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Pragmatism paves the way? *A scholar's adventurous exit from Nazi Germany*

BAIJAYANTI ROY

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Abstract: This paper examines, on the basis of hitherto unexplored archival materials, the unusual trajectory of the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943) who succeeded in slipping through Nazi control and migrating to England with his family in 1939.

Zimmer, who taught at the University of Heidelberg, lost both his teaching license and his honorary title of professor in 1938 since his wife, Christiane, daughter of the famous Austrian poet and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, was classified as a first grade Mischling (of mixed race) by the Nazi regime. The 'pure Aryan' Heinrich Zimmer was considered 'jüdisch versippt' (in this context: married to a Jew) which rendered him unsuitable for professional work according to Nazi racial politics.

This paper argues that Zimmer offered political and intellectual resources to the Nazi state for which he could get a degree of latitude. He also received some amount of solidarity from his colleagues since they wanted to retain this renowned scholar for the sake of the university's prestige. By analysing the complex relationship between Zimmer, the University of Heidelberg and the Nazi state, the article contributes to the history of the University of Heidelberg during the Third Reich and provides a new perspective on Heinrich Zimmer.*

Introduction

Any study of German universities during the National Socialist years involves a number of issues, the foremost among them being the one of continuity/discontinuity of academic personnel after 1933, following the regime's targeting of those it considered 'racially and/or politically unsuitable.' Another issue pertains to the politicisation of universities in ways envisaged by the regime. For academics affiliated to the universi-

* The author wishes to thank Prof Jörg Gengnagel for providing valuable information and the University of Heidelberg for the memoirs of Heinrich Zimmer.

ties, such politicisation often entailed making the pursuit and production of knowledge, i. e. research and teaching conform to the ideological demands of the Nazi regime. The National Socialist ruling dispensation expected that the German universities should contribute to the 'rejuvenation of national spirit' and to the strengthening of the bonds of the national community or *Volksgemeinschaft*. For academics, this often involved ignoring, tolerating, and in some cases even encouraging the marginalisation and eventual expulsion of colleagues who were victims of National Socialist politics.

While academic studies have generally focussed on the fates of victimised scholars after their emigration, the ways in which many of these scholars responded to the Nazi state's racist and repressive policies before they actually came to the point of emigration or in some cases, to more tragic ends like suicides or deportations, have not been studied in similar depth. Likewise, there are not many academic studies examining the relatively rare instances of solidarity or help granted to victimised scholars by their more fortunate co-workers.

The trajectory of the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943), affiliated to the University of Heidelberg, provides an interesting case study of the ways in which this casualty of Nazi racial politics tried to battle his fate, a battle in which he received a certain amount of support from his colleagues at the University. This case study also brings to light the loopholes and ambivalences of the Nazi racial policies and their implementation.

Heinrich Zimmer was the son of the Keltologist and Indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1851–1910). Zimmer junior obtained his PhD. in Indology at the University of Berlin in 1914. He fought in the World War I as a volunteer. In 1922, he joined Heidelberg University where he completed his Habilitation and obtained his *Venia legendi* or teaching license. In 1926, he was given the honorary title of professor for Indology, though he was not given tenure. Thus he could not become a tenured civil servant and was paid a modest stipend instead of a proper salary.

In 1928, Zimmer married Christiane von Hofmannsthal, daughter of the famous Austrian poet and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose family had converted from Jewish orthodox to Catholic faith a generation back. Nazi racial policy categorized Christiane von Hofmannsthal as a first grade *Mischling* ('mixed race'), since both her maternal grandparents were 'fully Jewish'. Hence, Zimmer, a so-called 'Aryan', was, according to Nazi parlance, *jüdisch versippt* – which in this case meant that he was in an undesirable marriage with a person of Jewish origin.

As the persecution of Jews was stepped up over the years, Zimmer's position became increasingly precarious, culminating in the revocation of his *Venia legendi*, as well as his title of professor in 1938. However, despite being under surveillance, Zimmer succeeded in fleeing to England with his family in March 1939. The family moved to New York in 1940, where Zimmer lectured on Indian Philosophy as a visiting professor in Columbia University. He died of a lung infection in March 1943, soon after he received an offer for a non-tenured faculty position at the same University.

This biography of Heinrich Zimmer is well known.¹ This paper focusses on some of the lesser known aspects of Zimmer's life story. It examines the complex relationship between Zimmer, the authorities at the University of Heidelberg and various ministries of the Nazi state. The article claims that there were several factors contributing to Zimmer receiving a degree of latitude which facilitated his exit from Nazi Germany.

One such factor, the article argues, is that Zimmer offered intellectual and political capital to the ruling dispensation. Another issue which this article examines is whether Zimmer could benefit from the fact that the so-called 'mixed marriages' remained relatively safe from the worst excesses of Nazi anti-Semitic policies because the policy makers were unsure about how to deal with what they considered to be miscegenation. Related to this is the subject of Nazi cultural politics, which involved exercising caution in taking a public stance against the daughter of a cultural icon and concerns about tarnishing Germany's image in the world by expelling an internationally reputed scholar from a prestigious German university.

The article also claims that one aspect that positively influenced Zimmer's case was a shared self-image of the academics at the University of Heidelberg who saw themselves as a clique of elite intellectuals. This self-perception sometimes generated a kind of solidarity among academics that transcended partisan politics.

A micro historical analysis of these aspects, with the help of hitherto unused archival materials show that Zimmer's was an 'exceptional normal' case, in which certain scholars could re-negotiate, in varying degrees, the boundaries of victimhood and collaboration in the University of Heidelberg under the Nazi dictatorship.

'Hopelessly apolitical?'

In his unfinished and posthumously published memoirs, tentatively titled 'Notizen zu einem Lebenslauf' (Notes on a Resume), written in America shortly before his death, Zimmer stated that he was 'decisively and hopelessly apolitical'. He claimed that neither the 'humiliating and disastrous' Treaty of Versailles nor the wave of enthusiasm for communism made an impression on him.²

In this draft, Zimmer conveyed the impression that he spent his life in a perpetual inner exile, always removed from the political currents of his time. The description of his youth, particularly his comments about his research guide Heinrich Lüders, who was a member of the conservative nationalist Deutschnationale Volkspartei (DNVP),

1 For biographical information on Zimmer, see the obituary of Zimmer written by Helmuth von Glasenapp in: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*. 100/1950. 49–51. Also, Valentina Stache-Rosen: *German Indologists*, 216–218.

2 Heinrich Zimmer: *Notizen zu einem Lebenslauf*. 45.

point to a streak of anti-authoritarianism.³ Zimmer wrote that after the war he became mentally free of the earlier generation to which his research guide belonged, a generation whose scholarship focussed solely on philology and positivism and whose politics had brought a disastrous war upon the country. Zimmer claimed that he broke away from this milieu, delving instead into the inner workings of Indian philosophy, literature, myth and art, a transgression for which his research guide never forgave him.⁴

Soon after coming to power, the Nazi authorities took an interest in the personal and political backgrounds of the academics at the University of Heidelberg. Zimmer was initially suspected of having connections with left wing political circles. In August 1933 the ministry of Culture and Education of the state of Baden set the Police to spy on Zimmer. The stated aim of the ministry was to check whether one could use the law passed on 7th April 1933 against Zimmer. This law, euphemistically called the 'Rearrangement of the Professional Civil Servants,' allowed the regime to remove Jews and those considered to be 'politically unreliable' from civil service. The Police could not find any incriminating evidence against Zimmer.⁵ The ministry then asked the Rector of Heidelberg University to check whether actions could be taken against Zimmer on account of his politics. The Rector of the University of Heidelberg at the time was the pro-Nazi legal scholar Wilhelm Groh, who duly complied.⁶

In a letter to the Ministry of Culture, an informant who signed as 'G', (probably Groh himself) wrote that he had heard from the Chancellor of the University that though Zimmer leads a quiet and low-key existence at present, it is beyond doubt that earlier in life he had associated with leftist circles.⁷ In answer to a renewed enquiry a year later, 'G' informed the ministry officials that he had also heard from the Chancellor that Zimmer made 'oppositional remarks', but the Chancellor could not offer any proof to support this claim.⁸ The same question and answer pattern was repeated in 1935, in which 'G' also added a secret report on Zimmer written by a certain Professor Stein.⁹ It is very likely that Professor Stein was none other than Johannes Stein, professor of Medicine and director of the University Clinic. Stein was a member of the SS from 1933, as well as the 'Führer' of the National Socialist teachers Association (NSLB) from the same year. He was also the pro-Rector of the University from 1935 to 1941.¹⁰

3 About Lüder's membership of the DNVP, see Michael Grüttner et al.: Die Berliner Universität zwischen den Weltkriegen 1918–1945. 21, 146.

4 Heinrich Zimmer: Notizen. 44–45.

5 Dorothee Mußnug: Die vertriebenen Heidelberger Dozenten. 108.

6 Groh became a member of the SA in 1933 and officially joined the NSDAP in 1937. Ernst Klee: Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich. 202.

7 Dorothee Mußnug: Heidelberger Dozenten. 109.

8 University Archive, Heidelberg (UAH): PA6483. Letter to Ministry of Culture, Education and Justice. 20.9.1934.

9 UAH: PA6483. Letter to Ministry of Culture, Education and Justice. 27.9.1935.

10 Wolfgang U. Eckart, Ed., Die Universität Heidelberg im Nationalsozialismus. 33.

It is notable that despite all the spying, no conclusive evidence of Zimmer's leftist sympathies were found. For good reason, as will be evident later in this article. It was not his rumoured leftist leanings but his wife's Jewish ancestry that made Zimmer's situation in the University of Heidelberg increasingly precarious, especially after the proclamation of the Nuremberg Race Laws in 1935.

Already in 1934 Stein had informed the Rector, Groh, that Zimmer was not married to an 'Aryan' and that one could not treat Zimmer differently than the others who were in the same situation. Zimmer's fate, he added, would be a hard but necessary one.¹¹ Groh, who was blatantly anti-Semitic, could not have had much sympathy for Zimmer either. In a speech to the entire teaching body of Heidelberg University in 1935, Groh had demanded the removal of those professors who, according to him, were not prepared to advance the revolution in the universities, by which he meant Jewish professors as well as those married to Jews. During his tenure as Rector (1933–36) Groh installed radical Nazis and Nazi sympathisers in key positions of the University.¹²

The approaching storm

Till 1935, even though the eventual dismissal of scholars married to 'Jewesses' (like Karl Jaspers) or to a 'First-grade' *mischling* or 'mixed breed Jew' like Zimmer seemed inevitable, the University authorities as well as the Nazi regime hesitated before taking any decisive steps against them. Considerations of cultural politics seem to have played a role in deferring the inevitable.

The dictatorship was still sensitive to international public opinion at this time. Since both Jaspers as well as Zimmer were scholars known beyond Germany, the regime did not want to besmirch its image in the eyes of the international academia by ousting them.¹³ Similar deliberations of cultural politics till 1937 made the ruling dispensation feel that it was not yet appropriate to take direct measures against prominent and respectable persons of Jewish origin, like the daughter of Hugo von Hofmannsthal.¹⁴

During the early years of the Third Reich, Nazi authorities did not generally feel powerful enough to take legal actions against persons in mixed-marriages. The University authorities as well as the Ministry of Education were aware that there were no legal foundations for the dismissal of the so-called 'jüdisch versippt' professors. The justifications for expulsions of such academics provided by the Reich ministry of Education (Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung) were legally tenuous.¹⁵

11 Dorothee Mußnug: *Heidelberger Dozenten*. 109.

12 Steven P. Remy: *The Heidelberg myth*. 15.

13 *Ibid.* 81.

14 UAH: PA715. Secret report of the Ministry of Culture of the state of Baden, written on 18.3.1937.

15 Arno Weckbecker: *Gleichschaltung der Universität?* 281.

The so-called 'mixed marriages represented an unique challenge to the Nazi regime: On the one hand, intermarriages were affronts to the Nazi ideal of a 'racially pure' and homogenous national community living in perfect harmony under the 'Führer. ' On the other hand, the regime was reluctant, at least in the initial years, to provoke protests and dissent by breaking up families since the dictatorship needed a degree of domestic peace and popular support.¹⁶

Presumably for these cultural and political reasons, the Ministry of Education for the state of Baden decided in May 1936 to continue Zimmer's stipend till June 1938.¹⁷ Similar considerations delayed Karl Jaspers' dismissal till 1937. The expulsion of Jaspers was presented as 'voluntary retirement on grounds of ill health' by the Ministry of Education, which ensured the philosopher a pension.¹⁸

At the same time, the University authorities seemed to have quietly begun preparing for Zimmer's eventual dismissal. From Winter Semester 1936\37, just a few months before Zimmer lost his license to teach, Hermann Güntert, the pro-Nazi specialist of German language and Indo-European religion who was also the dean of the philosophical Faculty of the university till 1937, began to lecture regularly on ancient Indian themes which fell in the sphere of Zimmer's academic expertise. This move was in all likelihood aimed to marginalise Zimmer.¹⁹

Most academic studies undertaken by Güntert were aimed at establishing the racial affinity between Indo-Germanic languages and Germanic people.²⁰ Thus, Güntert's scholarship was more compatible to the ubiquitous and malleable concept of 'German spirit' that pervaded the University of Heidelberg in the 1930s. This concept was a manifestation of the 'Gleichschaltung' (co-ordination) of National Socialist ideology with the German academia.²¹

Unlike Güntert, Zimmer, who was concerned with esoteric subjects like Indian art, Tantric Yoga and Hindu myths, desisted from the kind of scholarship that used Indian subjects as instruments for postulating the racial superiority of Indo-Germans and identifying the latter as ancestors of modern Germans. Zimmer was a romantic avant-garde who considered himself a practitioner of India's *Geistesgeschichte* (the history of India's soul and spirit). His India, as he wrote in his unfinished memoir, was 'Schopenhauer's India'. He stated further that his aim was to recast the 'Eastern Wisdom' in the context of western experiences and thought processes, for the European

16 Nathan Stoltzfus: *Limits of policy*. 117–144.

17 UAH: PA 715.

18 Steven P.Remy: *The Heidelberg myth*. 81.

19 Wolfgang U. Eckart: *Die Universität Heidelberg*. 379.

20 Steven P. Remy; *The Heidelberg myth*. 75.

21 *Ibid.* 7.

readers.²² He translated little known Buddhist and Hindu texts into German, adding long commentaries which could reach a wider audience beyond the academia.²³

Zimmer's scholarship was greatly influenced by C. G. Jung, whom he met in 1932. From 1933 till 1939, Zimmer frequently attended the Eranos conferences in Switzerland, where Jung was also a regular participant.²⁴

Between 1936 and 1939, the Nazi regime radicalized its racial politics by increasing its persecution of Jews. Simultaneously, it also escalated preparations for war. This was the time when the Nazis achieved a remarkable degree of control over the University of Heidelberg, which was established, in the words of Steven P. Remy, 'by imposition from above and accommodation and acquiescence from below.'²⁵

A new wave of anti-Semitism

From around 1937, the consolidation of political power of Hitler and his coterie led to the feeling that the 'Reich' need not take heed of international opinion regarding its racial politics. This led the Nazi regime to dispense with all considerations of 'cultural politics'. The change in direction had a bearing on Zimmer's life, as is reflected in a secret report of the Ministry of Culture of the state of Baden, written on 18.3.1937. It states that the factors working in Zimmer's favour so far – his restraint (regarding political activities), his record as a soldier in the World War I, as well as cultural political factors which required not taking any measures that directly affected the daughter of a celebrated poet – could be disregarded from now on.²⁶

Nazi Germany's increasing belligerence and a new wave of anti-Semitism led to the passing of German Civil Servants Law on 21st January, 1937, which stipulated that not only civil servants but also their spouses needed to be Reichsbürger (citizens) and not Staatsbürger (subjects). The result was another round of purges in the civil service, the victims of which included both Jaspers and Zimmer.²⁷ The Education Ministry of the Third Reich (Reichserziehungsministerium) revoked Zimmer's *Venia legendi* as well as his title of professor on 31st March, 1938.²⁸

Zimmer was allowed to travel outside the country without restrictions till 1936. One of his regular destinations was London, where Christiane's brother Raimundo von Hofmannsthal lived.²⁹ In 1936 Zimmer was permitted to visit London to give a lecture

22 Heinrich Zimmer: Notizen. 51, 53.

23 Gerald Chapple: Heinrich and Henry Zimmer. 67.

24 Ibid. 70–71.

25 Steven P. Remy: The Heidelberg myth. 48.

26 UAH: PA 715.

27 Steven P. Remy: The Heidelberg myth. 80

28 Dorothee Mußnug: Heidelberger Dozenten. 109.

29 Ibid. 110.

at the C. G. Jung club. But his activities there were monitored by the local office of the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service).³⁰

However, when Zimmer sought permission from the Ministry of Education in Berlin in October 1936 to undertake an educational trip to India in 1937 as an academic guide (Wissenschaftlicher Leiter) of a travel group, his request was turned down. Officials from Berlin informed the University of Heidelberg that since Zimmer was married to a woman 'not of German blood' he was unsuitable for this role. The Ministry of Education instructed the Rector of Heidelberg University not to divulge the real reason for the rejection to Zimmer.³¹ This is evident from the letter of protest that the Rector Ernst Kriek sent to the Ministry in reply. The protest was not out of sympathy for Zimmer. Kriek, a committed National Socialist, was concerned about Nazi Germany's international reputation. He claimed that even if Zimmer was not told the actual cause for the refusal, there was the danger that it would become internationally known through other ways and the standing of German academia would be compromised.³²

Till the end of February 1937, Zimmer was not formally informed by the Ministry about the ground for this denial. The possibility to see India, the land that inspired his scholarship, for free was so important to Zimmer that he had requested Albert Talhoff, the Swiss writer and film director, to use the latter's connections with the Education minister Bernhard Rust for helping his cause.³³ Talhoff had actually tried to persuade Rust, as another letter from Zimmer shows.³⁴ However, Zimmer's disadvantage of being married to a woman of 'non-German ancestry' (as an official document put it) outweighed all other considerations.

Compromises

By the time the official answer, which openly declared Zimmer's 'Jewish kinship' (jüdische Versippung) as the ground for the denial of permission, reached Zimmer in late February 1937, the travel date was already past.³⁵ Zimmer had complained in January 1937 about the delay of the ministry in answering his application, to the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, through a letter which he ended with the salutation 'Heil Hitler!'.³⁶ The use of this greeting was not the only political compromise that Zimmer made du-

30 Falk Reitz: Notes on Zimmer. 4. Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach (DLA-M): HZBIO 1-14.

31 UAH: PA715. The Ministry of Education sent the refusal to the Rector of the University on 19.11.1936.

32 UAH: PA6483. Kriek's letter to the Ministry of Education. 24.11.1936.

33 Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach: DLA-M: BHZDR 15-1. Zimmer to Talhoff. 19.11.1936.

34 DLA-M: BHZDR 15-1. Zimmer to Talhoff. 21.11.1936.

35 UAH: PA6483. Letter from the Ministry of Education, Berlin to the Rector of University of Heidelberg. 26.2.1937.

36 UAH: PA715: Heinrich Zimmer's letter dated 6.1.1937.

ring this time. Possibly sensing the approaching menace after the Nazis came to power, Zimmer tried in different ways to answer the demands and expectations of the regime. In doing so, he overstepped all boundaries of apolitical neutrality that he would later ascribe to himself.

Zimmer probably perceived early on that the Nazi authorities suspected him of harbouring left-wing sympathies. He tried to put such suspicions to rest through an official disclaimer to the University administration, dated 14th October 1933, affirming that he was aware that any kind of relationship, even an unofficial one, to the SPD or the KPD was forbidden.³⁷

His attempts at appearing to conform to the Nazi regime's political ethos led Zimmer to join the NSV (Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt), the welfare organisation of the Nazi Party, in 1935.³⁸ The NSV organised welfare activities exclusively for 'Aryans'. Nazi propaganda seemed to have convinced many ordinary Germans that a membership in this organisation signified social engagement and contributed to making the Nazi ideal of Volksgemeinschaft or national community a reality.³⁹

Around the same time, Zimmer voluntarily enrolled at two other organisations connected to the Nazi politics: the local Defence unit (Wehrkommando) and the Reichsluftschutzverband (an association preparing the civilians for possible air attacks), for which Zimmer received a Wehrpass (military pass) that denoted his willingness to join an eventual war.⁴⁰ This step was probably in tune with the fact that around mid-1930s, in at least some departments of Heidelberg University, teaching and research began to be oriented to military preparedness. Several special institutes and seminars were created in the University between 1936 and 1939 whose focus was on Germany's readiness for war. Eventually, this psychological gearing up for war was expected to permeate the entire Volksgemeinschaft.⁴¹

Zimmer sent certificates proving his membership of these NSDAP affiliated organisations to the Education Ministry in Berlin on 22nd June 1937, along with a certificate confirming that he had taken an Oath of Allegiance to the 'Führer' on 18th March 1937. All the certificates sent by Zimmer were attested by the Sekretariat of Heidelberg University.⁴² This indicates not only that Zimmer had ingratiated himself with the authorities of the Nazi-controlled institution but also that the academics administering the institution provided him a certain degree of support, which reflected their approval of Zimmer's purported orientation towards Nazi politics as well as their wish to retain an internationally reputed scholar in the university.

37 UAH PA 6483.

38 UAH: PA 6483.

39 Eckhard Hansen: *Wohlfahrtspolitik im NS-Staat*. 36.

40 UAH: PA 6483.

41 Steven P. Remy: *The Heidelberg myth*. 66.

42 UAH: PA6483.

It is not clear why the Nazi authorities had suspected Zimmer of being inclined towards left-wing politics. Whether he had shown interest in left-wing politics during his time in Berlin is not known. For most of his time in Heidelberg, Zimmer's political views seem to have been influenced by German nationalism as well as Catholic religiosity. In this, he was not an exception. Many members of the teaching staff at the University of Heidelberg were attracted to religion due to their experiences in the World War I.⁴³ Also, for much of the 1920s, most faculties at the University were dominated by conservative nationalists.⁴⁴

Zimmer was a part of a circle of relatively young academics who gathered around Erich Rothacker, a lecturer of Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. Other members of this circle, which called itself 'incalcata' (literally: 'the uncalcified') included the Romanist Leonard Olschki, historian Gerhard Ritter and the philosopher Erich Frank, who served as Rector of the University from 1938 to 1945. This circle was politically oriented towards conservative German nationalism.⁴⁵ In this light, the differences between Zimmer and Heinrich Lüders seemed to have been more academic than political in nature.

Members of the teaching faculty in Heidelberg who engaged in party politics during the 1920s generally belonged to one of the four right wing parties that espoused different degrees of German nationalism, anti-republicanism and anti-Semitism: Deutsche Staatspartei, Deutschnationale Volkspartei, Vaterlandspartei and the NSDAP. Thus, the political spectrum to which most of these academics belonged was not widely divergent. This could also have contributed to a kind of bonding that made them support each other to an extent. Also, the political differences between the academics were often transcended by their self-image as elite thinkers charged with and capable of providing answers to questions of great national importance.⁴⁶ Zimmer's correspondence with Mila Esslinger (born Rauch, 1886–1972) with whom he had a long extra-marital relationship and three children, provides glimpses into his political thoughts. This correspondence, housed at the German Literature Archive at Marbach on the Neckar, is being evaluated in this article for the first time.

Zimmer's affinity with a strand of German nationalism is reflected in a letter he wrote to Mila in 1931, claiming: 'The Nordic-Germanic substance appeals to me [...] Current developments evoke approval as well as criticism.'⁴⁷ In June 1932, a month before the national elections, Zimmer wrote to Mila that he and Christiane would vote for the Deutsche Zentrumsparitei, which represented political Catholicism.⁴⁸ He repeated this

43 Christian Jansen: Professoren und Politik. 41.

44 Steven P. Remy: The Heidelberg myth. 10.

45 Christian Jansen: Professoren und Politik. 41.

46 Ibid. 92–93.

47 DLA-M. BHZME AN432. Letter dated 28.10.31.

48 DLA-M. BHZME AN580. June 1932.

statement in an undated letter presumably written shortly after the last one, which he signed off as 'Heinz'. In this letter, Zimmer also wrote that both Communists and Nazis were parading near their house. The Nazis were marching with blaring music, but 'pleasantly, they did not come to our house.'⁴⁹ The Zentrumspartei demanded parity of representation of all confessions in military, administration and education, thereby indirectly helping the cause of the Jewish minority.⁵⁰ The Nazis saw this brand of politics as potentially dangerous and Hitler forced the Deutsche Zentrumspartei to dissolve in July 1933.⁵¹

The deep attachment that Zimmer felt towards Catholicism as well as the aversion that he felt towards Nazism are manifest in another letter written to Mila in July 1934, in which Zimmer wrote about the refusal of the Evangelical church of Baden to join the Nazi oriented Reichskirche, leading to strong criticism from the Nazified city administration. Zimmer lamented that for the young people, Christianity had no significance compared to the 'brown wave'. It disgusted him that people could abandon the centuries old traditions of Germany 'for the pure dynamic of the revolution, against whose party programme everything else was superfluous'. He partially blamed the 'bloodless Protestant religion' for the youth's lack of interest in Christianity.⁵²

It is notable that though Zimmer condemned the persecution of Jews by the Nazis, he himself was not free from prejudices about Jews and 'Jewishness'. Phrases like 'the dotting love of a Jewish ghetto mama' or the 'cloying sweetness of Jewish petty bourgeois' came up occasionally in his letters to Mila.⁵³ In a letter written in 1936, he described his recent meeting with Indologist Betty Heimann at London (where she had emigrated), as having to endure 'the infantile self-aggrandizing of a little, spoilt Jewish girl of about 48 years ...'⁵⁴ Evidently, he regarded his wife Christiane not as a Jew since she was raised a Catholic. Zimmer's attitude towards the Jews seemed to be an admixture of stereotyping, sympathy and condescension.

The letters to Mila show Zimmer's increasing despondency as well as desperation, as he made public displays of loyalty to the Nazi regime, while despising it in private. In March 1933, he wrote to Mila from Vienna that the political mood there was overwhelmingly against the Left and against parliamentary politics, adding that the situation was probably conducive to a transmission of the politics from the 'Reich'. He also wrote about his premonition that 'both the immediate and the distant future look troubled'.⁵⁵

49 DLA-M. AN803.

50 Thomas Gräfe: *Antisemitismus in Deutschland*. 148.

51 Detlef Junker: *Die Deutsche Zentrumspartei und Hitler*. 228.

52 DLA-M: BZME AN 265.

53 DLA-M: BHZME AN 102, BHZME AN 249.

54 DLA-M: BHZME AN 661.

55 DLA-M: BZME AN 435.

Premonition turned to despair in the course of a year, as another letter to Mila, written in July 1934, shows. He wrote: 'I will not be able to shed the nightmare of the present situation soon'. On that day, Zimmer had read in the newspaper about the suicide of Erich Mühsam, the Jewish left-wing political activist and writer, in 'protective custody' at Oranienburg. 'Maybe he doubted whether he would ever be set free,' wrote Zimmer, not knowing that Mühsam was actually murdered by the SS.⁵⁶

As the Nazis increased their hold over the University, Zimmer complained to Mila in a letter written in December 1936 about the level of vigilance, writing that if one wanted to be away from work for more than a day, one had to notify the Rector and seek his permission. He called it 'petty bourgeois style of harassment'. He also pessimistically commented that it did not matter whether one wrote and published, since the world was breaking down and such 'reflective pastimes' would soon cease to exist.

However, Zimmer did not lose himself in despondency. His resilience is apparent in the same letter, where he wrote that it was wise and right not to let oneself be driven insane by the catastrophe that was generally looming.⁵⁷

Indeed, Zimmer lost little time in taking pragmatic measures to ensure his own survival and that of his loved ones. In March 1933, Zimmer wrote to Mila that it was good that she and their children were relatively immune to the political waves in the countryside where they lived. He added that the children should also be exposed to some extent to the difficult reality. He advised Mila to go to the church regularly so that she could ask for the parish priest's protection if the need arose. The situation was precarious for Mila as well, since Eugene Esslinger, her husband and officially the father of the three children she had with Heinrich Zimmer, was Jewish.⁵⁸

In his professional life, Zimmer made constant concessions to Realpolitik. Despite his immersion in the world of Indian myths and his fascination for the Indian concept of Maya, (expressed in his master work, *Maya: der indische Mythos*, 1936) Zimmer was no other-worldly academic. His acquiescence to the changed political norms is clear from the letter that he wrote to Mila on the eve of May Day 1934. Zimmer wrote that Heidelberg was full of Swastikas in preparation for the procession on the next day in which he had decided to take part. He planned to listen to the 'Führer's' speech afterwards. He also hoped that Mila would dutifully display the swastika at her window.⁵⁹

Such political compromises were not rare among academics in the University of Heidelberg or generally in the German academia during the Nazi dictatorship. There were no collective protests by professors in Germany against National Socialist policies in general and the encroachment of different organs of the Nazi state into academia in particular. Few individual scholars dared to stand up against the regime. The few

56 DLA-M: BZME AN 268. About Erich Mühsam's tragic fate, see Chris Hirte: Erich Mühsam. 309.

57 DLA-M: BZME AN 285.

58 DLA-M: BZME AN 805.

59 DLA-M: BZME AN 761.

who did, like the sociologist Alfred Weber, who successfully resisted the SA's attempts to fly the Swastika over public buildings including his own institute in Heidelberg after the March 1933 elections, were motivated primarily by a displeasure of excesses rather than opposition to National Socialist politics.⁶⁰

Zimmer continued to find ways and means to protect his lover and their children from Nazi persecution. In 1937, he wrote to Mila that it was opportune that their son Pepo (Ernst Michael) was attending a boarding school in Fribourg in Switzerland because that was the smoothest way for him to acquire Swiss citizenship.⁶¹ Two years later, from his exile in Oxford, he congratulated Mila for her 'successful divorce' from her Jewish husband and advised her to give the children her non-Jewish maiden name. This, he wrote, would speed up their obtaining the certificate of Aryan heritage (Ariernachweis) which, in turn would make it possible for Zimmer to send them money from his wife Christiane's account, with the latter's knowledge and consent.⁶² Christiane von Hofmannsthal seemed to have accepted the other woman in her husband's life with a surprising lack of animosity.

Pepo could indeed become an 'Aryan', as he wrote to Zimmer, addressing the latter as 'dear father' in 1939, which Zimmer reported to Mila with evident relief.⁶³

Rewards and limits of pragmatism

It is not illogical to wonder whether the accommodations made by Zimmer had any bearing on his being granted a degree of latitude that was denied to some of the others in a similar position, like Karl Jaspers. The latter was forced into retirement earlier, in June 1937. From 1938 onwards he was denied the right to publish in Germany. He also recalled after the war that even before his formal dismissal, he was increasingly marginalized and isolated.⁶⁴ Zimmer however was allowed to publish, though the publications dwindled in number and they appeared mostly in lesser known journals and newspapers.⁶⁵ Zimmer was also allowed to act as PhD guide for the Indian scholar R.N. Dandekar, as late as in 1938.⁶⁶ Also, the Education Ministry of the Reich let the Rector of Heidelberg University know that Zimmer would receive his salary till end of September 1938, that is, even after his teaching licence had been rescinded. The letter

60 Steven P. Remy: *The Heidelberg myth*. 21.

61 DLA-M: BHZME AN 701.

62 DLA-M: BHZME AN 432: Letter dated 27.3.1939.

63 DLA-M: BHZME AN 008: Zimmer reported this to Mila in letter dated 22.05.1939.

64 Steven P. Remy: *The Heidelberg myth*. 82.

65 Gerald Chapple: *Heinrich and Henry Zimmer*. 73.

66 Falk Reiter: 8. DLA-M: HZBIO 1–14.

from the ministry suggests that the University authorities requested the Ministry to handle Zimmer's case as an exceptional one.⁶⁷

Interestingly, about a month before Zimmer's teaching license was withdrawn, he was invited by NSDAP officials to give a talk on Arthur Schopenhauer on the occasion of the latter's 150th birth anniversary in February, 1938, at Danzig. The programme was to be organised by the Gauleiter of Danzig under the direction of Alfred Rosenberg, the party ideologue.⁶⁸ The event had a special significance for the Nazis, since Hitler considered himself to be a disciple of Schopenhauer, the philosopher whom he quoted most frequently.⁶⁹

In his letter dated 4th February 1938, to the Rector Ernst Krieck seeking permission to attend the commemoration, Zimmer claimed in the way of justification that this event had been declared by representatives of the 'Führer' as an official programme, which had intellectual as well as ideological significance, not only for the NSDAP but also for the entire German 'Reich'.⁷⁰ Krieck readily gave his permission.

The talk given by Zimmer on 25th February 1938, titled 'Schopenhauer und die indische Philosophie' (Schopenhauer and Indian philosophy) was published in the journal *Nationalsozialistischer Erzieher*, a mouthpiece of National Socialist Teachers Association. Zimmer included a copy of this publication in a letter (dated 29.3.1938) that he sent to Karl Friedrich Schmidhuber, head of the Lecturers Association (*Nationalsozialistischer Dozentenbund*) of Heidelberg University from 1936 to 1945.⁷¹

In this letter, Zimmer pleaded for the continuation of his stipend even after his teaching position and title were revoked. To bolster his case, he claimed that he had served the Fatherland in different ways – as a frontline soldier in the World War I and as an academic whose scholarship was important for the Nazi regime. In this context, Zimmer also mentioned that the NSDAP invited him to deliver the talk on Schopenhauer.

Zimmer's appeal did not go unheeded. Schmidhuber, a member of the Nazi Physicians' League as well as the SS and an informant of the SD, wielded some influence on the University's politics. He did try to interfere with the University authorities on behalf of Zimmer.⁷²

The Nazi regime allowed Zimmer to attend the Eranos conference at Ascona in the summer of 1938, albeit under strict surveillance. He was ordered to get in touch with the external cell (*Auslandsorganisation*) of the NSDAP as well as with other German

67 UAH: PA 715. The ministry official signing the letter claimed that he had applied 'once more' to the Education Ministry to handle Zimmer's case as an exception. However, the Ministry answered that the original decision would remain unchanged. As a concession, Zimmer's stipend will be paid for three more months.

68 UAH: PA 6483. Zimmer to Ernst Krieck. 4.2.1938.

69 Birgit Schwarz: *Geniewahn: Hitler und die Kunst*. 52.

70 UAH: PA 6483. Zimmer to Ernst Krieck. 4.2.1938.

71 UAH: PA 715. Zimmer to Schmidhuber. 29.3.1938.

72 Dorothee Mußnug: *Heidelberger Dozenten*. 110.

officials there who would supposedly ‘assist him in his endeavours and in an evaluation of his stay’. In other words, Zimmer was required to provide a report of his activities to the Nazi authorities. He was also directed to make a visit to Berlin and meet the NSD-AP officials concerned.⁷³ A letter to Mila written in March 1938 shows that Zimmer had to make a similar visit to Berlin after the Schopenhauer event as well.⁷⁴

Not only Schmidhuber but also Adam Falkenstein, a committed National Socialist and teacher of Semitic Studies at Heidelberg University, appealed to the University authorities to reinstate Zimmer after his dismissal. In a letter written to Kriek, the Rector, on 4th April 1938 on behalf of the Association of Lecturers, Falkenstein claimed that Zimmer was an experienced lecturer of Indology whose classes were well attended. His wife who had ‘first grade Jewish kinship’, kept to the background and would therefore not cause any visible problems.⁷⁵

As late as in September 1940, Richard von Kienle, an expert on Indo-Germanic languages and a lecturer at the department of Oriental Studies, who was also a loyal member of the Nazi Party, complained to the then Rector Paul Schmitthenner about the lack of financial support for the institute since the ‘departure’ of Professor Zimmer implying that the department was being neglected after the exit of this eminent representative.⁷⁶

A secret memorandum in June 1938 from the External Affairs Ministry in Berlin to the Ministry of Culture and Education in Baden indicates that the University authorities of Heidelberg, particularly the Association of Lecturers appealed in favour of Zimmer’s restitution primarily because he was a distinguished scholar of international standing. The matter was about to reach the head of the Lecturers Union of the entire Reich (Reichsdozentenbund).⁷⁷

However, in a letter to the authorities of the Heidelberg university, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Berlin reiterated that Zimmer’s wife had a ‘mixed ancestry’ and requested the University to handle this case confidentially, thereby implying that the odds were against Zimmer.⁷⁸ Before any final decision could be taken on this case, Zimmer left for England.

As already mentioned, Zimmer had been permitted to make repeated visits to England, mainly as a guest of Christiane’s brother, Raimundo von Hofmannsthal and his wife Ava Alice Muriel Astor. His visits were mostly in connection with publishing his father in law’s work, about which Zimmer had signed a contract with the publishing house Berman-Fischer in London in June 1938. In autumn of 1938, Zimmer received an offer through his friend, the philosopher Raymond Klibansky, to hold an unpaid lec-

73 UAH: PA715. Ministry of Education to the University administration. 4.4.1938.

74 DLA-M: BHZME AN722.

75 UAH:PA715. Letter dated 5.7.1938.

76 Wolfgang U. Eckart, Ed: Die Universität Heidelberg. 376.

77 UAH PA715. Letter dated 4.4.1938.

78 UAH PA715. Statement from Ministry of Culture, Berlin to University Authorities, Heidelberg. 5.7.1938.

ture at Oxford. With financial guarantee provided by Astor, Zimmer shifted to Oxford with his family in March 1939.⁷⁹

Strangely, archival sources do not throw any details of this trip. What is clear is that before leaving, Zimmer did not officially notify the Nazi political authorities. This is evident because NSDAP representatives enquired about his whereabouts to Paul Schmitthenner, then Rector of Heidelberg University, in September 1940.⁸⁰ It is also curious that the Nazi authorities seemed to notice Zimmer's absence only a year after his departure.

This lapse on the part of Nazi surveillance machinery appears all the more intriguing, considering that Zimmer's migration was neither impulsive nor disguised. As early as in May 1938, Zimmer had written to Mila that he was negotiating his chances of emigration to England. He prophetically wrote: 'In times such as these, one cannot expect any feeling of security, because an European war might break out any day ...'⁸¹ In June or July 1938, Zimmer wrote to Mila that it would be irresponsible not to utilize the chance offered by generous relatives and develop plans.⁸²

Such plans were indeed developed soon. A letter to Mila written in September 1938 proves that the Zimmers were taking concrete steps for leaving the country. Zimmer wrote 'We now have a friendly, dependable lawyer who hopes to get us through and also look after our affairs afterwards.'⁸³

Another letter to Mila, written at the end of February/beginning of March 1939, states that the Zimmers gave their lawyer Eugen Gerhard all financial responsibilities, including the possible sale of their house before leaving for England and also that they were taking many of their belongings with them. Zimmer also mentioned a farewell party given for them by some of his academic peers at Frankfurt am Main, implying that their imminent departure was not a secret in academic circles.⁸⁴

Two other letters, written in quick succession in May/June 1939 from England, make it clear that Zimmer planned to visit Mila in Switzerland. One of them records his evident bitterness, where he forbade her to mention his imminent trip to any one among their circle of acquaintances, because he did not want to see any of these 'inimical, inquisitive and starved' individuals.⁸⁵ It is not clear whether the visit actually took place.

A letter dated 16th September 1940, that the lawyer Eugene Gerhard, along with two other lawyers sent to the University of Heidelberg, shows that the University authorities were aware of Zimmer's departure. The lawyers stated that Professor Zimmer and

79 Ilse Gudden and Katharina Geiser: Zimmer, Heinrich Robert. <https://kulturportal-west-ost.eu/biographien/zimmer-heinrich-robert-2>.

80 UAH PA 715. Letter dated 5.9.1940.

81 DLA-M: BHZME AN 040.

82 DLA-M: BHZME AN17.

83 DLA-M: BHZME AN 403.

84 DLA-M: BHZME AN 534.

85 DLA-M: BHZME AN 49.

his wife have given them the power of attorney to deal with their remaining assets in Germany and requested the University authorities to provide them a written confirmation of the 'Aryan heritage certificate' that Zimmer had submitted to the institution. The lawyers also stated that it would be difficult to obtain the certificate from Zimmer himself because of the ongoing war, even though they knew his address.⁸⁶

It is not clear whether Schmitthenner, the Rector, received the lawyer's letter before he covered up for Zimmer to the local Nazi authorities. In a letter dated 18th September 1940, in answer to the query of the NSDAP officials, Schmitthenner wrote that Zimmer had gone for a visit to England last year and was probably surprised by the war. He added that Zimmer was possibly interned there. He had indeed intended to return to Germany.⁸⁷

This act of complicity with Zimmer on the part of Schmitthenner, whose proclaimed aim was to turn the University of Heidelberg into 'the armorer of the Third Reich', signifies once again that Zimmer's political compromises were not without effect and also that at times, the perceived bond of intellectual elitism among the academics of Heidelberg surpassed the imperatives of Nazi politics.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Zimmer's political pragmatism points to the multifaceted ways in which academics could adapt to the political tenor of Nazi Germany. The responses of the different authorities – the University, the local Nazi party and its affiliated organisations, the ministries at Centre and state highlight the grey zones that existed within the established paradigms of persecution and victimisation in Universities. These grey areas reflect the flexibilities and agencies of different stakeholders and their complex relationship with each other, thus raising questions about the established binary of helpless victims silently suffering under a monolithic, oppressive Nazi regime. The grey areas also point to the process of exchange of resources between Zimmer and the Nazi state: the renowned scholar's proclaimed political allegiance was indeed a symbolic resource for the regime. The latter, in return, provided Zimmer another kind of resource – existential security, at least for some time.

In the context of the University of Heidelberg, the narrative of Zimmer's victimhood (he was beyond doubt a victim of Nazi racial politics) has precluded an examination of the compromises that he made and the multiplicity of the responses of different representatives of the Nazi state to his overtures. After his untimely death in exile in 1943, Zimmer appeared all the more as a tragic figure. The emphasis on his unconven-

86 UAH PA6483. Letter dated 16.09.1940.

87 UAH PA6483. Letter dated 18.9.1940.

88 Schmitthenner claimed so in September 1939. Steven. P. Remy: *The Heidelberg myth*. 85.

tional scholarship and the regime's suspicion of his politics as well as its targeting of his wife – all dovetailed into the image of the quintessentially other-worldly scholar who was a defenceless prey to Nazi oppression.

The government of India has recently established a chair for Indology at the University of Heidelberg in recognition of Zimmer's undeniably great contributions to his scholarly field and in acknowledgement of his trials and tribulations. Among all the eulogies and commiserations spent on Zimmer over the years, only the Indological scholar Wendy Doniger had struck a different note by remarking presciently that there was something of a chameleon in Zimmer. She was referring to his attempts to make himself more acceptable to the American academia, including changing his name to Henry, soon after his arrival at Columbia University in 1940.⁸⁹

Zimmer's dynamism, his philosophical bent of mind and powerful imagination made him capable of breaking new boundaries in his scholarship and to address audiences beyond the academic ivory tower. In his life, he used these qualities successfully to adapt to volatile political circumstances. The nuances in his narrative are as much worth keeping in mind as his sufferings and achievements.

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89 Wendy Doniger: The king and the corpse. 50.

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