

Season 2 Episode 4: Döblin's Year in Hollywood

KK: Welcome all you adventurous readers to the epic worlds of Alfred Dublin, where we explore the life and works of this fascinating but little known early 20th century writer. Brought to you by the website Beyond Alexanderplatz.

CG: Hello everyone! Welcome to season 2, episode 4 of our podcast. I'm Chris Godwin, and I'm here with Katie Kavanagh.

KK: Hello, everybody. Uh, very excited. Episode f4. Well, we're moving on apace now. Episode 3 was quite a long one. Um, Chris, what is this episode all about? What are we going to call it?

CG: Well, it's about five years in the USA.

KK: So maybe before we start, we should recap where we got to in episode 3. So where are Alfred and, uh, Peter?

CG: If you remember, episode 2 covered seven years in France. And then our last episode covered three months during the German invasion. And we're now back to five years. But we're going to be focusing really on two topics in this episode. One will be Alfred's Year in Hollywood, which is a wonderful kind of clash of civilizations. And the other one will be the family's conversion to Roman Catholicism, which was a very kind of fraught issue and had repercussions for the rest of the rest of their lives, basically.

But before we get on to those two topics, um, I'd like to follow up where we left the last episode. With number three son Klaus, or Claude, as he was called in French. He had unfortunately been left behind as the parents made their kind of mad dash to assemble all the necessary documents and cash to be able to get out of France, and then down to Lisbon and across the Atlantic.

KK: I remember.

CG: And Klaus, after the war, basically broke off all relations with his parents on the grounds that they were all horribly mean to have left him behind so he could never forgive them. He felt abandoned, and he thought that he was just not going to have any contact with them. So I did a little digging around in my archives, and I discovered that actually, Alfred and Erna had been pulling out all the stops to try to get help in terms of visas, both in France, in Vichy France and in Washington, and in terms of cash remittances to Klaus so he could buy tickets and so on.

KK: I see.

CG: Unfortunately, these efforts all came to nought. For example, money went missing.

KK: Oh, no.

CG: Yeah. And by the time he'd got this visa, the other visa had expired.

KK: Oh, gosh.

CG: You recall in the last episode we had all these frantic things about ...

KK: So much bureaucracy, And real trouble with visas and things like that.

CG: Yeah, but the parents really were struggling, because they'd also left Wolfgang behind and they had no idea what had happened to Wolfgang because the Red Cross couldn't identify him in any prisoner of war lists. And so on.

KK: Yeah.

CG: But anyway, I just thought we should clear that up.

KK: So the parents were not at all negligent once they'd got to America in trying to rescue Klaus and bring him out, but Klaus was unaware of their efforts.

CG: Well, Klaus was aware that they were trying to help because he was sending them letters and telegrams from Marseille. And explaining to them that the remittance he was just promised had never arrived.

KK: Right. So he knew that they were making efforts.

CG: Yes. So it's rather sad that it should have had those long lasting familial consequences.

KK: Yes, that is sad.

CG: But anyway, shall we get along with the tragi-comical episode of Alfred's year in Hollywood.

KK: Let's do it. Perfect. So, just to set the scene, what dates are we at right now?

CG: Well, we're now at October 1940. They've docked in New York. And Alfred, through the help of various aid agencies, has collared a one year contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, to see whether or not he can make it as a screenwriter in Hollywood.

KK: Okay,

CG: So they have a short time in New York, where they're able to meet up with lots of old friends. But then they immediately have to set off, I guess by train, across the country to Los Angeles.

KK: OK. So how did he approach this task? I mean, was he like, oh, I've written lots of books...?

CG: Well, he came up with the term "fraudulent wordsmithery" at one point! So here I am, this European man of letters with many major publications behind me. And now I sit here in an office with big pads of yellow paper, where I'm supposed to scribble down my ideas for a "story". You know, he's peppering his letters now with little English words as well. His English was still not very good, but they were paying him \$100 a week, which was – I mean, that sounds like quite a lot at the time.

KK: Yes,

CG: But certainly in terms of Hollywood, not extravagant. But still an awful lot more than your average kind of wage slave would have been able to get.

KK: Right. I mean, I'm sure when people like Bertolt Brecht and Günter Anders were lurking around in the back lots and moving, shifting stage props and so on, they were probably earning a lot less.

KK: They were also in Hollywood?

CG: They were all there. Yes. There were lots of – I mean, Louis Mayer alone actually employed four exile writers on this one year, \$100 a week basis. One other of them had actually been on the same boat leaving Lisbon for New York.

KK: That's really interesting that they're all together.

CG: Yes. And I think it was the 1930s – no, 1940s, here was an Austrian screenwriter who'd been working in Hollywood already for a year, and he had quite a long career in Hollywood after the war, called Georg Froeschel, an Austrian. And he gave an interview in 1962, and we'll be reading a couple of excerpts from that. So perhaps if I read the first excerpt now on how this kind of charity action came about. So Froeschel says:

"In 1940, Louis B Mayer, the head of the biggest US movie corporation, summoned me to his office and told me roughly as follows. In a few days, three Jewish writers will arrive here, having fled from Germany and been brought to America with the help of an aid committee. I don't know these gentlemen. I know next to nothing about them. They are said to be gifted people. They will work for us for a year on probation. Do your best

to acclimatize the gentlemen to the way things are done here. And keep an eye on them, what they do and what they get up to. Tell them nothing about this discussion.”

And so, says Froeschel, that's how he became, without their knowledge, the supervisor of Walter Mehring, Alfred Polgar and Alfred Döblin.

KK: I see.

CG: Froeschel would usually give Alfred a lift into the studio in his car, because the Döblins, of course, didn't have a car, which marked them out as a very small subset of the Los Angeles community.

KK: Right.

CG: But Alfred had a very difficult time adapting. I mean, he's obviously, you know, he produced all these enormous epic novels where he was somehow sort of channeling all sorts of ideas from elsewhere. But now he's told he has to sit in an office with his big pad of yellow paper, and he has to come up with stories. And he looks around and sees how other people are doing this. It's like a factory and everybody's in their little cubicle. It's not very easy to natter and chat with each other. But occasionally someone will lift up the telephone and there's excited chatter on the phone and whatnot, and then nothing would happen, because enormous numbers of stories must be generated of which perhaps 1 in 100 will eventually turn into a film. But he thought that, you know, there were. Several things that could be done with his books. Unfortunately, the first idea he toted around was to have the Iceland-Greenland episode from *Mountains Oceans Giants* turned into a film. Now, this is a kind of a stupendous scifi thing

KK: Yes!

CG: where, you know, the special effects would make even someone like George Lucas blanch. But back in 1940, there was no way such special effects could be done. You know, Iceland bursting, the volcanoes bursting, and then these mats being laid over Greenland.

KK: Yes, it's like a kind of atomic explosion. But it sounds like we could totally do that now.

CG: Well, I guess we probably could. But it was just there's just no way they could do it. And the shame is that there's an awful lot of other stuff in *Mountains Oceans Giants* that could have made a very impactful film. For example, you take this whole storyline he's got running through it on Synthetic Food.

KK: We've always talked about how cinematic his writing is, haven't we?

CG: Yes, yes. So that was a shame. But as his, his term is sort of progressing, he was actually given a specific task by Froeschel, so perhaps we could carry on with a second excerpt from Froeschel's interview in 1962.

KK: Sure.

CG: He said, “Almost at the same time as these three writers arrived, I was given the task of adapting Jan Struther's book *Mrs. Miniver* as a film script.” – I'm not sure not many listeners will be aware of *Mrs. Miniver*, I guess, but it was an enormous hit in 1942. It won something like nine Oscars.

KK: Wow.

CG: And Winston Churchill said, you know, this film is worth a whole fleet of destroyers in terms of building up morale and so on. And now he's given the task of adapting it as a film script. He goes on:

“Now, this book comprised a number of sketches dealing with little domestic events in the Miniver family. My boss had the idea of making the Mrs. Miniver character the central point of a dramatic treatment in which the courage and sufferings of the English people, currently in a state of war while America was still at peace, would be brought before the eyes of an American audience.” – In other words, it's war propaganda. –

“I presented all this to Alfred Döblin shortly after he joined MGM, and asked him to take a week thinking about how Mrs. Miniver might be turned into a dramatic character. Exactly one week later, Döblin turned up at my office and spent two hours telling me the content of the book's various schemes. Too polite to interrupt the writer. I asked him once he had finished. So, doctor, what do you think? Can we make a start on Mrs. Miniver? Döblin: ‘We could turn the material into an excellent film for Charlie Chaplin.’ In the circumstances of that time in the world and in films, this response was so absurd that I had no hope of Döblin ever offering anything usable for our script. He, Polgar and Mehring received a salary of a hundred dollars a week – miserably little in the context of the American film industry – but the modest Döblins did very well on the hundred dollars, lived in a little house in Hollywood, under palm trees admittedly, but not much differently than formerly in Berlin East, in the Frankfurter Allee. Every day I picked Döblin up in my car and brought him to Culver City. There the small, slightly unsteady man with the ruddy cheeks and flashing eyes behind thick lenses wrote his book about his escape from France. He showed not the slightest interest in the film, and the film industry at present had nothing to offer him. After many weeks I managed to develop a storyline for the *Mrs Miniver* film. One episode was to show how the husband sets off in a little boat down the Thames and sails across the Channel to help bring the trapped English army back to England. I asked Döblin to write down how he imagined the experiences of Mr Miniver. Just two days later he delivered a manuscript, written in German, of around forty pages. Brightening the tragic episode with flashes of humour, with a compelling verve and yet also proceeding by means of little details, Döblin depicted the story of the amateur sailor's heroic voyage. It was a masterpiece! I had the manuscript translated at once into English, and presented Döblin's work to Mr Franklin, who summoned Döblin and thanked him heartily. In the film *Mrs Miniver* there is little of Döblin's contribution to be seen. But it is certain that the Dunkirk episode is based mainly on his ideas. The film itself won eight Oscars in 1943, including one for me.

CG: Now just imagine if Dublin's episode had been incorporated. He would have joined the other four scriptwriters as a named Oscar winner –

KK: That's a shame.

CG: and I wonder what that would have done for his depressing time in the US.

KK: Is he listed on the credits at all?

CG: No no no.

KK: Oh, no. Nothing. Nothing. Oh, that's a shame. It's very cutthroat, isn't it? That industry.

CG: Well, I mean, we do it today as well. It's a weird way of using creative talent, basically, where the only measure is money. And there was a chap called Max Reinhardt, who'd been a famous impresario in Berlin and he'd also done stints in New York. But he'd produced an enormous live action *Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Hollywood Bowl stadium, with Mickey Rooney and various other well-known people. And I think it was Warner Brothers who said, hey, you know, we'll turn this into a film. You can direct the film for us. So he directed the film for them, and it cost the studio a hell of a lot more than they ever earned from the film. And so from that time on, you know, Max Reinhardt was persona non grata in Hollywood.

KK: Tricky, huh? Um, so did Alfred have any successful pictures at all?

CG: No. He didn't. But he was used as a psychiatric consultant.

KK: Oh, okay.

CG: On a film that they were making of a James Hilton novel. I don't know if you know the name James Hilton.

KK: I don't know.

CG: He wrote a novel about going off to Shangri-La, this planeload of people who sort of end up in Shangri-La, up on the Tibetan Highlands.

KK: Okay.

CG: And so on. But this was another film he made was called *Random Harvest*, which involved a shell shocked person coming back from the First World War. And the man has lost his memory. And so he leads a life back home under another name. Then through an accident, he regains his memory, but he's got no memory of what he was doing when he was the other person, and when he was the other person, he'd fallen in love with somebody. And then when he's forgotten that and gone back to his original life, he falls in love with the same person without realizing that they are the same person. And it's utterly absurd.

KK: But I quite like that.

CG: Alfred was supposed to give his considered professional psychiatric opinion if it was the right way to handle these things.

KK: Yeah. Lovely. OK. So then what happens then?

CG: Well, his one year came to an end. And for the first time in his life since he left school in 1900, he –

KK: . Sorry, Chris. Can I just stop you? Did they keep on any of that original group past the year, or were they all contracted just for one year?

CG: Uh, it's hard to say. There's very scattered information about this, but, um, for example, Heinrich Mann had been employed at a different studio – that's Thomas Mann's brother – employed at a different studio on a similar basis, and he was let go at the end of the year as well.

KK: Right.

CG: So he, you know, a 70 year old man now has got no financial support.

KK: Yeah.

CG: So Döblin at the age of 65, or 63, I guess he was by then, He has to sign on for unemployment. So instead of the \$100 a week – actually it turns out that \$20 was withheld for tax, and another \$10 withheld for something called agents fees.

KK: Oh, really.

CG: Yeah. So in fact he'd been taking home \$70 a week. But the unemployment was only \$15 a week, and only for 20 weeks. So they really were quite desperate. And he was having to seek cash from friends, from aid committees, trying to get a stipend from the Guggenheim Foundation and whatnot. And they had to move to a smaller house, into a little two room clapboard single story house in Hollywood, and it was unfurnished and they had to cadge furniture from wherever they could. And it's quite heartbreaking. They had no bedding, no sofas, no beds. So ...

KK: Meanwhile, is Peter still with them?

CG: No, no. Peter's been on the East coast the whole time. Peter was the eldest son, he was he was pursuing a career in printing and book design.

KK: Oh, sorry. I was thinking of Stefan.

CG: Stefan was the youngest, Etienne. Well, he's now Etienne because he's forgotten all his German, and his first language is French. And now he's doing well in English. Etienne actually had a very successful career. Eventually, after the war, he became the finance director at ~~Citroen~~ Renault, the car company.

KK: Very good.

CG: He was developing into a strapping young man. He was already two heads taller than Alfred.

KK: And he was with them in LA.

CG: Yes, it was three of them. There was Alfred, Erna and Etienne. Y

KK: And how old was Etienne, or Stephan, then?

CG: Well, at the time they arrived in America, he was 15. So he had to be enrolled in high school. And he was learning the recorder. Apparently he's going to a nice Catholic school

KK: Well that's interesting that he's learning the recorder as a teenager though. That's normally a younger ...

CG: Oh well but he became the first clarinet in the school orchestra. And he was a member of a California statewide orchestra.

KK: Oh, lovely. That's very good.

CG: Right. But, I've mentioned Günther Anders before, who was basically working as a scene shifter.

KK: Wasn't Alfred's father very musical?

CG: Yes, and Alfred himself was probably pretty good on the piano as well.

KK: Okay. Are you proud of me for remembering that?

CG: Well, I increasingly rely on you to jog my memory! Anyway, here's Günther Anders, who after the war became a well-known philosopher of the atomic age. And he was working as a scene shifter and working various Hollywood factories and getting a good idea of what industrial life is like. But he visited Döblin several times. And here's what he says, looking back from 1984; he remembers: "So Alfred was writing again, just like old times, day after day, his crazily long letters." – Meaning his writing. And we talked about his writing. It's very, very up and down, you know, only about 10 or 15 lines to a page. "Day after day, his crazily long letters filled the pages like root fibrils without constraint, without a goal, he delivered himself up to associations that had nothing at all to do with him ..." You know, he's channeling, channeling his ideas from somewhere.

KK: Mm. Right.

CG: He goes on:

"The old man Döblin, sitting in Hollywood as a neo-Catholic 'Frenchman'. For he – or it – wrote wise political saws about Karl and Rosa, ie. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who were no longer his concern, if they ever had been." - This was from *November 1918*, his enormous, sprawling 2000 page epic. "This happened in a small, hot south facing room on Citrus Avenue in Hollywood, in which, at the same time, his youngest son, who was already two heads taller than him, practiced Telemann on the flute without a pause, which must have driven the very musical father, from whom

nothing was further than such monodic stuff, around the bend. But he remained, perhaps helped by his religion, gentle and patient.

“So the ‘chronic cheeky chappy’ as he once described himself in Berlin, had now become a very patient, very modest, helpful old man. When in the height of summer, I lay in bed with an angina, he hotfooted through the searing streets of Hollywood as if it was the most natural thing in the world (of course, he was one of that tiny negative elite, the non-car owner) in order to paint my tonsils. And when we both lived in Herbert Marcuse vacant house in Santa Monica, he behaved towards his wife, who was dreadfully aged by the loss of her son” – They’re pretty well convinced now that Wolfgang is not coming back – “as a newlywed might behave towards his freshly blooming bride. He tiptoed around caring for her, he who once had mountains, oceans and giants at his disposal. He slipped into the kitchen to surprise her with breakfast in bed, which was not only a memorable achievement for his eyes, for although almost blind, he never messed up when breaking an egg, but for his heart too. All honor to his memory.!”

KK: So he does really care for Erna then?

CG: Oh. I’m sure. You know, as the years went on, they were a couple, the children grown up and gone. Gone away in more ways than one. I know we’ve talked about how their relationship has developed in previous episodes, and I think we’ll probably be coming back to their relationship again.

KK: Oh, well, he does sound very caring at this point, doesn’t he? Well I’m imagining.

CG: Can I just say as well, the scene when he was talking about his long writing, his long letters?

KK: His calligraphy. Was it to do with his eyesight?

CG: Well, I mean, he had always had this very, very elongated handwriting. It just flows easier than trying to do a little cramped hand, I guess.

KK: Yeah. But he says he’s nearly blind.

CG: Oh, yes. Well, he was getting more and more short sighted.

KK: Mm. OK.

CG: But we can contrast Anders with a very nasty remark by Bertolt Brecht, in the aftermath of the conversion,

KK: So Brecht is with them in LA?

CG: He’s in LA also doing sort of casual work. And when ...

KK: They used, when they were in Europe, they used to all hang out together.

CG: Oh yes. They collaborated very closely, and shared their ideas very, very closely. But he made a note after Alfred *came out* about his conversion. He tries to understand something of why Alfred has, uh, done this. And he says: “Döblin has indeed received hard blows: the loss of two sons in France, the 2400 page epic that stands no chance of ever being printed” – Meaning *November 1918* – “Angina pectoris, the great converter ...” In other words, heart attacks make people think about their death, right? And then: “...and life with an uncommonly stupid and philistine wife.

KK: Oh, that’s really hardsh.

CG: Oh, it’s horrible, isn’t it?

KK: Yes But why? Why did he say that?

CG: Well, because, all along, Erna had not shared. Alfred's kind of ... I mean, she was not a literary person. She would type up his manuscripts, but she wouldn't actually understand what the contents, what the story was. And he wasn't able to discuss with her anything about the style or the rationale behind what he was writing. Um, she was the mother. She was the family organizer.

KK: I imagine that typing something up like that, she would undoubtedly know what it was all about, and undoubtedly she would understand it. There's no question. It sounds like she was just so busy. Well, if he's constantly writing, she's got to do everything else.

CG: But I suspect that very early on, because Alfred felt that he had been, shoved into this marriage with Erna when he was already having an affair with the young nurse Frieda, back before the First World War, he'd been pushed into this. And they had exchanged, um, confidential information about themselves. Um, and the information she provided to Alfred shocked him to the core, being the 19th century male that he that he was, growing up, and so there was a certain sort of frigidity, I think, in the relationship at the start, which is a barrier between them. But as the years went on, they were, you know, much more dependent on each other and sharing their lives. You know, this is where we are, we need to make the best job of it.

KK: Mm.

CG: Remember, in his deep depression during the those months of escaping from France, Alfred had been going over religious ideas and ideas about God and going into the cathedral every day and so on. But when they got to Los Angeles, he made contact with some Jesuit priests just down the road. And he and Erna spent basically the winter of 1940-41 taking instruction, to be baptized in the spring. And I think it was in ~~March 41~~ November 1941. And Alfred was very stern with his sons, saying, "you must not go public with this. It will cause enormous complications if you go public with this."

KK: And why would there be these complications?

CG: Well, firstly, because he would be considered by his Jewish contacts to have betrayed them by becoming Roman Catholic. And secondly, because he would be seen as a traitor by all the Enlightened non-religious intellectuals which had been his universe in. Berlin; that he was backsliding into a kind of Middle Ages of clericalism. So, you know, it would have been very difficult on those two counts. But anyway, for 18 months roughly, he managed to keep it under wraps as far as possible. Then it's his 65th birthday celebrations where the Manns and various other dignitaries were there giving him congratulations. When he was giving his thank you speech, he he couldn't hold back any longer. And he spoke out about, you know, we really we really need to rethink where the Enlightenment without God has brought us to. Um, and this was considered very, very shocking, not least by Brecht, uh, who wrote a little poem called 'Embarrassing Incident', which has been used by critics of Dublin, you know, right up into the post-war years. Um, have we got time just to read this? It's quite a short poem.

KK: Yes. Would you like me to read it, or are you going to?

CG: No, you do it.

KK: Okay. "Embarrassing Incident":

When one of my highest gods had his 10,000th birthday
I came with my friends and my pupils to celebrate him,
And they danced and sang before him and read out prepared words.
The mood was lively. The feast approached its end.

Now the celebrated God stepped onto the stage
 That belonged to the artists
 And declared in a loud voice
 In front of my sweat-drenched friends and pupils
 That he had just experienced a revelation and from now on
 Had become religious and with unseemly haste
 And in a challenging manner placed a motheaten priest's hat on his head,
 Dropped indecently to his knees and shamelessly intoned an insolent hymn,
 Thereby injuring the irreligious sensibilities
 Of his audience, among whom were
 Young people.
 For three days
 I have not dared to meet the eyes
 Of my friends and pupils, I am so
 Embarrassed.

^^^

- CG: So if we're going to use another episode to go further into the implications of this major action by Döblin, then perhaps we could stop here with that reading.
- KK: Yes. Okay, perfect. So that means we'll be we'll be picking up the, um, the conversion issue in more detail than, uh, later on because I feel like it's such a massive thing to go through with, isn't it?
- CG: And, you know, it's been shamefully neglected and misrepresented by the literary establishment ever since. Even even now, it's only fairly recently that we've had some very sensible analyses of what led up to it.
- KK: Right. I mean, isn't it, like we say, it's a big thing. But is it a big thing? People change their minds about things all the time, don't they?
- CG: Oh, yes. But he wasn't changing his mind. He wanted to be spreading a message to the world. As actually he had done in his South American trilogy, *The Land Without Death*. The idea that the Enlightenment has led to all kinds of barbarities and misuse of the world.
- KK: Mm. Well, I am looking forward to this as a future episode then, Chris.
- CG: Oh, okay. I had actually started to prepare our next episode, which I was going to focus on Wolfgang.
- KK: Oh, okay.
- CG: But we could slide these. We could vary where we put these topics.
- KK: Yeah.
- CG: It's just we've still got quite a lot to talk about.
- KK: Yes we have. Brilliant. Love it. Oh, well, thank you so much for all of that today, Chris. So I feel like we're getting further and further along in his life. So he's now, uh, how old is he right now? 60?.
- CG: Well, he was 65 at the birthday celebration where he came out.
- KK: 65. Okay. So we've got a few more years left.
- CG: Yes. Those rather sad years back in Europe until his death in 1957. And then, of course, there's the aftermath and the editions and so on and how gradually over the decades has become somewhat wider known? There have been some well edited editions of his novels. I mean, you compare it with some comparable English writers. There are contemporary English

writers who just sort of disappeared. They're out of sight underneath all the kind of throwaway stuff that fills the bookshelves these days.

KK: Yeah, that's true. That's true. Yeah. All right, well, let's stop there then. Excited about our next episode already. Thank you so much, everybody, for joining us today. And we will see you next time. As always, if you have any questions or if there's anything that you want us to focus on, please do leave us a comment.

CG: Okay. Cheers. Thank you everybody. Thank you. Until next time.

KK: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin. Join us next time to explore more about this fascinating writer's life and works. Meanwhile, visit the website beyond Hyphen Alexanderplatz for posts about Döblin and some of his unjustly neglected contemporaries, as well as downloads of translations. So until next time, happy reading!