

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

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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-

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 7<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 Mußgnug: *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 Mußgnug: *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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

### 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

Most academic studies undertaken by Güntert were aimed at establishing the racial affinity between Indo-Germanic languages and Germanic people.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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

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.<sup>24</sup>

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'.<sup>25</sup>

### 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.<sup>26</sup>

Nazi Germany's increasing belligerence and a new wave of anti-Semitism led to the passing of German Civil Servants Law on 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> The Education Ministry of the Third Reich (Reichserziehungsministerium) revoked Zimmer's *Venia legendi* as well as his title of professor on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1938.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> 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).<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> Talhoff had actually tried to persuade Rust, as another letter from Zimmer shows.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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!'.<sup>36</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> October 1933, affirming that he was aware that any kind of relationship, even an unofficial one, to the SPD or the KPD was forbidden.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> 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*.<sup>41</sup>

Zimmer sent certificates proving his membership of these NSDAP affiliated organisations to the Education Ministry in Berlin on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1937, along with a certificate confirming that he had taken an Oath of Allegiance to the 'Führer' on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1937. All the certificates sent by Zimmer were attested by the Sekretariat of Heidelberg University.<sup>42</sup> 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.