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RECORDARE – NEVER TO FORGET*

Alexander L. Ringer

The honour of delivering this, the first Alan Lessem Memorial Lecture at the very institution to which our lamented friend was so utterly devoted, fills me with a great deal of sadness as well as deep gratitude: sadness, because a quite extraordinary human being, in whom I sensed a kindred soul from the moment we first met more than a quarter of a century ago, will no longer be allowed to spread his many blessings among young and old, his family, students and colleagues, yet gratitude for the unique privilege of having known such a generous heart and such a persistently creative mind about as well as a teacher will ever know any younger man in his temporary academic care. Since, moreover, I came to value him also as a trusted friend in the course of our close association at the University of Illinois, I trust that I shall be permitted a few brief personal reminiscences of that truly remarkable individual, unquestionably the most brilliant of a host of superior graduate students who had the fortitude to subject themselves, at their considerable peril, to my merciless doctoral proddings.

If Alan Lessem is certain to affect for a long time yet to come the thoughts, feelings and doings of all whose lives he touched in one capacity or another, it won't be so much on account of his vast knowledge and commensurate powers of communication, nor even his often uncanny insights, but rather, on account of his unflinching sense of justice, his absolute integrity, the courage of his convictions, strictly human qualities of which I caught a glimpse in the course of our very first encounter in a London hotel lobby. It was during my second Fulbright appointment in Israel, when I found myself in Britain on a fund raising mission for the new musicology department of the Hebrew University. The day before, my official host had mentioned a young Jewish musician from Rhodesia who had completed his studies at Cambridge and now looked forward to an academic career in Israel. And so we fixed an appointment with this decidedly intense, though

* This article is the complete text of a lecture delivered at the memorial celebration in honour of scholar, musician, and teacher Alan Lessem (1940–1991), held at York University on Sunday, 8 November 1992. The event commemorated Alan Lessem's contributions to the field of musicology and the musical community and his service to the Department of Music and Faculty of Fine Arts at York University. (*ed.*)

outwardly very quiet, man who introduced himself as Alan Lessem and soon gave me all the good reasons for his ardent desire to live and work among the Jewish people in their national home. I was struck almost immediately by the affective quality of his plea which brought to mind that part of the daily Hebrew liturgy where the congregation pleads for the gift of understanding not in intellectual terms alone but *be' ahava*, in love. Even so, I felt conscience-bound to voice a note of caution. While his primary area of study had been musical composition, he wished to pursue musicological studies for his doctorate in a country with, for the time being, extremely limited music library holdings, not to speak of a barely started academic curriculum in the field of music generally. In the mid-sixties Israel hardly seemed the place for the kind of advanced historical research he had in mind. And, as for a teaching position, the budding department's future depended clearly on highly qualified faculty with experience and credentials well beyond Alan's M.A. But typically, he was not to be discouraged and soon taught at several non-university institutions in Israel before he and his lovely wife Evelyn decided to come to exchange Tel Aviv's mediterranean beaches for the cornfields of Illinois. The rest, as they say, is history. An outstanding fellowship student, teaching and research assistant, Alan enjoyed the respect and affection of all who got to know him during the few short years he spent with us. For he did his course work faster than anyone else and completed his exhaustive dissertation on the structural interpenetration of music and poetry in Arnold Schoenberg's predodecaphonic works in record time. Published with equally little delay not only in the United States but also abroad in Italian translation, that pioneering study has lost none of its comprehensive value for anyone hoping to gain a better understanding of the composer's complex creative world.

Eventually, to be sure, Alan's interests radiated from Schoenberg to other composers who came to the New World in search of a haven from persecution, and in the process he inevitably turned to Kurt Weill, that other much-maligned and admired musical *enfant terrible* of the short-lived Weimar Republic, who was destined for such resounding success on Broadway. Unlike Schoenberg, who looked upon his highly talented, but temperamentally quite different, younger contemporary with decidedly mixed feelings, Weill shunned the academic scene in the United States no less than he had in Germany and France, and Alan logically concentrated on his primary venue on both continents: the musical stage. But the time left him was short. His engrossing critical reexamination of the *Mahagonny* opera in the surprise *Festschrift* prepared by a number of my onetime doctoral students upon my retirement from active teaching in the spring of

1991, testifies eloquently to what might have been. But Alan did not content himself with that fine contribution. Stubbornly defying his weakened physical condition, he insisted on making a special trip to Illinois in order to offer a second paper in person on that melancholy occasion, an astonishingly original discussion of aspects of closure in the music of Schoenberg. That was on April 28, 1991; half a year later it was my sad duty to present his paper on "The Emigré Experience: Schoenberg in America" at the Arnold Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles where we had very much hoped to meet again. Since fate decreed otherwise, I would like to devote this memorial address to a subject which, I know he would have welcomed: the Jewish experience of Kurt Weill, the cantor's son, as reflected in his creative achievement.

Unlike most of his Jewish colleagues, Weill landed in the United States in 1935 in response to a specific artistic task, the completion and preparation for performance of his music for *The Eternal Road*, a curtailed, and in part drastically altered, English version of the historical pageant *Der Weg der Verheissung* written by Franz Werfel, the noted Austrian novelist and playwright, for the Zionist producer Meyer Weisgal and the legendary director Max Reinhardt. Having had only Werfel's German text at hand, Weill had every reason to anticipate a good deal of time-consuming work on its English adaptation. Still, he hardly expected anything like the two-year delay of the première, due in no small measure to endless artistic quibbles among the principals and, above all, to the contingent financial problems caused in particular by the virtual reconstruction of the Manhattan Opera House's interior to satisfy the often extravagant requests of the perfectionist Reinhardt and/or the visual imagination of his designer Norman Bel Geddes. When, in early January 1937, the curtain finally closed over the first performance of this unprecedented musico-dramatic depiction of millenia of Jewish history, the sell-out crowd of notables from every walk of life, gentile and Jew alike, left indelibly touched, as did the many thousands who filled the theatre night after night until there was simply nothing more that could be done to hold the many creditors, including the entire cast, at bay. In the meantime, though, the otherwise troublesome constant rescheduling had not only prevented Weill's return to France and thus, for all we know, saved his life, but it also gave him the chance to make a critically acclaimed, albeit financially hardly rewarding, Broadway début with the anti-war show, "Johnny Johnson." This, in turn, drew the attention of Hollywood's motion picture moguls. In short, before he and his actress wife Lotte Lenya had time to feel like refugees in a strange country, the American Weill was fully launched.

Meyer Weisgal, that irrepressible showman and fund raiser, confidant of Haim Weizmann, after the war the first President of the newly established State of Israel, the same Weisgal who later himself became President of the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, has given a vivid description of what it was like to try to mediate between three incompatible men of undisputed genius, chosen to collaborate on *The Eternal Road*. The first decisive meetings took place in the early months of 1934 in Salzburg, where Reinhardt then still lived in royal splendor. Werfel in particular had a distinctly assimilationist past to contend with. And Weisgal later reported: "I spent a whole night walking with Werfel in the garden explaining to him, as well as I could, that this was a *Jewish* play – that and nothing else. It was our history, the history of his and my people, that had to be portrayed – not some alien or abstract concept ... Kurt Weill was a quite different kettle of fish. Like myself, he was the son of a chazan, the descendent of a long line of rabbis; but unlike me he had shaken himself free of Jewish life ... He did not appear to me the most suitable choice of a composer for the score of a Biblical pageant; but I had given Reinhardt a free hand, and his instinct turned out to be right."¹

In terms of his family background, Weill was unquestionably the most German of the lot, since he descended from a long line of rabbis and religious teachers demonstrably resident in German lands from the later Middle Ages on. He himself was born and raised in Dessau, the seat of the generally tolerant Ducal House of Anhalt, where his father, Albert Weill, served as cantor of the small but rather well-to-do Jewish community. For more than a century Dessau had prided itself on its most famous son, Moses Mendelssohn, the eighteenth-century herald of Jewish emancipation, biblical scholar and translator, friend and correspondent of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder, and, needless to say, grandfather of Felix Mendelssohn. In recognition of his services, the city's reigning ducal house had supported an excellent Jewish school from the early nineteenth century on. And by 1900, the year of Kurt Weill's birth, the Jewish community had assumed jurisdiction over growing numbers of families "of the mosaic faith" – in the politically correct parlance of the day – living dispersed throughout the tolerant Dukes' commercially flourishing realm. Kurt, the cantor's youngest son, was just eight years old when his father's fondest dream came true, as he humbly offered the congregation's prayer of thanks at the widely reported dedication ceremonies of Dessau's "magnificent new synagogue."² In short, Kurt Weill grew up in a cultural milieu that represented the much-touted German-Jewish symbiosis at its peaceful best.

1 Meyer Weisgal, *So Far* (London: Jerusalem 1971), 120.

2 Ronald Sanders, *The Days Grow Short* (New York, 1980), 11.

During his previous tenure in Eichstätt, a smaller and far less glamorous Bavarian town, Albert Weill had published a volume of Hebrew liturgical compositions for cantor and male chorus that reveals a rather undistinguished follower of Salomon Sulzer, the great Viennese reformer of synagogue music, admired by musicians of all faiths and/or stylistic tendencies.³ How Dessau, a Wagnerian stronghold that liked to think of itself as “the Bayreuth of the North,” might have taken to the strictly diatonic, metrically simple idiom of these modest pieces is anybody’s guess. The elder Weill, at any rate, did leave the cantor some solo opportunities. And these, in turn, are clearly not meant to preclude the kind of traditional improvisation on liturgically appropriate modal patterns, the so-called *Steiger*, that has long been the *hazzan*’s very special musical prerogative. Pure melody would, in the end, always carry the day in Jewish worship with its distinctly Oriental roots, even at a time when functional harmony literally set the tone for virtually all of Western music. Thanks to his cultural conditioning, young Kurt Weill was thus well-prepared for his eventual apprenticeship with Ferruccio Busoni, the German musical prophet of Mediterranean ancestry, who dared to predict that “the future belongs to melody.”⁴

In August 1934, about to immerse himself fully in work on *Der Weg der Verheissung*, the now world-famous composer of *Die Dreigroschenoper* humbly called upon his father for some “really old, genuine, original music, not new, modern. Also,” he wrote, “I would like to have a collection of *Nigen* [Jewish tunes]. By the way, I do not have the intention to use these things directly, but merely want to use them as material for preliminary study.”⁵ A few months later, he told Max Reinhardt: “Above all, my music emphasizes melody over all musical elements.” Although the project at hand virtually mandated reliance on original Jewish motives, he decided to employ any such material “sparingly, i.e., only in connection with the liturgy.” For, as he goes on to explain, “the Jewish liturgy is very poor in real melodies; it consists primarily of melodic formulae and short motives, on which I have often based [the setting of] the rabbi’s readings.”⁶ Some four years later, Arnold Schoenberg reached a similar conclusion in connection with his highly personal version of *Kol Nidre* of 1938. Interestingly enough, Schoenberg’s compositional principles had reflected the essence of this belated insight all along, even though his early upbringing had

3 See Alexander L. Ringer, “Salomon Sulzer, Joseph Mainzer, and the Romantic *a cappella* Movement,” *Studia Musicologica* 11, (1969), *passim*.

4 *Busoni, Briefe an seine Frau*, ed. Friedrich Schnapper (Erlenbach/Zürich/Leipzig 1935), 230.

5 David Farneth, “From the Archives: Retracing *The Eternal Road*,” *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 6: (Spring, 1988), 10.

6 Farneth, *ibid.*

deprived him of most of the musical and religious lore that Kurt Weill absorbed, as it were, with his mother's milk.

Young Weill was actually still in high school when he composed an *a cappella* "Prayer" for the "confirmation," the *bat mitzva* ceremony, of his sister Ruth during *shavuot*, the Jewish Pentecost, of 1915. The following year he drew upon verses of Yehuda Halevi, the greatest of medieval Jewish poets, for *Ofrah's Lieder*, a cycle of five songs for voice and piano that represents an important landmark on his way to musical maturity under the wise guidance of Albert Bing, a Jewish conductor on the staff of the Dessau Court Opera. Nor was the seminal significance of that early song cycle lost on him later on. As David Drew has pointed out on very sound grounds, "he unconsciously returned to its polyglot Jewish-Romantic modes in *Der Weg der Verheissung* and *The Eternal Road*."⁷

Provincial Dessau, let alone Lüdenscheid where during his brief tenure as a young *Kappellmeister* he learned, in his own later words, "everything I know about the stage," were by that time at best melancholy memories for one who had but recently freed himself of the magic spell of that artistic mecca, Berlin, in the heyday of the Weimar republic. From the moment he settled in the German capital, studying first somewhat uncomfortably with Engelbert Humperdinck and then, to his lasting satisfaction, with Ferruccio Busoni. Berlin's celebrated cosmopolitanism affected all his thoughts and actions, musically, dramatically, and indeed politically. And as a result, he soon occupied a special place of honour among the prime targets of reactionary guardians of "Aryan culture," not only at home but also abroad. In this regard, the quite unexpected phenomenal success of *Die Dreigroschenoper* during the final year of the Republic's short-lived economic boom, which carried his fame well beyond the German borders, proved anything but an undivided blessing. As for the unassuming composer in his later twenties, thrust suddenly into the company of his country's international *Prominente*, he never fell victim to that pervasive illusion which in Werfel's Prologue to *The Eternal Road* causes the "rich man," the Jew "who has arrived" to boast: "I am a respected man among those others, too, and like them and their equal in every way. The king has addressed me on more than one occasion and has bidden me to his very table."⁸ Some of Weill's more immediate colleagues had obviously fallen into that ubiquitous trap. Not so Meyer Weisgal's "different cattle of fish," the cantor's son who in 1923, the very year of Adolf Hitler's abortive Munich Putsch, had set the prophet Jeremiah's fifth chapter of Lamentations over the fall of Jerusalem for a *cappella* mixed choir and children's choir. *Recordare* was the title of that little known choral masterpiece dedicated to his

7 David Drew, *Kurt Weill, A Handbook* (London, 1987), 104.

8 Franz Werfel, *The Eternal Road*, transl. Ludwig Lewisohn (New York, 1936), 6.

brother Hanns, the patient correspondent of his youth and *spiritus rector* of the Jewish cultural circle in Halberstadt where, as a youngster favored by the prewar House of Anhalt, Kurt had earned some of his first public musical laurels.

Recordare was still written under the watchful eye of Busoni, as was Weill's *Sinfonia Sacra*, his opus 6, and, for that matter, a song cycle for baritone and orchestra based on Rainer Maria Rilke's "Book of Hours," *Das Stundenbuch*. Rilke's sophisticated lyricism, with its judicious mixture of religious and erotic symbolism, fascinated Weill's generation in much the same way that Stefan George's poetry had appealed to Arnold Schoenberg and his more immediate contemporaries. Paul Hindemith, in fact, completed the first version of his Rilke cycle, *Das Marienleben*, just a few short months before Weill embarked on *Das Stundenbuch*. Before long, though, with the forces of reaction steadily gaining ground, it was the radical left which hailed *avant-garde* art as the true vanguard of a genuinely humane new moral order, and Weill gladly did his part. Yet a decade later, fleeing from the Gestapo across the French border one dark night in March 1933, the now world-famous composer faced his uncertain future with the inner strength of one still firmly rooted in the spiritual soil of his ancestral culture.

Not a few escaping from Germany that year, or in the years to come, must have felt close to Werfel's "Estranged One," who had thought of himself as "wholly one with the people of this land . . . and did not wish to be reminded of you – and the past." Even now in his unexpected predicament he dares to tell his fellow victims: "I shall be honest with you! I would not have come back, had not the people recognized my face." Franz Werfel, Alma Mahler's third husband, may well have spoken for himself in this instance but surely not for his musical collaborator, mindful at all times of his people's long and painful trek on the road to national renewal. When, three years after the end of a devastating war, that elusive goal was finally within the "saving remnant's" blood-soaked grasp, Weill again did what he could to advance that seemingly unending cause, albeit with the hastily prepared *pièce d'occasion*, *A Flag is Born*, drawing considerably, though not unreasonably, on music from *The Eternal Road*.

During the intervening decade Weill had managed to establish a solid reputation as a sophisticated, yet remarkably popular, composer of Broadway musicals. At last financially secure, he obviously enjoyed life with his wife Lotte Lenya on their small countryside property not too far north of New York City. But the outbreak of World War II brought new worries, especially when it appeared that Field Marshall Rommel's Panzer divisions might well be able to push through Egypt all the way to Palestine where the elder Weills had found refuge just about the time their son reached the United States. By 1943, evidence of the Nazis' genocidal war against the Jews was mounting rapidly to the point

where the newly naturalized American Kurt Weill took the gruesome reports seriously enough to look desperately for ways, like Arnold Schoenberg but unlike most of his fellow citizens, to forestall the worst. *Recordare*, the biblical command never to forget the murderous crimes perpetrated by Amalek upon the children of Israel in the wilderness, had also been the underlying theme of much of *The Eternal Road*, as it transported the audience from one historical station of Jewish suffering to the next. In contrast to Johann Sebastian Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, its presumed model, Werfel and Weill sought to depict rather the collective calvary of the Jewish people persecuted through the ages by those who perversely invoked the very name of a Jew in justification of what was, in effect, a hideous chain of offenses against a powerless minority. Those undeniable correspondences between the Bach Passion based on the New Testament and Weill's musical dramatization of some of the most poignant historical moments in the Old certainly conceal a good deal of undoubtedly deliberate symbolism. Still, while Werfel proved himself to be more than Picander's equal, Weill in his boundless admiration for Bach would have regarded as sheer sacrilege any comparison with even the least of what Bach produced as a matter of daily routine, let alone his crowning achievement for voices and instruments. This admiration did not prevent him, however, from shaping the role of the Rabbi in *The Eternal Road* in the image of Bach's evangelist, just as Bach alone could have inspired the *Allegro giusto* fugue "Gott schuf im Anfang" (In the Beginning ...), not to mention several numbered fugatos inserted apparently as afterthoughts in response to some last-minute stage requirements.

In more general terms the eighteenth century left its unmistakable traces in a variety of dance melodies, such as Schimons' *Siciliano* in the first act or the "tempo di Minuetto" of the last. Yet this sort of musical historicizing appears perfectly compatible with the traditional Hebrew elements, whether the *Echa* mode of the Book of Lamentations as read on the Jewish national day of mourning, the Ninth of Av according to the Hebrew calendar, which governs the opening Lento, or the *Ahava raba* mode with its typical augmented seconds of the *Allegro non troppo* which follows. Recurring references to the Ninth of Av hymn *Eli Tsion* (Wail Zion and its dwellings) and the *Adon Olam* (Lord of the universe) melody for the three pilgrimage festivals introduce chorale-like melodic patterns, though with obvious Jewish associations. But to his lasting credit, Weill resisted the temptation of more literal Bach imitations in the manner of Michael Tippett who in his Passion-inspired oratorio, "A Child of Our Time," demonstratively assigned to Negro spirituals the decisive structural position of Bach's Lutheran chorales. Weill, the past master of musical parody and paraphrase, stuck to his longtime principle of re-composition even when going many an extra mile on the wellnigh endless *via dolorosa* of Jewish history.

The American composer Marc Blitzstein, who visited Weill in Paris during the early months of 1935, found him "at work upon his next 'grosse Wurf,' a huge oratorio-spectacle—*The Road to Promise*." Moreover, he added, "a private piano performance of this work indicates to me that it is Weill's best score." Whereupon, as if in explanation of a fellow Jew's total devotion to this particular task, Blitzstein relates an incident that took place just a short time before, during the first performance of Weill's *Ballade de César*, not in Nazi Berlin but in the French capital under the premiership of Pierre Laval of later Vichy notoriety. "We have enough bad musicians," Florent Schmitt, one of France's senior composers, screamed at the top of his aging lungs, "without having to import German-Jewish ones." Two years earlier he had marred Madeleine Grey's rendition of selections from Weill's last German work, *Der Silbersee*, with shouts of "Vive Hitler."⁹

Painful events, such as these, could not but leave their imprint on the creative efforts of one who had sought refuge from persecution in the supposed haven of freedom, fraternity and equality, the home of Jean Jaurès, advocate of a humanitarian form of socialism as the only "road of promise" to peace and happiness for all. Like Schoenberg chased from Mattsee as an undesirable Jew already in the early twenties, Weill must have experienced a violent shock, if such was needed, into the reality of his Jewishness after years of hope that socialism with its notion of universal brotherhood would also dispose of the so-called "Jewish question" once and for all. What had lured so many Jewish artists and intellectuals into the socialist fold was precisely the conviction that the ideals of the Hebrew prophets of old would find their modern realization in that classless paradise envisioned by an admittedly thoroughly alienated descendant of the Jewish people, contemptuous of all established religion, Christian as well as Jewish. Early Soviet Marxism-Leninism had tended to reinforce this unfortunate misconception. The new Tsarism of Joseph Stalin, however, now appeared bent on outdoing the pogromist mentality of his archenemy Hitler, as his henchmen accused and convicted loyal Jewish comrades, among them a number from Germany, of crimes never committed, indeed of thoughts never thought by men and women who as ardent communists had sworn off any and all connections with their religious heritage.

Latent religious motives were, of course, no rarity among committed socialists. Kurt Weill's Christian contemporary Johannes R. Becher, in his later years Minister of Culture of the German Democratic Republic, at first saw in Karl Marx above all a prophetic figure caring for the disenfranchised, the downtrodden, in accordance with early Christian precepts eventually espoused by Martin

9 Marc Blitzstein, "Theater Music in Paris," *Modern Music* (March–April 1935): 132–133.

Luther, the central figure in that author's strictly Protestant education. Becher's first play quickly caught the young Weill's attention hardly by sheer accident. The Weimar Republic was still in its infancy. The rightist Kapp-Putsch had been squashed, to be sure. But none of the governmental coalitions that succeeded each other in short order seemed capable of generating a sufficient measure of political and economic stability. Poverty was rampant, especially among the countless only recently demobilized veterans. It was in this social climate of general hopelessness that Becher's verse drama *Arbeiter, Bauern, Soldaten* aroused the interest of the budding composer deeply disturbed by conditions in the German capital, if only because it was actually "more quasi-religious than Marxist in its socialist vision, as its amended sub-title indicates: *The Awakening of a people to God*."¹⁰

Especially curious, given Weill's later involvement with Werfel's *Der Weg der Verheissung*, is Becher's explicit reference to a mythical *Land der Verheissung*, a promised land of social justice. Small wonder that for a moment the twenty-year old Busoni pupil appears to have played with the idea of using that Becher *Festspiel* for a timely oratorio. To be sure, nothing came of it nor of *Sulamith*, the projected *Chorfantasie* presumably inspired by Hermann Sudermann's novel *Das hohe Lied* (the Song of Songs). Since it went no further than a few short fragments, one can only speculate about the possible psychological impact of the peculiar fact that Sudermann's characters include "the composer of an unfinished setting of the Old Testament Song of Songs."¹¹

In the works that saw completion under Busoni's benevolently critical supervision, the religious connotations remained by and large limited to such general terminology as *andante religioso* or "like a chorale." *Recordare* is the notable exception. For, in this arguably most important, stylistically at any rate most advanced, piece to emerge from that decisive period in Weill's esthetic as well as ethical development, he speaks to his generation in no uncertain terms: remember the sinful decline in public and private morality, the lack of social responsibility, that led to the decimation of Europe's youth in a fratricidal war; remember the trespasses of God's own people and their horrendous consequences for ancient Jerusalem, the holy city, in the days of the prophet. Remember and beware, but also hope. Let the surviving remnant repent and return to the Lord of heaven and earth who craves not vain rituals but compassion and justice for all. Certainly, Weill himself never forgot, except that, like

10 Ronald Sanders, *The Days Grow Short*, 47. For the pertinent facts, see David Drew, *Kurt Weill*, 128–29. In factual matters Sanders, his obvious devotion to his subject notwithstanding, is unfortunately not always reliable.

11 Drew, *Kurt Weill*, 125.

Jeremiah, he was increasingly unwilling to accept formal religion as a valid substitute for genuine religiosity. It was in fact his penchant for the latter which brought him ever closer to the views of men like the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber on the one hand and, on the other, the closet-Protestant preacher Bertolt Brecht who put his stock in socialism as the only guarantee for a future worthy of man fashioned in the image of his Maker.

Meanwhile, however, German postwar antisemitism had already proven far more vicious than its prewar variety. For all we know, it was the assassination of Walter Rathenau, Germany's first and last Jewish foreign minister, in broad daylight in the streets of Berlin which caused Kurt Weill soon thereafter to warn: "remember, don't forget." But few would listen. It was to take nearly half a century for *Recordare*, masterly though it is in every way, to receive a first hearing – a quarter of a century after the defeat of Adolf Hitler, who had defied public law and order so brazenly the year it was written. Hitler, of course, had used his unconscionably brief period of detention to write his party's catechism *Mein Kampf*, serving notice on the Jews of Europe that his war of extermination against them had merely been postponed. The antisemitic harangue, "Die Juden sind unser Unglück," assigning responsibility for every evil in the world and most emphatically the German defeat in the great war to the small Jewish minority, never subsided. And given the German penchant for *Kultur*, it made eminent political sense to single out the proportionally large number of Jewish artists and intellectuals as utterly contemptible conspirators sworn to destroy Western civilization, the glory of the Aryan race.

Many an intended target, thoroughly assimilated and barely conscious of his or her Jewish descent, quite logically looked to the left for active resistance. Others retreated into the sterile shell of art for art's sake. But some, whether inspired by the teachings of a Martin Buber or not, began to reappraise their own cultural inheritance with an eye on both what it offered the creative individual and, above all, its possible socio-political implications for the collective future of the community at large. Arnold Schoenberg was but one of several prominent individuals who turned to Zionism after painful personal reminders of the liabilities and responsibilities that come with one's Jewish birth.¹²

Hitler had, in fact, not yet reached the exalted military rank of corporal when Richard Beer-Hoffmann early in the war began work on a trilogy conceived, it would seem, as a Jewish response to Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, in which David, the biblical hero, takes the place of the teutonic Siegfried. Following the example of Wagner's *Rheingold*, no doubt, Beer-Hoffmann wrote an evening-filling *Vorspiel*, "Jacob's Dream," that saw the Berlin footlights

12 See Alexander L. Ringer, *Arnold Schoenberg – The Composer as Jew*, (Oxford, 1990), *passim*.

within a year of the war's end, produced and directed with great success by none other than Max Reinhardt. In the unlikely event that Weill missed it then, he surely must have attended one of the performances given in Hebrew by the visiting *Habima* theater group seven years later, when *tout* Berlin vied for seats to the season's undisputed theatrical sensation. Whatever the case, in Beer-Hoffmann's play the antagonist Samuel ridicules and pities Jacob as a fool: "God's chosen whipping boy" on whose "suffering back His lash drives home His Godhood to all other tribes on earth

Thou art His sacrifice! servest but as witness,
 The incorruptible, whom He may trust:
 Who still can doubt, when thou – by Him downtrodden,
 Bleeding to death, still praise thy God as just?
 Ever thou hopest each trial will be the last,
 That God would tempt thee only this once more ...
 Make thyself free: no judge is throned up there
 Who will thy torture as atonement score¹³

Kurt Weill, too, had tried to "free himself," albeit it in the sincere conviction that God's favorite whipping boys were duty-bound to bring every possible political means to bear upon the powers-that-be in a modern secular world of reckless greed and manifest contempt for the masses of ordinary people whose hard labours ensured the welfare of the ruling classes in the first place. The novelist Jakob Wassermann in his autobiographical essay, "My Life as a German and Jew," spoke of his German-Jewish contemporaries as the *Jacobiner* of the period, determined to transplant the Messianic ideals of Judaism from the religious to the purely social realm, whatever the consequences for them personally.¹⁴ In other words, the prophetic tradition was alive and well in the twentieth century, but in a political, though equally utopian guise and, for that matter, on grounds no less realistic than in the days of old. Seen in this rather pertinent light, Kurt Weill's aims and achievements throughout the decade preceding his forced departure from Germany reflect precisely that deep sense of religiosity, as opposed to formal religion, in which Martin Buber recognized Judaism's only hope for the future.

As the "biblical mystery play," *The Eternal Road*, draws to its inexorable conclusion, the multi-tiered stage "bursts into radiance" upon "the procession of Biblical figures" from Abraham to Isaiah and Jeremiah, behind them the entire

13 Richard Beer Hofmann, *Jacob's Dream*, transl. Ida Benson Wynn (New York, 1946).

14 Jakob Wassermann, *Mein Weg als Deutscher und Jude* (Berlin, 1921), 118.

“timeless congregation of Israel, led by the rabbi with uplifted Torah-scroll and by the Estranged One’s son.” Ascending the heavenly stair this “eternal procession of Israel” intones Psalm 126: “When the Lord brings back the redeemed to Zion, then shall we be like unto dreamers ...” Weill, whose parents had been lucky enough to secure a British permit to settle in the land of Zion, sang that perennial song of hope with all his heart and all his soul still long after he had come to accept America as his personal Zion. In the New World, he later recalled, he had felt at home virtually from the moment he arrived, and his three and a half decades in Europe gradually vanished from his purview. But when the first reports of Hitler’s war against the Jews began to reach the United States, he was deeply shaken. Most Americans tended to believe the majority of politicians and journalists who characterized the steadily growing evidence of unspeakable horrors as “vastly exaggerated,” if not “typically Jewish” propaganda. Weill, on the other hand, who had witnessed various Nazi excesses throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, sensed the full extent of the truth even before Ben Hecht, the popular novelist and screen writer, dropped a veritable bombshell in the February 1943 issue of *The Reader’s Digest*. Citing irrefutable documentation conveyed to him by Haym Greenberg, the editor of *The Jewish Frontier*, Hecht described the mass murders in all their gruesome detail and called for immediate steps to prevent the worst. Not unexpectedly, however, few in America, though honestly committed to the war against an evil that threatened all of mankind, were ready to accord the Jews in the enemy’s hands “special consideration.” And with President Roosevelt, like the Department of State, unwilling to explore what few options remained open for those not yet caught in Europe, even the American Jewish establishment, Zionists not excluded, seemed reluctant to press the issue. Ben Hecht, always a man of action, did what he could on his own initiative but with little initial success. His autobiography, *A Child of our Time*, offers a vivid account of the tumultuous events at the home of George S. Kaufman, who had managed to gather some thirty American-Jewish writers and one composer to hear Hecht’s impassioned appeal for immediate pressure on the British to unlock the doors of Palestine as a last resort before it was too late. “Who’s paying you to do this wretched propaganda,” Edna Ferber shouted, “Mr. Hitler or is it Mr. Goebbels?” After the hurried exodus that followed had subsided, two of the visitors approached the dejected speaker. First came Moss Hart who promised help with “anything definite in the way of Jewish propaganda.” Whereupon, “Kurt Weill, the lone composer present, looked at me with misty eyes. A radiance was in his strong face. Please count on me for everything,” Kurt said.¹⁵ Soon thereafter Billy Rose, the Broadway producer, joined Hecht and Weill, and

15 Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century* (New York, 1954), 552–53.

together this dedicated trio mounted the pageant *We Will Never Die* in Madison Square Garden as "A Memorial to the Two Million Jewish Dead of Europe." New York's Governor Thomas E. Dewey had proclaimed 9 March 1943 an official day of mourning for Hitler's Jewish victims, and some forty thousand people are said to have attended the two performances given that evening; another twenty thousand crowded the streets outside and listened to the performance of Kurt Weill's great music piped over loud-speakers. Before long, Ben Hecht assumed the co-chairmanship of the "Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe," and again Kurt Weill and Billy Rose were by his side, ever ready to give generously of their time and talents to the cause of their fellow Jews in dire straits. "All our cohorts had seemingly melted away," Hecht later wrote, "except Kurt. My composer friend was unmeltable. He was a piece of Jewish obsidian."¹⁶ The one-time pacifist composer of Bertolt Brecht's socialist plays had become a fervent supporter of Jewish national aims which, he realized, could only be attained by the force of arms. His final collaboration with Ben Hecht, *A Flag is Born*, was staged for the explicit purpose of raising funds for the "American League for a Free Palestine," the American wing of the militant Zionist organization, *Irgun Tsva'i Leumi*. Weill was hard at work on his "American opera" *Street Scene* at the time, hence felt constrained to draw heavily upon his score for *The Eternal Road*, as indeed he had for much of *We Will Never Die*, from which he borrowed in turn his original arrangement of the traditional *Kaddish*. Back then, in March 1943, he was busy planning his "musical comedy" *One Touch of Venus*, in the words of one of his biographers, "the most completely 'Broadway' of Kurt Weill's scores."¹⁷

The dichotomy sacred and secular or, if you wish, heaven and hell, so important for Christian lore and practice, never had much significance for the Jewish people who were called upon to sanctify every aspect of their daily lives. Kurt Weill's creative achievement exemplifies this particular characteristic in any number of ways, though perhaps nowhere quite as strikingly as in the *Kiddush* dedicated to his father in 1946 on Purim, the festive day recalling one of the rare joyous events in Jewish history: salvation from the clutches of the Jew-hater Haman in ancient Persia, thanks to the courage and determination of the Jew Mordechai and his beautiful niece, Queen Esther. In this short setting of the traditional Hebrew blessing over the ritual wine on Sabbath and holiday nights, many of the disparate yet strangely interconnected elements in the life and music of the cantor's son are joined literally in perfect harmony. Weill obviously recalled his father singing the *Kiddush* both in the synagogue and before the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 576.

¹⁷ Ronald Sanders, *The Days Grow Short*, 329.

festive meal at home with much affection. Not only is his Hebrew prosody near perfect, but the vocal gestures, too, in some general ways bespeak his loving recollection. But the American Weill also wished to pay homage to his adoptive country, while paying tribute to those who were born there yet, not unlike the Jews of Europe, had remained underprivileged, their signal contributions in the field of music in particular notwithstanding. Thus, he chose the blues, the musical outpouring of the black man's beleaguered soul, as his musical frame of reference, mindful perhaps of the fact that for hassidic Jews, too, dancing is anything but anathema.

Cantor Puttermann of New York's Park Avenue Synagogue, who had commissioned the piece, sang it with his choir for the first time on 10 May 1946, the sixth anniversary of the Nazi invasion of neutral Holland, which resulted in the eventual eradication of most of Dutch Jewry. Just about a year after that memorable première of one of Kurt Weill's least known pieces, he left the United States for a much delayed reunion with his aged parents in Naharia, close to the Northern border of what was then still Mandate Palestine. What he saw and heard there left an indelible impression. As he wrote to Maxwell Anderson, his American Brecht: "one sees happy faces everywhere, youth, hope, and the general theme is construction."¹⁸ Various projects envisioned for the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation and *Habima*, the company that had triumphed with *Jacob's Dream* in Berlin twenty years earlier, came to naught. He did, however, manage to produce an original orchestral version of *Hatikva*, the Zionist anthem, in anticipation of Jewish statehood which was finally declared two years, almost to the day, after Cantor Putterman premiered his *Kiddush*.

"Three things cannot be kept out – the wind, the rain and the Jew." This poignant sentence from *A Flag is Born* might be said to apply in a particularly meaningful manner to the life and work of the cantor's son, Kurt Weill, whom nothing managed to keep out, neither the radical left nor Hitler, and certainly not his more timid fellow Jews. And yet, though determined and decisive, he was far from aggressive, perhaps he always remained "in," even when surface appearances suggested otherwise. He was, of course, not alone in this regard at the time and in the environment that conditioned him and to which he, in turn, contributed so much. What does make his case rather exceptional are the many-splendored creative lessons he drew from that time and environment, the lasting works that resulted without much fanfare yet, when all is said and done, turn out to proclaim in countless different ways our perennial obligation not to forget: *lo tishkach*, *recordare*, to remember always – in contrition as well as in joy.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 363.