

Musicians who kept it quiet during World War II

- Shirley Apthorp From: [The Australian](#) November 19, 2011 12:00AM



The Spivakovsky-Kurtz trio, from left, Tossy and Jascha Spivakovsky and Edmund Kurtz.
Source: Supplied



German musicologist and music critic Albrecht Dumling. Picture: Ana Pinto *Source:* Supplied

THE invitation to bomb Berlin caught Albrecht Dumling by surprise. The German musicologist was not being collared by militant extremists in a dark pub. He was visiting the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

There is an exhibit of a Royal Air Force bomber plane with an interactive button to simulate bombing Berlin.

"It's like an adventure toy," Dumling recalls. "It felt very strange to be prompted to drop bombs on Berlin. I didn't." Instead, he wrote a book. *Vanished Musicians: Jewish Refugees in Australia* has just been published by the Bohlau Verlag in Germany. It contains many shocking revelations about a largely forgotten side of Australia's cultural past.

Questioning the way history is presented is one of Dumling's chief preoccupations. He was in Canberra to sift through the National Archives, looking into what really happened to Jewish musicians whose flight from Nazi terror brought them to Australia.

Today, it is tempting to imagine Australia as a safe haven, where the unjustly persecuted could begin again. The reality was different. Australia was not eager to accept Jewish immigrants. At the Evian Conference of 1938, Australia's trade and customs minister Thomas White, pleading against large-scale Jewish immigration, declared that "as we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one".

As he dug around this infamous episode in the archives, Dumling unearthed further damning evidence. "Representatives of Australia's immigration department went out to assess the quality of potential Jewish immigrants," he says. "They wanted to know if they were good enough. They decided that the more centrally European their origins, the better. Berlin Jews were good, Viennese Jews had bad characters, Budapest Jews were really bad, Polish Jews were all thieves, Romanian Jews were gangsters and so on. Interestingly, their categorisations came extremely close to those of the Nazis."

When war broke out in 1939, Germans in Australia were classed as enemy aliens and sent to internment camps, where Jews were often obliged to live side-by-side with Nazi sympathisers. First in Hay, later in Tatura, Winston Churchill's brutal dictate to "collar the lot" was rigorously implemented. Refugee numbers were swelled by the arrival from Britain of 2500 passengers from the ship *Dunera*, mostly Jewish refugees, who were appallingly mistreated by their British captors during the shameful voyage.

What was not known until Dumling began his research in earnest was how many of these unwanted arrivals were musicians. Many had concealed the fact in order to have a chance of entering Australia; most were forbidden to work in their chosen profession.

In immigration newsletters for European Jews during the mid-1930s, musicians had been discouraged from considering Australia as a possible destination. The country needed farmers and engineers; artists were advised to retrain if they wished to gain entry. Violist Richard Goldner trained to become a jeweller, never imagining that the laws of his new home would oblige him to make his living designing zippers, with his music-making reduced to a spare-time activity. Brilliant pianist Water Dullo learned massage and chocolate-making.

Goldner and Dullo went on to found Musica Viva Australia in 1945 and their contribution to the development of their adopted homeland's musical life is now recognised. But countless others remained in obscurity, as bakers, shoe-makers, domestic or factory workers, a lifetime of musical study deemed worthless by a country that felt it already had enough musicians. Frank Kitson, secretary of the Australian Musicians Union at the time, applied pressure to the immigration department to ensure foreign musicians would not be welcome.

"He said, 'We already have excellent, qualified Australian musicians,' " says Dumling. " 'We don't need any more.' In Germany, musicians were told not to bother. Australia viewed the refugees as immigrants. They never thought about whether the refugees might need something. The question was always, 'Do we need them?' They only wanted qualified people. The assessments they made then now look pretty culpable."

Dumling's discoveries in Canberra's archives and in countless interviews with survivors or their descendants disturbed him. The journey of academic exploration that brought him to Australia had begun in the mid-1980s when Dumling, with a fresh doctorate in musicology to his name, began working on a project in Dusseldorf about music banned by the Nazis.

That Nazi decision-makers had labelled visual art that displeased them as "degenerate" was well known in Germany at the time, as was the fact that they had held a propaganda exhibition of Degenerate Art to illustrate their point in Dusseldorf in 1938. Far less well known was the fact that Dusseldorf had also hosted an exhibition titled Degenerate Music, and that the fuzzy tenets it espoused were closely linked to some of Hitler's core ideologies.

Fifty years later, Dumling painstakingly reconstructed the Dusseldorf exhibition. What he uncovered rocked the music world to its foundations. Though Friedrich Prieberg had published a volume about music under the Nazis half a decade earlier, Europe of the 1980s had not yet seriously considered what impact Hitler had made on the music world of their time, and how that might influence what we hear and think today.

For Dumling, who had been increasingly interested in the question of music and exile since writing his thesis on the composer Arnold Schoenberg, the reconstruction of the Dusseldorf exhibition was a process of discovery. The poster advertising the exhibition had a caricature of a black man, more monkey than human, playing saxophone and wearing a rosette with the Star of David. Curator Hans Severus Ziegler was attempting to pack a number of ill-matched ideas into one graphic message. "Degenerate" music was black, was Jewish, was grotesque, was modern; in fact, it was anything of which the Party disapproved. "It was absolutely reactionary," explains Dumling. "Hans Severus Ziegler was not a musicologist. He specialised in literature. But he was a fan of Wagner, and a great admirer of Hitler."

The Nazis appropriated the term entartet (loosely translated as degenerate) to illustrate ideas drawn from American "racial hygienists", and to suggest that racial origin could influence the arts in unhealthy ways.

"Ziegler had no idea what 'degenerate' might mean in musical terms," Dumling says. "He had to improvise. American racial theory was absolutely useless when it came to music. In visual art, the Nazis had decreed that anything abstract was indicative of mental illness. Cubism was seen as sick. But it's hard to imagine how that could translate into music. What's realistic music?"

What is sick? Ziegler decided that a simple chord structure was inherently Germanic and natural. And that anything which departed from tonality was basically Jewish. The entire exhibition lacks any kind of theoretical basis. It's just an idea."

But it was a sinister and powerful idea, and it was eagerly embraced by the Nazis. Musicologists Rudolf Gerber and Josef Muller-Blattau argued that the music of the German Brahms drew on the blood and earth of the motherland, while that of the Jewish Mendelssohn was weak and derivative.

Wagner had sown some seeds with his egregious tract *Jewishness in Music* (1850, republished 1869), and his anti-Semitic legacy was passed on directly to Hitler by his daughter-in-law Winifred Wagner and British racial theorist Houston Stewart Chamberlain, both staunch supporters of Hitler from their Bayreuth base.

"Hitler saw himself as an artist," Dumling says. "He even wrote an opera libretto; performances of Wagner's *Rienzi* and *Lohengrin* in Linz were seminal experiences for him. He wanted a cultural revolution. Like Wagner, he believed that music had absolutely immense power, that with music, you can shape a human personality. In my opinion he rated music too highly. He thought that because music was as powerful as drugs, it should be equally strictly controlled.

"Because the Nazis believed that music had so much power, they decided to invest a great deal of money into educating the German public, but they also decided that they should hear the right kind of music, not the wrong kind. Oddly, until then, music in Germany had been more international than in almost every other country."

Composers such as Berthold Goldschmidt, Erich Korngold, Erwin Schulhoff and Franz Schreker were robbed of their posts, denied commissions, forced into exile, or sent to death camps. Korngold went to Hollywood, and forever influenced the course of film music; George Dreyfus came to Australia, where he became well known for his theme music for the TV gold rush series *Rush*.

Through the murder or expulsion of so many gifted composers, Germany permanently altered the course of its own musical history. In the traumatised aftermath of World War II, German philosopher Theodor Adorno declared that there could be "no poetry after Auschwitz", and a new harshly abstract aesthetic began to dominate contemporary music.

"I didn't know all of this when I started in this field," Dumling says. "From today's perspective, the idea of 'degenerate' music is very strange. I found it all utterly foreign. I had to come to terms with Ziegler, who remained a completely convinced Nazi until his death in 1978. He lived in Bayreuth, he was a friend of Goering's widow, he was a member of the NPD, he thought the Nuremberg trials were wrong. It's shocking and more than a bit repugnant."

Dumling's exhibition was a roaring success, touring to Vienna, Zurich, Frankfurt, Berlin, Amsterdam, Munich and Hamburg in its first year alone. His research was one of the main catalysts for a re-examination of music history spearheaded by the German music world. Forgotten composers were rediscovered, their works performed and recorded, their legacies re-assessed.

At the heart of the reconstructed exhibition was Dumling's critical commentary, placing the Nazi theory in its historical context and examining its repercussions. Though he touched on the topic of exile, Australia did not feature high in his awareness of possible destinations for Nazi victims.

It was only when Dreyfus contacted him that he began to consider what had happened to musicians who travelled further than the US. Dreyfus was born near Dumling's home town of Wuppertal and the two men discovered many points in common. Until then, Musica Reanimata, the association Dumling had founded in Berlin to promote music suppressed under the Third Reich, had concentrated on the work of murdered composers.

"I thought it would also be interesting to examine the topic of exile with a living composer," Dumling says. He invited Dreyfus to be the subject of a portrait concert. He was, in turn, invited to give a lecture tour of Australia, where he met composer Felix Werder. Gradually, Dumling began to understand the depth of the German musical connection to Australia. His 1996 Dresden conference Musical Exile in Australia began a project that was to flourish more than he could have anticipated; eventually, the German Research Society awarded him a grant and the National Library in Australia granted him the Harold White Fellowship.

Die Verschwundenen Musiker Judische Fluchtlinge in Australien is Dumling's seventh book, an impressive tome that meticulously presents its arguments and fastidiously documents a string of forgotten or dislocated lives without ever losing its lightness of touch. From the Spivakovsky-Kurtz trio, whose members defected during a 1933 Australian tour on hearing of Hitler's rise to absolute power, to entertainer and pianist Werner Baer, who later became organist of the Sydney Synagogue, Dumling has traced a web of connections between yesterday's Germany and today's Australia, a history of disgrace, culpability, neglect, unlikely twists of fate and even the occasional happy end.

Dumling is a lean, bird-like figure who commutes around Berlin on a bicycle and seldom dresses formally. He is 62, but could pass for at least a decade less. His diffident manner belies a dry sense of humour and a tireless curiosity for the world about him.

"In the 1930s, Australia was very closed," Dumling reflects. "There was the White Australia policy, and Britishers Only. After the war, from 1945, there was a change. Australia today is a very open and multi-faceted society and I think these German-speaking immigrants, although they weren't such a huge number, helped to create this major change of mentality. Often quietly, they contributed a significant amount to what Australia is today."

Albrecht Dumling will lecture at the Australian National University, Canberra, on Tuesday, will talk at the Sydney Jewish Museum on Thursday afternoon, then launch his book at the Goethe Institut in Sydney that evening.