.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: He would have been a part of this ensemble there to represent the richness of the king and entertain these kind of people.

MANDY PATINKIN: But his singing career was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. Karl was an enthusiastic volunteer.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: He was young and strong and tall, and also very nationalistic. And when the First World War began, he said, where are the weapons? I will go there and fight and defend my fatherland.

MANDY PATINKIN: An artist, and a Jewish one at that, risking his life on behalf of the German state. Matthias says that this was fairly typical.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: It was a strong national movement back then. There were hundred thousand Jewish soldiers in the German army. And a lot of composers, they were internationally very connected. When the First World War started, they immediately compose very nationalistic compositions. It's not like the cliché today where you would think everyone would have been against the war or something like that.

MANDY PATINKIN: In war, Karl was quickly distinguished by his bravery. Before long he rose to the rank of lieutenant, and was known for his reliability and good judgment. But the war was brutal.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: He was in the part of the army that was in France. And, I mean, it was an awful war. Fighting 500 meters and 10,000 people are dying.

MANDY PATINKIN: One day in the winter of 1915, during an especially brutal battle, Karl was hit in the head by shrapnel. He ended up with a wound, and a severe concussion. It took Karl a while to recover, and he had a lot of time to think.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: For him, this whole thing of war and particularly this injury also was kind of a awakening for him or like a rupture in his life. Before he wanted to make a career, to become an opera singer. He has now a totally different approach to music and culture in comparison to before. He really wanted to change the whole cultural system substantially. There's a whole generation coming back from the war deeply traumatized and thinking that the society they are living in, that it couldn't go on like it was before.

MANDY PATINKIN: At the end of the war, King Wilhelm II was deposed, along with other German rulers. The Royal Court Opera was gone. But even joining the State Opera didn't appeal to Karl.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: He starts to write a lot. He's like a missionary. In Germany it's called *Denkschrift*, it's like a memorandum? And he's writing one after the other about the music education system, about choirs, about the general role of music in the life of human beings in the society. It was not anymore about, like, becoming a virtuoso. He's calling it "*l'art pour art*".

MANDY PATINKIN: Art for art's sake, not for personal glory or acclaim, but for the people. It's a grand idea, but it would take some work to shake up an entire education system. As it turned out, Karl was not alone. While fighting for his homeland, Karl had made friends with more politically-oriented people who were thinking along similar lines to him.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: The ideal of the social democrats in that time was to educate people from the working class, to give them a chance to get in a bit better position, especially when they experienced this war situation where all of these people from the working class, they were just used like material, like blood and flesh material.

MANDY PATINKIN: In 1918, Karl's friend Theodor Bäuerle invited him to set up a music department for Stuttgart's Association for the Promotion of Public Education. Karl headed up the department for a few years, but he wanted to further shake up the way music was taught.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: His idea was to found a new music education system on a professional level, but with a totally new spirit, and not with a goal to produce only professionals, but to give everyone access to this kind of top level music education.

MANDY PATINKIN: In 1921, Karl took over an amateur department that had been spun off from the Stuttgart University of Music, and turned it into the New Conservatory of Music. It struck a chord with the musical community of Stuttgart.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: They had people studying there. They really made a career in professional music. And also, on the other hand, a lot of people, they just did it for self growth. It was all about participation. Everyone could come together and sing together, like to feel as a community. It was modern and innovative in, like, more in a sociological way, but not so much in an artistic way.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl made sure his conservatory had an accessible price point, as well as accessible teaching methods. He built the curriculum around the German Baroque music that he loved—Handel, Bach—relying upon teaching techniques that meant anyone, no matter their background, could learn to sing in a choir.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: It's called “tonika-do method.” So you can use your hand to train people in singing. They don't even have to be able to read scores. You can just give them some like signals with the hand, and so with this, they can sing.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl brought a wide range of people together and created a community around the music. That new community included a young woman named Grete, who would become Karl's wife. The couple married and had a son, Fritz. As the years passed, Karl's conservatory went from strength to strength. The number of students rose from about two hundred in 1921 to more than one thousand within a decade.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: It's really impressive. He was a person that could really attract people to come to this new institution. He must have been very charismatic. But he made a lot of enemies because the old conservatory, they were very afraid of, like, losing money and losing power and in the first years of the Nazi period, they were thinking about who would be the figures to give this signal or this threat? To make everyone know what's going on now.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl had become one of the most prominent musicologists in the Stuttgart scene. And in the early 1930s, amidst celebrations of the school's 10 year anniversary, he was attacked in the Nazi press as the party started to question who should be allowed to teach and perform German music.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: The review is saying he's doing a great job, but he's a Jew, so he shouldn't do it. And it's very dangerous for us. I think that made him also for the Nazis so dangerous, because he did all the same stuff that they wanted to do. But in their logic, he was not German. So he was dangerous. So they really made an example out of his case.

MANDY PATINKIN: To Karl, these reviews came as a huge shock. He felt as German as they come.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: People like Karl Adler in the beginning, couldn't believe that the Nazis mean it for real. It's just temporary. They always said, yeah, they mean some other people, but not me because I'm a German. I'm super nationalistic. I gave my body to this country. So it cannot be that this country is going to expel me now.

MANDY PATINKIN: His colleagues at the Conservatory stood behind him, unanimous in their support for Karl. But their words weren't enough to protect him. On March 13, 1933, Karl was standing in the garden of his apartment when three masked men ambushed him and attacked him with a steel rod. When he was found, he had a fresh head wound, right next to the one he received fighting for his country during World War I. The police didn't apprehend the gang, but everyone knew. This was an antisemitic attack. The police took Karl into custody, supposedly for his own safety, but two days after the attack, he left of his own accord. There was a devastating surprise waiting for him. A former student of Karl's named Fritz Meininger, who was now a member of the SA, had reported a number of serious allegations against Karl to the conservatory.

FRITZ MEININGER: Herr Adler will not be returning to his post, one way or the other. It is up to you to avoid further unpleasantness by getting Herr Adler to resign from his post. If you fail to do so, we will take the matter further.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl's old friend Theodor Bäuerle, stood up for him and his character. But Meininger pressed on, accusing Karl of sexually harassing his students.

FRITZ MEININGER: The whole atmosphere in the conservatory must be described as queer. There are impure conditions. In the director's room, as well as in the entire conservatory, female employees have to disappear with Adler in the office as well. Things are so bad that the conservatory has even already been called a brothel.

MANDY PATINKIN: Meininger parted with a final threat.

FRITZ MEININGER: It will be good if you intervene very quickly. Because in a day or two, events could happen that I would like to spare the conservatory. I would be sorry if, in a few days, I had to stand before you as a brownshirt and give you orders. Because soon, there will no longer be negotiations in Germany, only orders.

MANDY PATINKIN: To exonerate himself, Karl requested an investigation from the Ministry of Culture, but they said it was out of their jurisdiction, since the conservatory was a private institution. Then, just a week later, a new law came into effect stating that all non-Aryan civil service workers must leave their positions, including cultural institutions like state-run opera houses, theaters, music halls, and conservatories. This time, the Ministry of Culture didn't care that Karl's conservatory was a private institution. They wanted him to resign. He had been made a victim of his own success.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: That's also, of course, part then of the infamous Nazi argumentation. The conservatory was, business-wise, highly successful. Ah, of course there was one of these Jews, you know, they know how to do

the business. So it was only, all the thing was only about money. We see that all our music culture is only exploited by these guys, of course, then we shut it down immediately.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl was forced to leave the Conservatory he had built from the ground up. In solidarity, the board resigned with him. And in a letter Karl wrote to a former colleague who turned on him, Karl made it clear that he would not go quietly or with his head bowed in shame.

MUSIC: The Abduction from the Seraglio: Overture by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

KARL ADLER: During the war, as German soldiers at the front, we considered it beneath our dignity to continue fighting an enemy who had become defenseless. In contrast, you are not content to see a man who has fought and bled in the field for his country robbed of his life's work. I don't want any pity. But I won't give away an ounce of my honor either.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl was at a loss for what to do next. His life's work had been snatched away, and once again, he needed to pivot. But before long, he heard an unexpected idea from Berlin.

LILY HIRSCH: The April Civil Service laws effectively dismissed Jews from any state run positions in music and theaters, all of these talented creative folks, suddenly without jobs.

MANDY PATINKIN: This is Lily Hirsch, a musicologist and author. Kurt Baumann, a German Jew working at Berlin's Municipal Opera House, had drafted a proposal for a Jewish cultural association after he had been dismissed from his job, just like Karl.

LILY HIRSCH: Kurt Bauman thought, here was a population in need of an income, in need of a place of refuge, and a Jewish organization that supported theater and music could be that. That could give jobs to those who had lost their positions at state-run institutions in music and theater, and it

could also be a place for Jewish people that felt increasingly unwelcome at institutions supporting the Aryan population.

MANDY PATINKIN: The curious thing was that the Nazi Party, the power that had fired all these artists to begin with, agreed with Baumann's proposal.

LILY HIRSCH: They negotiated these terms and they came up with this plan, that the organization was going to be staffed only by Jewish artists, and it would have to be financed by the all-Jewish audiences. For the Nazis, they had a way to oversee the Jewish population. They also had a way to force their ideology, this segregation of not only Jewish people, but also Jewish music to separate them from German music.

MANDY PATINKIN: It would be called the Jewish Culture League, and would also function as an effective propaganda tool for the party. Hannah Kroner, who was a dancer in the Berlin chapter of the League, remembers it clearly.

HANNAH KRONER: It was kind of the sign to say we are good to the Jews, they even have their own theater. Particularly in the year 1936, when the Olympics came to Berlin and the whole world was in Berlin, so it was very important to show how good we Jews were being treated.

MANDY PATINKIN: Although conditions were far from optimal, the League served as a lifeline to Jewish artists and audiences around Germany.

HANNAH KRONER: When you are an artist, you know, basically, the show must go on. And even under those conditions, once we were on stage and the curtain opened, the show had to go on to the very best of our abilities. I like to think that the performance was strong enough to give the audience some hours of thinking other than their current problems and of having some kind of entertainment that really moved them into another world.

MANDY PATINKIN: Early on, Karl established a chapter of the Jewish Culture League in Stuttgart. Within a short time, he assembled a large choir and a symphony

orchestra. The first concert was on December 19, 1933. It was a Hanukkah celebration. Karl stayed true to form, programming a mixed evening of music with German composers and familiar Jewish folk songs to celebrate the holiday. Two weeks later, the evening received a glowing write-up in a local Jewish newspaper: "Fifteen hundred people from our community, regardless of class or ideological position, fifteen hundred Jewish people sit next to each other and document a new Jewish will to live." Karl also remained true to his ideals, holding "open singing" events, inviting non-musicians to participate in temporary choirs. His concerts and activities helped many to endure the misery of an increasingly dark everyday life.

HANNAH KRONER: The people who put this together were courageous and artistic, and strong leaders in a field that needed them.

MANDY PATINKIN: For five years, the Jewish Culture League managed to weather numerous losses of musicians fleeing to safety, and increasing restrictions on what they were allowed to perform.

LILY HIRSCH: They had this idea that naturally these organization members would perform Jewish music simply because they are Jewish. So they didn't think they had to put into these terms "and you have to play Jewish music" initially. So it was over time that they slowly had to constrict the repertoire. And there was never a list that they were given that said, you can't perform these composers. What would happen is the performers would submit the repertoire, because that's what they were supposed to do. And they would receive the list back with things crossed off. So from that, they became aware of what was allowed and what wasn't. Richard Wagner, no. Anton Bruckner, no.

MANDY PATINKIN: Then, following the devastating events of Kristalnacht in November 1938, the Nazis banned all further events of the Stuttgart Jewish Culture League, and any other Jewish businesses and organizations. Along with many others, Karl was arrested by the Gestapo. But even in prison, at great personal risk, he taught music and breathing exercises to his fellow inmates, even though oral communication was forbidden. After eight days and nights in prison, the Nazis let

him go. But Karl had to promise not to engage in any future cultural activities. Karl became the director of the *Jüdische Mittelstelle*, or Jewish Centre, in Stuttgart. He acted as a liaison between the Nazis and the Jews in the region. Again, Musicologist Matthias Pasdzierny.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: If you see this life of Karl Adler, he comes always in the position of this kind of middleman or networker, and now in this position after 1938, in the so-called *Jüdische Mittelstelle*.

MANDY PATINKIN: The office was beside the synagogue in Stuttgart, which the Nazis had destroyed on Kristalnacht.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: So, I think they choose him because he was so super German, so you could always rely on him. You could always trust him. And in a way, I think his motivation, he was always trying to help people to improve their situation or to improve them as much as he could in these very bad conditions. But still then, of course, he was also used by the Nazis. He was, of course, then very close to the Gestapo, to all these Nazi structures of suppression. I imagine it, like, really strange position, more or less.

MANDY PATINKIN: As the head of the Jewish Intermediary Office, Karl helped his fellow Jews with many things, including finding housing and food, and alleviating financial difficulties. One of the largest tasks, though, was facilitating Jewish peoples' emigration. The office was besieged by desperate people who could find no country willing to take them. Those who managed to emigrate had to leave behind all of their possessions. In this role, Karl managed to save numerous lives, as evidenced in letters archived at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York.

SAMUAL BERNHEIM: My cousin Willy Gideon emigrated to Chicago in August 1939, and handed over my case to you, as I've already been in the concentration camps for 4 years. Thanks to your intervention, I was not sent to Sachsenhausen near Berlin, but was able to emigrate on the last ship to Shanghai. I therefore feel obliged to thank you repeatedly. Yours, Samual Bernheim.

HANS STERNHEIM: It is no merit in itself to reach a ripe old age. But when a man of your caliber reaches the age of 80, the many who know and respect you can look back and remember the extraordinary services you rendered to the former Jewish community in Germany at a time of bitter hardship. With courage and responsibility, you stood up for our brothers and sisters, including my own family.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl also sent his only son, Fritz, to safety in England on the Kindertransport in 1938. Karl spent two years helping other Jewish people find their way to safety. Finally, the Nazis gave him permission to leave. He received an offer for a job doing what he truly loved. He would be a teacher at the New York School of Music. Poems, songs, and tears were part of the sad farewell "party" given to Karl and his wife, Grete, before their departure from the country they still loved dearly, in spite of all that had come to pass. Karl had just ten marks to his name. Starting from scratch at age 51, learning a new language, integrating into this American culture – a daunting task. And then, tragedy struck. Karl and Grete's only son, Fritz, had been living safely in England since 1938. In early 1943, he boarded a ship that would bring him back to his family. But two weeks later, the ship's rudder broke. And it sank. All 88 people aboard were killed, including Fritz. He was only 15. Karl's life was once again in tatters, his family tragically torn apart. In 1945, still deeply grieving the loss of his only son, he wrote to the President of Yeshiva University in New York City, saying that he was looking not for a job, but for a task. His first class contained only "half a student" —a young man with a fraction of a class credit to spare. More and more students enrolled in his classes each semester. And with his trademark dedication, Karl conjured a thriving music department into existence. Even though Karl never returned permanently to Germany, he retained strong links to his homeland. On regular visits home, he campaigned for German-Jewish reconciliation, and lectured on the importance of tolerance. But Karl also wanted to find a way to help other Jewish artists living in exile, people who were once well known in their fields but now forgotten, their jobs handed to other people who didn't want to give them back.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: Stuttgart radio station developed this small recompensation program on the sidelines. The idea was to do it very

unbureaucratic and to give it as a donation to people in emigration from cultures, so writers, musicians, and so, they asked Karl Adler to find emigrants from the musical scene that are, like, in really bad situation that needed support.

MANDY PATINKIN: Karl traveled around New York, following leads and knocking on doors, searching for former stars and stagehands of the German cultural scene.

MATTHIAS PASDZIERNY: It was not so much money, but most of them, they couldn't be professional musicians anymore. And so, they felt that was, like, emotionally very important to feel not to be forgotten. For example, he's visiting a female opera singer telling them she's so poor she doesn't have money to buy her new teeth. So she cannot sing anymore. So stories like that. And then he wrote these letters to this committee in Stuttgart, and then they got these donations, and the people were very thankful.

MANDY PATINKIN: Above all, Karl was deeply committed to the remembrance of the once thriving Jewish population in his home village of Bittenhausen, which had been completely erased by the Nazis.

KARL ADLER: While the economic damage caused by the expulsion of the Jews is still talked about, the human tragedy has almost been forgotten. The young people there hardly know anything about the terrible events of these times. That's why I came up with the idea to put up a memorial plaque with the names of those who were deported and those who died or were killed away from home. "To honor the dead, to teach the living," as it says in an old Jewish memorial book.

MANDY PATINKIN: Today, as a direct result of his unwavering efforts, plaques and memorial stones are scattered throughout the village, in the Jewish cemetery, where the synagogue once stood, ensuring that those who were deported and killed will not be forgotten. Karl Adler died on July 10, 1973, at the age of 83. In 1990, the city of Stuttgart, which he loved so dearly, named a street after him. And in 2007, the Jewish community of Württemberg founded a yearly competition for youth music in

his honor. Their motto is drawn from Karl's long, and storied career: "We are looking for young musicians, and we support them."

THEME MUSIC

ANNOUNCER: The Karl Adler collection at LBI documents his entire career, including his engagement at the Royal Court Opera of Württemberg, his World War I service, and his work with the Conservatory and the Jewish Culture League in Stuttgart. Records of the Jüdische Mittelstelle show Adler intervening with the Gestapo on behalf of Jewish families seeking news of their husbands and fathers who had disappeared or been arrested. A folder of materials he collected about the Jewish history of Buttenhausen includes a photograph of Adler, his voice raised in song, at the dedication of his native town's Holocaust memorial in 1961. See the collection at lbi.org/adler. Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's narrated by Mandy Patinkin. This episode was written by Nadia Mehdi. Our executive producers are Laura Regehr, Rami Tzabar, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our producer is Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf. Voice acting by Cyrus Lane and David Walpole. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson. Theme music by Oliver Wickham. This episode of Exile is made possible in part by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which is supported by the German Federal Ministry of Finance and the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future.