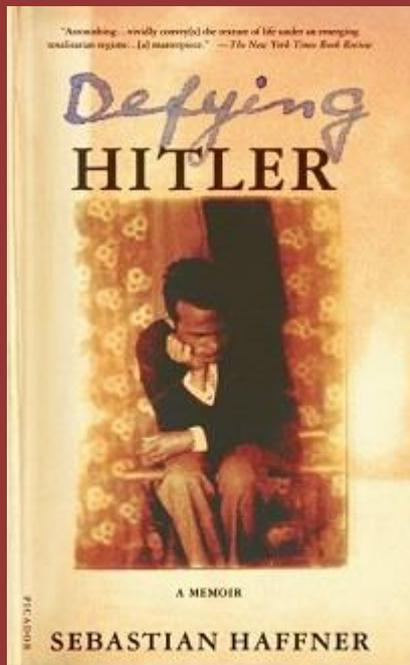


Cabaret in Germany officially began on January 18, 1901. The German Cabaret Archives document its history:

What the cabaret was, what it became, and what it is. And what it can be, even in systems of oppression and intolerance.

The year 2018 is the eightieth anniversary of the so-called “Night of Broken Glass,” a euphemism for the night of November 10, 1938. And 85 years ago, May 10, 1933, was the day when books burned in Berlin. Shortly thereafter, on June 23, they burned in Mainz as well. In his memoirs, “Defying Hitler: A Memoir”, Sebastian Haffner describes what literary-political cabaret could be during the years of the National Socialist reign of terror:



Incidentally, it is typical of the early years of the Nazi regime that the whole façade of everyday life remained virtually unchanged. ... The fact that this was possible also speaks against us. Our reaction to the experience of fearing for one’s life, and being totally at the mercy of events, was only to try and ignore the situation and not allow it to disturb our fun. I think a couple of a hundred years ago would have known better how to deal with such an experience—if only by celebrating a great night of love, spiced by danger and the sense of loss. Charlie and I did not think of doing anything special, and just went to the cabaret because nobody stopped us: first, because we would have gone anyway, and second, in order to think about unpleasant things as little as possible. That may seem cold-blooded and daring, but it really only indicates a weakness of the emotions. We were not equal to the situation, even as victims. If you will allow me this generalization, it is one of the uncanny aspects of events

in Germany that the deeds have no doers and the suffering has no martyrs. Everything takes place under a kind of anesthesia. Objectively dreadful deeds produce a thin, puny emotional response. Murders are committed like schoolboy pranks. Humiliation and moral decay are accepted like minor incidents. Even death under torture only produces the response “Bad luck.”

That evening, however, we were recompensed for our inadequacy beyond our deserts. Chance had led us to the Katakombe, and this was the second remarkable experience of the evening. We arrived at the only place in Germany where a kind of public, courageous, witty, and elegant resistance was taking place. That morning I had witnessed how the Prussian Kammergericht, with a tradition of hundreds of years, had ignobly capitulated before the Nazis. In the evening I experienced how a small troop of artists, with no tradition to back them up, saved our honor with grace and glory. The Kammergericht had fallen but the Katakombe stood upright.



The man who led this small group of artistes to victory—standing firm in the face of overwhelming, murderous odds must be counted as a victory—was called Werner Finck. This minor cabaret master of ceremonies has his place in the annals of the Third Reich, indeed one of the very few places of honor there. He did not look like a hero, and if he finally became something like one, it was in spite of himself. He was not a revolutionary actor, had no biting satire; he was not a David with a sling. His character was at bottom harmless and amiable, his wit gentle, light, and capricious. His jokes were based on double entendre and puns, which he handled like a virtuoso. He had invented something that could be called the hidden punch line. Indeed, as time went by it became more and more necessary for him to hide his punch lines, but he did not conceal his opinions. His act remained full of harmless amiability in a country where these qualities were on the liquidation list. This harmless amiability hid a kernel of real, indomitable courage. He dared to speak openly about the reality of the Nazis, and that in the middle of Germany. His spiel contained references to concentration camps, the raids on people's homes, the general fear and general lies. He spoke of these things with infinitely quiet mockery, melancholy, and sadness. Listening to him was extraordinarily comforting.

This March 31 was perhaps his greatest evening. The house was full of people staring at the very next day as if into an abyss. Finck made them laugh as I have never heard an audience laugh. It was dramatic laughter, the laughter of a newborn defiance, throwing off numbness and desperation, feeding off the present danger. It was a miracle that the SA had not long since arrived to arrest everybody here. On this evening we would probably have gone on laughing in the police vans. We had been improbably raised above fear and danger.



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