CHAPTER 3

“Sehnsucht ohne Wiederkehr”: Hermann Sinsheimer’s Exile Inside Germany and in London

Deborah Vietor-Engländer

Abstract

Hermann Sinsheimer’s career as a German journalist, novelist and theatre critic ended abruptly in September 1933. He was one of the most important figures in the intellectual life of the Weimar Republic, not only because of his discovery of Bertolt Brecht in 1922. His exile while still living in Germany (until 1938) led to a complete change of intellectual orientation involving a return to the roots of his Jewish origins. His escape via Palestine in 1938 and his twelve years in England until his death in 1950 can now be documented in the light of new source material, and the publication of an unabridged and no longer falsified version of his autobiography in 2013 gives us clearer insights into his background and intellectual development both before and after 1933.

Who was Hermann Sinsheimer? One of the most significant figures in the intellectual life of the Weimar Republic. But what was his background? Born into a comparatively prosperous family in the village of Freinsheim/Pfalz on 6 March 1883, his was the only Jewish family in the village after his mother’s father Marx Fränkel moved to Cologne and the synagogue was closed. Sinsheimer noted that he experienced little anti-Semitism as a child; he recalled only two references to his Jewish origins. One teacher remarked: “Jesus Christus [ist] ein Jude gewesen genau so wie der Hermann Sinsheimer. Freilich hat Jesus nie Kirschen gestohlen” [Jesus was a Jew like Hermann Sinsheimer. But Jesus never stole cherries] and a teacher commented on his ancestors:

Was war das für eine gehobene Stunde, als der Lehrer seiner Erzählung vom Auszug aus Ägypten den Satz anfügte: ‘– und das waren Sinsheimers

Vorfahren. Aller Augen richteten sich auf mich, und ich erglühte in Stolz.  
[That was an exalted moment, when the teacher told us about the exodus from Egypt and added the sentence ‘— and those were Sinsheimer’s forefathers. Everyone looked at me and I glowed with pride.]  

However, during his compulsory military service (1902–3) there was talk of his becoming an officer of the reserve until his superiors realized he was a Jew:

Aber als der Leutnant mich vor der Front so belobte, war in mir der andere Ehrgeiz erwacht, daß in meiner Person das üble Vorurteil und Unrecht beseitigt werden sollte – ein winziges Fortschrittchen! Aber es sollte nicht sein – das kränkte mich damals aufs tiefste. Der Stachel saß! (gip 70)  
[But when the lieutenant praised me in front of all of them I felt a different sort of ambition to achieve a miniscule element of progress and that in my person the evil prejudice and injustice would be removed. But it was not to be – that hurt me deeply at that time. The sting hit home.]

(He was in fact made an officer of the reserve a year later, on 18 September 1904.) Sinsheimer combined his legal studies first with his military service and then with work as a theatre critic. He received his admission to the bar and permission to practice as a solicitor in 1910. Three months before his final examinations he was offered the job of theatre critic for the *Neue Badische Landeszeitung*. He later achieved a doctorate in law and also wrote for Siegfried Jacobsohn’s *Die Schaubühne* (later *Die Weltbühne*) first as a student and later while working as a lawyer (more than 50 articles between 1905 and 1913). During the First World War he worked at the ‘Kriegsgericht der Landwehrinspektion Landau’ [war court of the Landau militia administration] for two years and was then released on health grounds on 16 June 1916. From the autumn of 1916 to July 1917 he was the artistic director of the *Münchner Kammerspiele* but was not particularly successful as war censorship meant he was unable to stage the plays he wished to, for example Else Lasker-Schüler’s *Die Wupper* [The River Wupper], Walter Hasenclever’s *Der Sohn* [The Son] and Carl Hauptmann’s *Krieg – ein Tedeum* [War – a Tedeum]. He went to the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* as a critic and was the first critic to review Brecht’s *Trommeln in der Nacht* [Drums in the Night] on 30 September 1922 and to hail Brecht as a major new dramatist:

---