

# **The Bombay Talkies Limited**

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An epistolary history of Indo-German film relations



## An epistolary history of Indo-German film relations

*By Eleanor Halsall*

Jörg Zedler's discovery of a cache of letters written by Karl von Spreti to his family when he was working at Bombay Talkies enhances our understanding of this relatively unknown period of his life.<sup>1</sup> For the film historian, these personal letters inject moments of enlightenment, his private correspondence revealing information about the day-to-day working of one of India's most important film studios of the period. As he alludes to the power struggles, petty jealousies and minor squabbles that sometimes erupted into violence, his words provide an understanding of the relationships between individuals, and the tensions that prevailed in the day to day working of a film studio. Although he omits much detail about the technical aspects of film architecture – perhaps a little too dry for his family's pleasure? – he provides enough information to brush some of the dust off testimonials that have been shaped through the prism of time and the calcification of memory. He talks with pride about the first car he bought, and the 'boy' he employed to shape his image as a young man of repute in colonial Bombay; and we discover which social networks he operated in, some of which do not appear to have been readily available to his compatriots at Bombay Talkies. Was this was by dint of his birth as the scion of an aristocratic family or simply because he possessed the social confidence and charm to move with ease between quite different social circles? His letters are significant because of their immediacy and we read them as they were intended: crucial vectors of contact in a world in flux.

1 Cf. to Spreti's life Jörg ZEDLER: *Karl Graf von Spreti. Bilder einer diplomatischen Karriere*, Munich 2008.

Karl von Spreti is, of course, better known to political historians for his involvement in post-war German politics; and for a diplomatic career that took him to Luxembourg, Cuba, Jordan and the Dominican Republic before he was taken hostage and murdered in Guatemala in April 1970. It is this history that has overshadowed his early work in the film industry and possibly led to confusion when occasionally obituaries associated him with Richard Eichberg's Indian productions.<sup>2</sup> Altogether von Spreti worked on at least twenty films in Germany and India yet, as is often the case with transnational film histories, his role as film architect is barely traced in India where he regularly received acclaim for the films he worked on at the Bombay Talkies; and he receives no recognition in Germany where he appears to have been mostly a film architect in training.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide context to the filmmaking enterprise that Karl von Spreti was involved in at the Bombay Talkies and to try to position him within the nexus of cultural exchanges taking place between Germany and India during this interwar period. It explores the factors that might have motivated him to move to India to work with the newly established and untested film studio, in a country he did not know and whose languages he did not speak; and it looks at the options he considered when the time came to move on. The chapter tracks some of the details he provides about his work at Bombay Talkies, as well as about his life outside work: his descriptions of the cultural landscape, the films he watched, the clubs he visited and some of the people he knew. Equally important are the political

2 Obituary Karl von Spreti, in: *The Times*, 7 April 1970. "Count Karl Von Spreti had spent three years in India early in his life designing film sets for two German films [...] he was in India during the pre-war period to design film sets for the German films *The Indian Sepulchre* and *The Tiger of Eschnapur*." Richard Eichberg travelled to India in 1937 with a large Franco-German film crew to produce two films. It is likely that they would have passed through Bombay and may well have encountered Karl von Spreti, perhaps at the German Club; however, there is no evidence that he was ever involved in these productions.

groupings he refers to in colonial Bombay, a location that was entangled between the triangulated politics of Britain, Germany and India.

### A film architect in training

Karl von Spreti's journey to the Bombay Talkies began when he enrolled to study architecture at the Technical University of Munich (Technische Hochschule) in October 1930. Whether or not this was intended as a first step towards a career in the film industry is speculative: he could, for example, have enrolled at Munich's own Film School had filmmaking been his principal objective. There was a link between Munich's Technical University and its film industry at Geiseltasteig, however, and this had been established since 1918 when the University's celebrated Professor of Architecture, Theodor Fischer, accepted a position on the cultural advisory board of the newly founded Münchner Lichtspielkunst GmbH, otherwise known as Emelka.<sup>5</sup>

Over a period of seven semesters, Karl von Spreti followed the subjects mandated for a foundation diploma in architectural practice, excelling at some, passing others. It is one of his optional subjects, however, that hooks the attention. In the winter semester of 1931/32 he followed a course in cinematography taught by the head of the *Bayerische Lichtbildstelle* (and from 1934 on head of the *Landesbildstelle Südbayern* as well), Dr Hans Ammann.<sup>4</sup> We have no more detail about this particular course and his participation does not appear to have been graded, but by the time he graduated in March 1933 he had already been working at Emelka since at least the middle of 1932.

5 Cf. Neue Kino Rundschau, 29 June 1918, 60. On the early years of Emelka cf. Petra Putz: Waterloo in Geiseltasteig. Die Geschichte des Münchner Filmkonzerns Emelka (1919–1933) im Antagonismus zwischen Bayern und dem Reich; Trier 1996.

4 Cf. Technical University Munich Archive, PA Stud. Spreti, von K.

His name does not appear in any of the filmographies, and his status was likely to have been some form of apprenticeship.<sup>5</sup> It was at Emelka's studio at Geiseltal to the south of Munich where he worked with Ludwig and Willy Reiber, two of Emelka's longstanding film architects; and in his application to join the Reichsfachschaft Film (RFF) in July 1933, he names both Reiber brothers as referees as well as Karl Vollbrecht who worked occasionally at Geiseltal.<sup>6</sup> The RFF application records that by this date Karl von Sprei had worked on the sets of at least seven or eight films, educational documentaries such as *Eine Fliege ist ins Glas gefallen* (*A fly has fallen into the glass*, 1932) as well as feature films including productions directed by Géza von Bolváry (*Ein Mann mit Herz / A man with heart*, 1932) and Carl Boese (*Eine Frau wie Du / A woman like you*, 1933), two of Germany's prominent directors at the time.<sup>7</sup> Most significantly, his time at Geiseltal, where he was still working at the beginning of 1935, would have brought him into contact with cameraman Josef Wirsching.<sup>8</sup>

### Indo-German exchanges

Wirsching's connection with India began with the 1925 production of *The Light of Asia* (*Die Leuchte Asiens*, 1925), a silent film based on the early life of the Buddha. Directed by Franz Osten and produced by Himansu Rai, this was an international co-production with Emelka and the Great Eastern Corpora-

5 Cf. Personalakt Karl von Sprei, Personalbogen, 7 December 1955, Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office (in future: PA AA), Vol. I, 57937.

6 These details are provided in von Sprei's application to join the Reichsfachschaft Film (RFF) in July 1933, membership of which was essential to continue working in the film industry. Cf. Bundesarchiv (in future: BArch), RK J0096.

7 Cf. *ibid.*

8 Cf. Personalbogen, 7 December 1955, PA AA, Personalakt Karl von Sprei, Vol. I, 57937.

tion Limited. The latter, established in India, provided much of the funding, whilst Emelka provided the film crew which included Wirsching and Willi Kiermeier as camera operators, and Bertl Schultes as translator and assistant director. The film crew was led by Osten, Emelka's lead director. Although for Kiermeier and Schultes this would be their only involvement with this Indo-German link, the partnership between Rai and Osten, the latter departing Emelka at the end of 1926, would last nearly fifteen years, overseeing two more silent films, as well as sixteen sound feature films in the Hindi language. For Wirsching himself, it would lead to a long and significant film career in India and after 1935 he neither worked nor lived in Germany again.

Himansu Rai was a Bengali aristocrat who had originally studied law in Calcutta and had subsequently been sent to London to train as a barrister at Middle Temple. His interests lay elsewhere and, to the dismay of his family, he was soon directing his energy towards productions for stage and film. *The Light of Asia* was his first film but, in spite of its relative success, Emelka showed no interest in future co-productions, leading Rai to seek other partners. By September 1927 records show that he was sending synopses written by fellow Bengali, Niranjan Pal, to the German Universum Film (Ufa) in Babelsberg and agreement to produce *Shiraz (Das Grabmal einer großen Liebe, 1928)* was finally reached the following year.<sup>9</sup> When Ufa shifted decisively to the production of sound films, building its first sound film studio at Babelsberg in 1929, the production of silent films in Germany rapidly declined. For a brief period, a hybrid form of post synchronisation was used, and this was applied to *A Throw of Dice (Schicksalswürfel, 1929)*. Rai's attempts to persuade Ufa to co-produce films in Indian languages came to nothing and the Board turned him down, bringing his involvement with the company to a definitive end in November 1930.<sup>10</sup>

9 Cf. Verträge BArch, R 109-I/2421, 309.

10 Cf. Niederschrift 652, 1 July 1930 and Niederschrift 684, 4 November 1930, both in BArch,

The relationship that Rai had with both Emelka and Ufa is one manifestation of multiple cultural exchanges between Germany and India that saw aspirant filmmakers from India travelling to Germany to access training and experience.<sup>11</sup> The Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) of 1928 recorded at least twenty-one respondents who praised German film training, either from personal experience or because someone else had recommended it.<sup>12</sup> Among them was Mohan Bhavnani who von Spreti met at a dinner at the Polish consulate.<sup>13</sup> Bhavnani had studied in Germany and spoke excellent German. He continued to maintain strong links there and would later provide refuge in India for the Jewish film critic and writer, Willy Haas.<sup>14</sup>

German establishments such as the Stern'sches Konservatorium in Berlin's Wilmersdorf, the Reimann Akademie at Landshuter Straße (Berlin), and the Tonfilmschule Döblin at Halensee (run by Hugo Döblin, actor at the Deutsches Theater and brother of the famous novelist, Alfred Döblin) advertised their courses in Indian film publications, promoting themselves as specialists in sound film training.<sup>15</sup> Indian readers also sought counsel from Baburao Patel, the mordant editor of *Film India*, on how best to acquire a German film training, earning his sardonic advice to "proceed to Germany

R 109-I/1027b (these are the minutes of Ufa's Management Board).

11 Cf. Eleanor HALSALL: *Kosmopoliten, Nationalisten, Visionäre: Indische Filmstudenten und Filmschaffende im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik*, in: *Filmblatt 73/74* (Winter 2020/21), 4–17.

12 Cf. The Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) was set up in 1927. Comprising of six panel members, three Indian and three British, the ICC travelled the length and breadth of British India interviewing selected citizens with regard to how the Indian film industry could be strengthened and promoted. No Germans were interviewed, in spite of the two films receiving the most attention in the final report (*Shiraz* and *A Throw of Dice*).

13 Cf. Letter Karl Graf von Spreti to his parents, letter 89, 17 December 1936, published in: Jörg ZEDLER (ed.): *Briefe aus „Bollywood“*. Karl Graf von Spreti und die Anfänge der indischen Filmindustrie (1935–1938), will be published in 2022.

14 Cf. Willy HAAS: *Die literarische Welt. Erinnerungen*; Munich 1983, 206.

15 Cf. Advertisement *Filmland* (India), June 1932.

[...] take your training there and then come back to India and earn back the expenses of your trip. Even if you go as far as Aden and return shouting at the top of your voice that you have been working in the Ufa studios in Berlin, producers will fall over one another to secure your services.”<sup>16</sup> After several years mocking those who aspired to a German training, in 1939 Patel took himself on an investigative trip to Ufa’s Babelsberg site in the company of Krishna Hirlekar, an Indian filmmaker who had lived and worked in Germany from the early 1920s. Patel’s enthusiasm for the apparent autonomy of Ufa’s organisation was no doubt inspired by his own desire for India’s *Swadeshi* campaign to succeed: “Everything that is required for the film industry, from a nail to a star, is either manufactured or found in the country and Germany does not buy anything from any other country. The industry is therefore fully indigenous.”<sup>17</sup>

In an undated letter from July 1935, von Spreti refers to an Indian he worked with at Geiseltal who had just joined Bombay Talkies as a photographer. Unfortunately he does not provide a name, leaving us to reflect on possibilities. R. D. Pareenja, who worked closely with Wirsching from the studio’s first film onwards, can be discounted as he was only born in 1913.<sup>18</sup> One Indian student could be tracked through the archives of the Munich Film School, later the Bayerische Staatslehranstalt für Lichtbildwesen, but his name does not appear in subsequent film industry records.<sup>19</sup> What might once have been a reliable source, German registers documenting the inward migration of Indian students and filmmakers, appear to have been lost and

16 Letter from a reader calling himself K.V.N., Bangalore, in: *Film India*, December 1937, 17.

17 German Film Industry, in: *Film India*, September 1939, 28.

18 Other possibilities include D. N. Bali and Krishna Gopal, who both supported Wirsching on the earliest films at the studio.

19 In 1930/31 Raoji Bagde of Ahmednagar is listed as an Indian student at the Munich Film School, an institution first established by Peter Ostermayr, brother of Franz Osten. Cf. Bericht über das 31. Schuljahr 1930/31, BArch, R 8128/16956.



tracing these names remains tantalisingly elusive. Several of Bombay Talkies' other technicians had worked abroad, although it proves equally difficult to trace their records in other European archives. Savak Vacha, who began at Bombay Talkies as a sound engineer had trained in France, acquiring a French wife who herself worked for Bombay Talkies as a makeup artist, using the pseudonym, Mme Andrée. Von Spreti describes meeting the couple at a whisky party they hosted, spelling their name phonetically as Watcher.<sup>20</sup>

In the course of describing his many social engagements, von Spreti mentions the names of several German industrialists who were established in India, representing companies such as Krupps, AEG, Siemens, Schering and Agfa, all of which had a strong presence in India. At least three Germans worked in other parts of the Indian film industry. They included an animation specialist, Bodo Gutschwager, who initially worked for Bhavnani before moving to the industry in India's south; and a cameraman, Wilhelm Meyer-Bergelt, the latter having stayed on to work at Profulla Pictures in Calcutta after work on Richard Eichberg's films was completed.<sup>21</sup> Gutschwager and Meyer-Bergelt remained in internment for the duration of the war, their number increasing with the arrival of Paul Zils, who had been taken prisoner of war in Java in May 1940 and later became a renowned documentary film maker in his adopted country.<sup>22</sup>

20 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 14, 19 May 1935.

21 Cf. Deutsche in Feindesland, PA AA, R 127753.

22 Nominal rolls of internees and parolees in India. British Library (in future: BL), IOR/L/PJ/8/31; Amrit GANGAR: Paul Zils and the Indian Documentary; Bombay 2003.

## The Bombay Talkies

Rai and Devika Rani produced their first sound film, *Karma* (1933), at London's Stoll studios. This dual language production in English and Hindi marked Devika Rani's debut as an actress. Osten did not direct on this occasion, but a German link was maintained with cameraman Emil Schünemann who had photographed *Shiraz* and *A Throw of Dice*. Although *Karma* achieved relative success in England, this was arguably due more to its novelty and the on screen presence of Devika Rani, who Karl von Spreti describes as being "as pretty as a picture".<sup>23</sup>

Devika Rani advised the *Times of India* that she and Rai planned to establish "an Indian Hollywood at Bombay", adding that they intended to "engage technical experts from Europe, and to use these specialists to train their Indian staff."<sup>24</sup> Her use of Hollywood as a comparator is instructive because it highlights the totemic power that Hollywood retained around the globe; power that was gradually granting the American industry metonymic status, and would eventually insinuate itself onto the film industry in Bombay via the mimetic term Bollywood. Incidentally, the film industry in Calcutta was already being referred to as Tollywood in recognition of its location at Tollygunge.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of December 1933, the Rais returned to India to establish their own film studio. The intention was that foreigners would train Indian colleagues to succeed them, a promise that Rai allegedly made to Pal.<sup>26</sup>

23 ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 4, 22 March 1935.

24 Indian Hollywood in Bombay: Plans completed, in: *Times of India*, 5 June 1933, 6.

25 Cf. Advertisement for Tollywood's Social Hit, Mr and Mrs Bombay, in: *Bombay Chronicle*, 17 February 1937.

26 Cf. Kusum Pant JOSHI/Mohan Lalit JOSHI (eds.): *A forgotten Legend and such is Life. An Autobiography by Nirranjan Pal*; London 2011, 234.

The public was offered the opportunity to invest in this new enterprise, the details of which were listed in a share proposal that appeared in the Indian press on 9 August 1934.<sup>27</sup> The document outlined their plans, signalling the intention to produce talking films in a region that was already identified with commercial cinema. Couched in legal language, the proposal embodies a social gravitas, naming its elite board of directors, several of whom had received British knighthoods. The managing director would be Sir Richard Temple, son of a previous governor of Bombay, and sufficiently wealthy to provide substantial funding for the new studio. These were not chance occurrences but relationships carefully nurtured by Rai to bring an air of respectability to the production of films in India and to encourage respectable Indian women onto the screen; without doubt Karl von Spreti's aristocratic status would sit comfortably within this constellation. Rai signalled that the nature of Bombay Talkies would be distinct from the enterprises of the moneymen whose cheap productions had fallen foul of the arbiters at the ICC. Interviewed by the *Bombay Chronicle*, he argued that "the protean variety of modern Indian life would provide a better scope for Indian films than the hackneyed themes of Indian mythology."<sup>28</sup> Defining their vision of cinema as a medium for education and an endeavour worthy of respect, their ambition extended beyond cinema's primary charge as an object of entertainment.

They also announced "plans and details for the erection of a Studio and Laboratory and up-to-date equipment for the same, selecting attractive stories, engagement of capable Artistes and experienced technicians for the purpose of producing films of quality and popular appeal."<sup>29</sup> Descriptions of the way the Studio was organised indicate a model similar to many of those in the West, in particular Ufa. Ashok Kumar later recalled that the studio

27 Cf. The Bombay Talkies, Limited, in: Times of India, 9 August 1934.

28 Himansu Rai thinks, in: Bombay Chronicle, 24 March 1934.

29 The Bombay Talkies, Limited, in: Times of India, 9 August 1934.

had “a library, a dispensary, a laboratory, a canteen run by the famous Brandons and acres of open space and a beautiful garden.”<sup>50</sup> The Governor of Bombay and his wife were given a tour of the new studio on 16 May 1935, following which an article in the *Times of India* enthused about “the most up-to-date cinematograph studios in India” that were designed “on a systematic and careful plan.”<sup>51</sup> The stress on modernity, mobility, speed and efficiency of appliances and apparatus was perhaps nowhere clearer than the effort to control the natural resources of air and water and noise, all active enemies in the sensitive processes of film production. Although Bombay Talkies might employ foreign workers and prefer foreign technology when buying “complicated machines for intricate purposes”, it also stressed that “what apparatus could be constructed in this country such as development and drying plant has been produced by Indian labour”, a sentiment that might have satisfied Baburao Patel.<sup>52</sup>

### Recruiting foreign specialists

Towards the end of 1934, Rai had once again made contact with his former employers at Ufa: a brief note in the board minutes of 7 December 1934 records his request for recommendations for a cameraman, an artistic director, a dramatist and a sound engineer.<sup>53</sup> Although the Board initially appeared to view Rai’s request favourably, Ufa’s foreign department rapidly intervened and a note pasted over the previous annotation declined any help. One might only speculate on the reasons behind this abrupt change of heart.

50 Ashok KUMAR: “Those were my formative years”, in: *Screen*, 5 October 1984.

51 Bombay Talkies Studios: Governor’s Visit, in: *Times of India*, 17 May 1935.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Cf. BAArch, R 109-I/1029c, Niederschrift 1049, 7 December 1934.

The way became clear for the Munich players: On Christmas Eve 1934 Josef Wirsching asked Karl von Spreti whether he might be interested in joining them at Bombay Talkies, suggesting that Rai's request for help had also been directed to his former partners in Munich.<sup>34</sup> "The challenge I face is considerable and I hope that I can acquit myself satisfactorily."<sup>35</sup> Identifying an opportunity, but nevertheless apprehensive at the task ahead, Karl von Spreti was on a boat bound for Bombay a little more than two months after this meeting "proud, as a German, to have been called to work there."<sup>36</sup> This last comment resonates with remarks accorded to Franz Osten who stressed that his role with Bombay Talkies had enabled him to install German products and equipment and who also claimed to have shown *Achhut Kanya* (*Untouchable Girl*, 1936) at the German Ministry of Propaganda on a trip home in 1937.<sup>37</sup> The emphasis on making positive representations of Germany appears in another letter when von Spreti describes an event at the German Club where they were reminded "that we are also representatives for our country and must use our very identity to promote our country."<sup>38</sup>

Rai had relied on Wirsching to find a suitable film architect. Apart from von Spreti's aristocratic status, his recruitment offered another benefit because he would be able to design film sets *and* buildings, a point he mentioned in a later application: "I received recognition from the local authority to work as an architect (License to act as a Surveyor, granted under section 355

34 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 41, 27 December 1935.

35 Ibid., letter 1, 9 March 1935.

36 On one occasion, frustrated at demands for subscriptions from the German film organisation and union (RFF and DAF) von Spreti commented: "in a propagandistic sense, we are really working here at Bombay Talkies on behalf of Germany. How the newspapers attacked us, yet today the other companies and the press have to acknowledge, albeit reluctantly, and even if we are bloody Germans." Ibid., letter 78, 9 September 1936.

37 "During my holiday in 1937, I was able to show [Achhut Kanya] at the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda." Osten, Lebenslauf, BArch, RKJ0079, 301 f.

38 ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 59, 6 May 1936.

of the city of Bombay Municipal Act 1888), I was appointed as architect responsible for the maintenance and building conversions on the premises of Bombay Talkies.”<sup>39</sup> One example of this was the garage he records working on in May 1935.<sup>40</sup>

What attracted Karl von Spreti to take this appointment? In spite of his background, money appears to have been short and on at least three occasions during his studies at Munich’s Technical University, he had to ask for a grace period for his fees.<sup>41</sup> His position at Bombay Talkies would provide him with a regular income and it would enable him to use his professional skills as both architect and set designer. He would also have a degree of autonomy in managing his own team, something he would probably not have achieved at Emelka for some time: “At home I have fewer rights but less work, but must defer to others all the time. Here, on the other hand, I am my own boss, I can determine everything – time management, salary, hiring and firing people”.<sup>42</sup> The appointment also provided him with a place to live. Musing on his future during the long, and sometimes lonely journey to India, he reflected that the experience would influence him and that he would return to Munich a different person.<sup>43</sup>

As reported by Devika Rani, the four Germans and one Briton would each be responsible for a technical function as well as training local staff. This latter point appears to have been a popular attraction when Rai toured India,

39 Application to Reichskammer der bildenden Künste, 3 July 1938, BArch, RKJ0096.

40 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 12, 31 May 1935.

41 Cf. application to Reichskammer der bildenden Künste, 3 July 1938, BArch, RKJ0096.

42 ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 66, 17 June 1936.

43 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 1, 9 March 1935. On the journey he struck up conversation with Dr Martin Rikli, special correspondent for Ufa, who was heading to Abyssinia where he would make some six documentary films.

principally searching for candidates who were at least matriculates.<sup>44</sup> Leela Chitnis, one of Bombay Talkies' most popular film stars who joined the studio in 1939, later told an interviewer that "graduates from universities were offered various positions in Bombay Talkies with the assurance of being trained by foreigners as well as Indian experts in different sections of movie production."<sup>45</sup> Franz Osten became the lead director, as he had once been at Emelka and Josef Wirsching assumed responsibility for cinematography. Willy Zolle, who had already been working for another Indian film studio in Bombay, would manage the processing laboratory.<sup>46</sup> A British sound engineer, Leonard Hartley, oversaw the Visatone sound recording for the studio's first film, returning to England in early October 1935, leaving the role to be managed by Savak Vacha and Shashadhar Mukherji. Karl von Spreti was appointed film architect with responsibility for set design, his team including an art director. This was most likely to have been J. K. Roy, an artist whose tenure with the studio was to be short lived for reasons that become clear from the letters. By the end of 1935, the Bombay Talkies would grow to "a staff of more than 400 artistes and technicians."<sup>47</sup>

44 Cf. Situations Vacant, in: Times of India, 14 January 1935.

45 Leela CHITNIS: The Glory that was Bombay Talkies, in: Screen, 5 October 1984.

46 A letter from von Spreti to the Reichsfachschaft Film (RFF) in Berlin advised that Zolle had already been working at another (unnamed) studio in Bombay for at least a year by the time he was employed by Rai to run the laboratory at Bombay Talkies. Letter from von Spreti to Rath, 15 November 1936, BArch, RKJ0096, 318 f. In a letter, von Spreti refers to meeting an engineer called Zoller who had just been appointed to the studio and who had a wife and two children (ZEDLER, Briefe [fn. 13], letter 6, 1 April 1935). In all future letters he refers to his colleague, Willi Zolle, who is the person recognised as working at Bombay Talkies. If this is the same person, the mention of a family is new and may have been a misunderstanding by von Spreti. Internees with families were usually housed in special family camps. Zolle was interned in India and archival documents indicate his next of kin was his father in Berlin (PA AA, R 145721; BL, IOR-L/PJ/8/32).

47 The Romance of Bombay Talkies, in: Screen, 28 September 1984.

“The unit [at Malad] is entirely self-contained and in and around the studio has developed a complete film colony, the members of which live, eat, work and play together in conditions of corporate existence such as one might expect to find in a university or college but hardly in a work-a-day business organisation.”<sup>48</sup> The Rais had secured a lease on premises at Malad, thirty kilometres to the west of Bombay. The property belonged to Framroze Edulji Dinshaw, a Parsi member of Bombay Talkies’ board of directors, and the estate came with a palatial two storey bungalow set in some twenty-one acres of ground.

This included extensive gardens and an orchard, and offered the opportunity to erect studio buildings as well as to accommodate many of its employees. It was here that the Germans were housed. As we read from the letters describing the fluctuating pressures of film work, this could be both a blessing and a curse. Von Spreti’s work was at its most intense when he was researching, designing and building the sets; easing off slightly once shooting was completed. Film shot during the day was passed to Willy Zolle for developing overnight so that the rushes could be examined before the next day’s shooting began.<sup>49</sup> Once filming was finished, the editing process took over and von Spreti comments that Osten and Wirsching frequently worked around the clock to finish a film for exhibition. The consequence of this was that von Spreti’s letter writing could be interrupted at any time of day or night if his involvement was needed to rectify a problem, disrupting the narrative flow of his correspondence but lending it a stream of consciousness tone.

The extensive backlot of Dinshaw’s property was available for the studio’s use and several film scenes can be identified as having been shot here: glimpses of the garden are visible in the opening scenes of *Janmabhoomi* and

48 Bombay Talkies, *The Motion Picture Magazine*, October 1937, 10–12.

49 Cf. R.D. MATHUR: *The Film Patriarch*, in: *Screen*, 28 September 1984.



*Jeevan Naiya's* substantial wedding party provides a sense of its size (both films: 1936).<sup>50</sup> In an early letter von Spreti describes his arrival at Malad when Devika Rani showed him the garden she was creating containing “banana and orange trees, palms, jasmine, and shrubs with a variety of different flowers.”<sup>51</sup> The vibrant diversity of India’s flora would be a frequent topic in his letters home, a pleasure he evidently shared with his father. Von Spreti later commented about the success of a garden he built in the studio for *Jawani-ki-hawa*, which led Rai to joke that he should give him the contract for – presumably – managing the main garden.<sup>52</sup>

Von Spreti’s descriptions of the grounds at Malad are particularly poignant because they provide detail that is mostly lost and not readily replicated. Following the demise of the Bombay Talkies in 1953, the growing population of the City of Bombay encroached, swallowing up the land. The site was long ago divided into industrial workshops and the remains of its stately buildings now resemble ancient ruins rather than the majestic structures that appeared as backdrops to the films.

### Communities and colleagues

The intimate register of Karl von Spreti’s correspondence with his family collapses inhibitions when he describes relationships with his colleagues; and it reveals his perceptions and frustrations of the wider world in which he operated, suggesting an acute observer of people, a quality that would no doubt contribute to his future role as a diplomat. His descriptions can be both in-

50 Janmabhoomi is available to watch at <https://indiancine.ma/> (Zugriff: 1. März 2021).

51 ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 5, 22 March 1935.

52 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 20, 7 August 1935.

cisive and amusing; when reading them it is important to recall that these were personal letters, private gossip intended for a group of intimates. It is these very details, however, that animate his descriptions of colleagues, friends and acquaintances. They provide fascinating insights into the internal politics and the day-to-day work within the studio, as well as the triangulated political landscape of a colonial city striving for independence, an environment sometimes mirrored by minor fault lines within the Studio that itself sat at the confluence of Britain, Germany and India. Bombay Talkies was being promoted, and generally strove to be, a cosmopolitan space where workers from India's diverse communities and its European technicians came together to produce feature films in Hindi, although the strength of these bonds would be tested from time to time as became clear when the first film was completed.

The Parsi community reacted furiously against the involvement of the two Homji sisters in *Jawani-ki-hawa*.<sup>53</sup> The anger, predominantly from the patriarchs of the community, raged for many days, becoming increasingly hysterical in tone: "Take for instance Miss Modest Virgin going to the stage or screen as an actress. She is asked to woo one Mr Scoundrel! And to fall in his arms and be his bride on the stage! Can she do this without compunction? Certainly not."<sup>54</sup> The Parsis demanded that the scenes with Chandraprabha be reshot with a non-Parsi actress. Given that one of Rai's ambitions with the new studio was to encourage Indian women to work in film, he refused to accede and three of the four Parsi directors resigned. The fourth, Mr

53 Korshed Minocher Homji, subsequently known as Saraswati Devi, was employed as music director and her sister Maneck Minocher Homji, subsequently Chandraprabha, became an actress.

54 Barucha: Why Parsis are opposed to ... appearance of girls on screen or stage, in: *Bombay Chronicle*, 11 September 1935, 11.

Dinshaw, remained, claiming he had known from the outset of the sisters' involvement; given that he was also their landlord, this was fortunate.<sup>55</sup>

The uproar delayed the film's release for nearly two weeks leaving von Spreti somewhat bemused, judging by the tone of his letters: "All the newspapers are running huge articles [...] the guys are hypocrites and terribly arrogant. I'm collecting the newspaper clippings and sending them to you."<sup>56</sup> On the day of the premiere, he relates that he stayed behind at the studio in the company of eight policemen who had been sent to ensure the studio's protection.<sup>57</sup> While this may seem an overreaction, the danger was real. In 1970, Saraswati Devi recalled "I was on my way to the studio with Himansu Rai. Suddenly our car was stopped, and I was dragged out. But Himansu addressed me as 'Devika Rani' and since people didn't know what I looked like, they let me go. That was really a close shave. Had they known the truth, I shudder to think of what the consequences would have been!"<sup>58</sup>

Sir Chimanlal Setalvad's speech, given at the inauguration on 31 March 1935, had included a hope that the peaceful cooperation of the studio's diverse workforce would act as a role model for politicians.<sup>59</sup> "They want us to live in harmony, never to get angry, to work together [...] Tagore School!"<sup>60</sup> Von Spreti was alluding to Shantiniketan, the college established by Rabindranath Tagore and which Rai had attended. The day-to-day reality of life in the studio was different, however: the commercial intensity on production and

55 Dinshaw's sudden and unexpected death on 3 January 1936, mentioned in von Spreti's letter of 9 January 1936 (cf. ZEDLER, Briefe [fn. 13], letter 43, 9 January 1936), briefly threw the company into turmoil until they established that they could stay at Malad.

56 Ibid., letter 25, 5 September 1935.

57 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 27, 18 September 1935.

58 Shashikant KINIKAR: *Lasting Lady*, Khurshid-Saraswati, in: *Cinema Vision 2* (1980), no. 2, 70–72.

59 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 6, 1 April 1935.

60 Ibid., letter 9, 11 May 1935.

pressure from the board of directors resulted in long working hours, including nights, weekends and holidays. Illness and heat exhaustion meant that von Spreti's colleagues regularly suffered from bouts of malaria and *Tropenkoller* – tropical madness. Caste affiliations often meant that the dismissal or resignation of one worker might lead to the loss of an entire group of workers at a critical point in production.<sup>61</sup> Atmospheric conditions ranging from mouldering monsoon rains to intense heat hampered production. Local fauna – rats and snakes – required regular suppression, the former for the damage they could do to the sets, the latter for their risk to the workforce. The clash of opinions about artistic direction as well as the clash of different cultures was intensified because they were living and working together, practically under the same roof. Rai insisted that “all the executives should dwell within hailing distance of Malad” and he kept a tight rein on production decisions, appearing not to have brooked dissent.<sup>62</sup> A recent publication based on the letters of Devika Rani, portrays him as a somewhat mercurial character, often given to extremes of mood which could erupt in violence.<sup>63</sup> According to Ashok Kumar, Rai did not like to have his decisions challenged and used to “scold and shout a lot”; on one occasion, he allegedly slapped Vacha so hard, he caused him to become deaf.<sup>64</sup> Were these the symptoms of encroaching illness, or an indication of the extreme pressure he worked under? Announcing his untimely death on 19 May 1940 at the age of only 48, *Film India* reported that it came “after a month’s illness following a nervous breakdown due to overwork.”<sup>65</sup>

61 Cf. letters 13 and 14, 12 June and 19 June 1935.

62 Cf. *The Romance of Bombay Talkies*, in: *Screen*, 28 September 1984.

63 Cf. Kishwar DESAI: *The longest Kiss. The Life and Times of Devika Rani*; New Delhi 2020.

64 *The Romance of Bombay Talkies*, in: *Screen*, 28 September 1984.

65 Sudden death of Mr Himansu Rai! *Film India*, June 1940, 15 f.

### Work in the studio

Having arrived at the studio in Malad on 22 March 1935, Karl von Spreti was instructed to prepare the studio for shooting to begin on 1 April.<sup>66</sup> Although he was pleased with the structure that had been built, he commented that it contained absolutely nothing; it was his responsibility to procure everything from nails and tools, to props and furniture in readiness for the first film, *Jawani-ki-hawa*. Shopping trips to Bombay became a regular undertaking.

The production of *Jawani-ki-hawa* presented Karl von Spreti with his first challenge in managing a team of workers. J. K. Roy had been appointed as Art Director, allegedly without previous experience of making a film, according to von Spreti. Roy was an artist who does not appear to have had prior experience of designing sets for films. Von Spreti's complaints (he doesn't actually name Roy in the letters) suggest someone who might have lacked the professional understanding that the medium of film imposes specific constraints on design of the sets. After moments of fury and long hours of discussion, unable to persuade Rai to dismiss the art director, von Spreti left Roy to draw the designs as the latter imagined they should be. The strategy appears to have worked when Osten could be heard "bellowing and shouting" while Wirsching "carped constantly" about the standard of the set they had been given to work with.<sup>67</sup> Roy's name disappeared from future productions.

The narrative of a harmonious workplace dissolves under the sharp focus of von Spreti's observations. Straightforward about his dislike of the British sound engineer, Len Hartley, but without explaining precisely why

66 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 5, 22 March 1935.

67 Ibid., letter 9, 11 May 1935.

(unless it refers to a drunken incident he describes);<sup>68</sup> von Spreti later suggests that Hartley and his wife had been agitating against Osten.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, his own criticisms of Franz Osten became a regular feature in his letters home, to the point where his family asked him why Osten was so unpopular with everyone: “he is awful to work with” he replied, “he is constantly afraid that his contract will not be renewed and he is sycophantic.”<sup>70</sup> Another complaint von Spreti made about Osten was his tendency to act like a slave-driver;<sup>71</sup> a point discussed below.

When Osten accepted Rai’s offer to become the lead director at Bombay Talkies, his career already spanned more than twenty-five years and he had produced at least fifty-one films, making him the most experienced of the production team working at Bombay Talkies in the studio’s early years. Osten was 58 when he joined Bombay Talkies and Rai’s offer had arrived as his film work in Germany appears to have dwindled. If he was not popular with his compatriots, however, he was respected by many of Bombay Talkies’ Indian employees such as Ashok Kumar who said: “Franz Osten was like a father figure to everyone at Bombay Talkies.”<sup>72</sup> Paidi Jairaj, who joined Bombay Talkies for the production of *Bhabhi* (1938), later commented that “Osten took a personal interest in me and treated me like a son, and when I showed interest in learning direction, he showed me old scripts from Ufa.”<sup>73</sup>

On the surface, Rai’s decision to employ a foreigner for a role concerned with the presentation of Indian aesthetics onscreen appears at odds with

68 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 14, 19 June 1935.

69 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 29, undated (September/October 1935).

70 *Ibid.*, letter 45, 23 Januar1936.

71 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 70, 14 July 1936.

72 Amrit GANGAR: *Franz Osten and the Bombay Talkies. A Journey from Munich to Malad*; Mumbai 2001, 9.

73 BT: *The complete studio*, in: *Screen*, 28 September 1984, 20.

his earlier responses to the ICC. Von Spreti's status as a qualified architect who could plan and construct the necessary modifications to the site at Malad would have been an attractive combination and his professional training probably helped instil a rigorous discipline to the way sets were designed and built. Concerns about the safety of actors and technicians involved in film production were regularly raised, not just in India, but around the globe. Injuries, including fatalities, were not uncommon. Workers fell from the lighting bridge, or were crushed by falling objects. They could be harmed by noxious chemicals, electrocuted by surging currents, burnt by fire, and asphyxiated by smoke. A cameraman at Film City was electrocuted because the high voltage cables had deteriorated<sup>74</sup> and three actors drowned during the outdoor shooting of a film by Mohan Pictures.<sup>75</sup>

Comments in the letter of 15 April 1936 hint at contrasting cultural mores as much as they reveal von Spreti's concern for the Studio's workers. A night scene in *Jeevan Naiya* was being shot, for which he and his team had prepared the gardens at Malad: "During the day I had to finish setting everything up, and in the evening at 9 o'clock we started our night shoot, namely an Indian wedding party. We had 150 extras, the worst kind. Where they found them I don't know, in any case in one of the darkest quarters of the city. We were filming until 6 o'clock in the morning."<sup>76</sup> Apart from the difficulties of controlling such an unwieldy group of extras, von Spreti's concern was that after shooting all night, Rai and Osten seemed to think it acceptable to carry on working during the day. Frustrated that the Indians lacked the courage to challenge this themselves, von Spreti could only dissuade Rai by warning him that "people are overtired and there is a danger that one of the lighting workers will fall asleep on the bridge [...] and then once one falls off,

74 Cf. *Film India*, 31 March 1939.

75 Cf. Film actors drowned, in: *Times of India*, 11 May 1938.

76 ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 55, 15 April 1936.

we would be terribly inconvenienced from the police.” These were not isolated examples and von Spreti held Osten as culpable as Rai for his tendency to push people to their limits and beyond: “I could see from the records that in the thirteen days of July my employees had worked day and night for eleven days in a row, with another two days of overtime. The night work is also seven hours of overtime. I have to say that this drudgery is inhumane and would rightly be punished by imprisonment.”<sup>77</sup>

By December 1936, von Spreti’s department had grown to a workforce of 60 and the volume of work was huge.<sup>78</sup> This latter state is a frequent refrain in the letters: “I was completely exhausted by work”; “we are working flat out here and I hardly know how to get on top of my workload”. That same month he complained “the organisational side of work is catastrophic right now, no fun at all. I don’t know what’s going on from one day to the next and I don’t get any manuscripts.” The Studio was working on *Izzat (Honour, 1937)*, an historical drama requiring considerable research.

In addition to his work in the studio, his architectural skills were frequently in demand. Above and beyond the work designing and building sets for the studio and displays for the premieres at cinemas, he was also working on projects within the studio grounds. As mentioned above, the extensive grounds at the Malad site allowed for the erection of several buildings, including the main studio which was already in place when he arrived, but in his letter of 31 May 1935, he also refers to a garage that he is busy constructing in addition to his studio work.<sup>79</sup> Beyond Bombay Talkies, he was frequently called upon to assist with other projects. For example, the German Club prevailed upon him to produce a display for the Oktoberfest in 1936 to in-

77 Ibid., letter 70, 14 Juli 1936.

78 Ibid., letter 88, 10 December 1936. The following quotations in that order *ibid.*, letter 56 (22 April 1936), 63 (28 May 1936), 91 (30 December 1936).

79 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 12, 31 May 1935.



clude “a Bavarian house, a shooting gallery, a dance floor and two additional stalls”. This turned out to be “a laborious task because everything should cost nothing yet should still look good”.<sup>80</sup>

In spite of his heavy workload, he did manage to find time to relax. Whether socialising at the German Club or dining and dancing at the Taj Hotel; driving to visit sites of natural beauty in and around Bombay; or attending to his religious obligations. Of particular interest here, however, are his visits to the cinema.

### Cinema in 1930s Bombay

The physical space of the cinema features regularly in Karl von Spreti’s letters. As a film architect, he regularly transformed this space by building promotional sets for the premieres of Bombay Talkies’ films.<sup>81</sup> The cinema was somewhere he went to relax, to be amused and distracted; a place he visited with colleagues at the end of a working day or where he entertained female company. And it functioned as a source of professional interest where he gathered ideas for his own work and critiqued the films he saw.

Although he did not always provide film titles (presumably if a film failed to provoke a reaction) he simply recorded a visit to the cinema. Nevertheless these notes provide interesting detail about cinema-going in 1930s Bombay. Von Spreti’s letters reveal him as a keen cinephile, some weeks attending multiple times, even twice in a day; far less during busy periods at the studio. Many of the films he referred to, inevitably European or American, can be tracked through copies of the *Bombay Chronicle*. For example, of two films which he regarded as “excellent”, *Les Misérables / Die Elenden* (Richard Bo-

80 Ibid., letter 83, 21 October 1936.

81 Cf. *ibid.*, letters 27 and 46, 18 September 1935 and 6 February 1936;

leslawski, 1935) was screening at Bombay's Pathe Cinema on 29 May 1935 and *The Gay Divorcee / Scheidung auf amerikanisch* (Mark Sandrich, 1934) starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, was showing at the Wellington on 23 June 1935. *Sweet Music* (Alfred E. Green, 1935) which he watched at The Capitol on 5 June 1935, is given an excellent rating for its set design, a reminder that he was as much a professional filmmaker as a spectator. He criticised *Let's Live Tonight / Leise kommt das Glück* (Victor Schertzinger, 1935) which he saw at the Wellington on 20 November 1935, for its failure to bring out the best in Lilian Harvey, "proving once again that Hollywood doesn't know how to get the best out of German actors".<sup>82</sup>

### The German Club in Bombay

A German Club had existed in Bombay since at least 1874, although by 1892, the name was also used to describe a *chawl* on Bombay's Grant Road.<sup>83</sup> Traders, missionaries and scholars were counted among those who had made their home on India's west coast. In 1914 the Status of Aliens Act interrupted the free movement of German citizens throughout the British Empire and Bertl Schultes, an actor who accompanied the film crew of *The Light of Asia*, later described the delays the film crew experienced in getting visas at the beginning of 1925.<sup>84</sup> Correspondence in the political archive at Germany's for-

82 Ibid. (in this order): letter 12 (29 May 1935), 15 (26 June 1935), 12 (5 Juni 1935), 37 (20 November 1935; here the quotation). Ironically, among other explanations Ufa would provide in 1939 for no longer employing Lilian Harvey, was that she was an Englishwoman. BArch R 109-I/5008, 21.

83 *Chawl* describes a specific type of residential development. The *Times of India* reported an incident that allegedly arose when the defendant, Mr Morgan, responded angrily to having his sleep disrupted by "eighteen Germans singing in chorus" and threw bricks at the Club's windows; Article 6, in: *Times of India*, 24 September 1874.

84 Cf. Bertl SCHULTES: Ein Komödiant blickt zurück. Erinnerungen an Ludwig Thoma, das

eign office reveals the difficulties this continued to cause German traders and business people long after the end of the First World War.<sup>85</sup>

In 1930, the Club at Bombay was re-established by Consul Karl Kapp, an Arabic-Persian scholar who worked to promote Anglo-German reconciliation in India. The Club frequently served as a site of confluence through which visiting German expeditions, whether mountaineers, scientists, or filmmakers (and sometimes a combination of all three), as well as other visitors, passed on their way to destinations within British India and beyond. After 1936, the Club's activities were regularly reported in a monthly publication, *Der Deutsche in Indien*. The Club hosted talks by luminaries such as Professor Günther Oskar Dyrenfurth, one of the leaders of an international expedition to Kanchenjunga in 1930 which included the British mountaineer, Frank Smythe; and it welcomed the Indian Olympic team in June 1936 before they left for Berlin. On his way to Karachi in 1939 as a member of Peter Aufschnaiter's Nanga Parbat team in 1939, Heinrich Harrer later commented on the colonial lifestyle he observed when he passed through Bombay: "In the German Club we were astonished to experience the life style of Europeans in a colonial setting. In spite of the heat [...] people played tennis, quenched their thirst with a magnum of Beck's Beer or drank several cocktails."<sup>86</sup> The Olympic team had visited again in September 1936, but by this

Bauerntheater und deren Freunde; Munich 1963.

85 This embargo persisted into late 1925, for example: "The only way to boost our exports and restore the confidence in German products that has been shaken in the last decade is to first introduce outstanding special machines that will restore confidence in German products and create demand for other German products. We would therefore like to ask the Foreign Office to support us in the difficult struggle on the foreign market and, in the present special case of the departure of our special engineer, Mr Bender, to instruct the German Embassy in London to strongly support our visa application to the competent British authorities." Letter from the Badische Maschinenfabrik to the Auswärtiges Amt, 15 July 1925, AA R90738.

86 Heinrich HARRER: *Mein Leben*; Munich 2002, 45.

time, Kapp had been replaced.<sup>87</sup> In spite of Kapp's encouragement of Anglo-German rapprochement, an ambition that may have expedited his relocation to Ohio, the German Club was by now firmly located on the shadow axis of National Socialist organisations that were operating across British India and increasingly monitoring the behaviour of Germans in India. Of the 38 issues of *Der Deutsche in Indien* that were published between 1936 and July 1939, all but four have survived. They regularly reference Franz Osten and occasionally Wirsching and Zolle are mentioned, the latter usually when it came to contributing to the Winterhilfswerk. Karl von Spreti's name does not appear in any context, even though his letters indicate that he was a regular visitor to the Club. When he returned to Germany in December 1937, there was no valedictory comment and he was not mentioned at all, although the newsletter for that month did report that Osten and Wirsching had returned to Germany for a holiday.<sup>88</sup>

Von Spreti's letters to his family suggest an ambivalent relationship to the Club and its members. Early on he describes it as comprising mostly of young bachelors, with few women and an emphasis on heavy drinking, and he declares his personal preference for Bombay's Royal Yacht Club.<sup>89</sup> After Kapp's departure, the internal factions grew, seemingly encouraged by Oswald Urchs. In one letter home, von Spreti is alarmed that he was even suspected of having somehow been involved in the events of 30 June 1934 which saw Ernst Röhm and at least 85 of his followers murdered, among them Hans-Erwin von Spreti, Röhm's personal adjutant and close relative of Karl von Spreti.<sup>90</sup>

87 A British intelligence report into the activities of National Socialists in India suggested that Kapp was removed following a disagreement with Urchs. "An examination of the activities of the Auslandsorganisation of the National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei", BL, L/PJ/12/505, 75.

88 Cf. *Der Deutsche in Indien*, Volume 20, December 1937.

89 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 8, 2 May 1935.

90 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 59, 6 May 1936. See also the contribution of Jörg Zedler in this volume for

Karl von Spreti's extant letters to his family cover the years 1935 and 1936 in good detail making it possible to map his activities both within and beyond the studio. By 1937, however, the gaps between letters widened, either because the letters were not kept together, or simply because his workload filled most of his time. Given that he was a good letter-writer and was evidently close to his family, the former is more likely. Either way, it is unfortunate that the letters are not available because 1937 included an event that once again illustrated the close entanglements between India and Germany and more specifically perhaps, between Munich and Malad. In March 1937, Bombay's harbour was visited by the Kreuzer Emden, one of the twentieth century's most frequently reincarnated battleships, renowned in India for its bombardment of the port of Madras, now Chennai, on 22 September 1914, killing three people.<sup>91</sup> This earlier battleship was sunk by the Australian navy on 9 November 1914 and became the subject of several films including *Unsere Emden* made by Emelka in 1926, an early form of docudrama which received favourable reviews at home and abroad. Perhaps the trauma of the 1914 bombardment was partly redressed when, during the 1937 visit, the Emden's crew rescued thirty Indians after their boat had capsized in Bombay's harbour; an event for which they were awarded a medal for bravery from the Safety First Association of India.<sup>92</sup> Emelka made a further film, *Kreuzer Emden*, in 1932; a feature film depicting hyper masculinity and heroism in battle.<sup>93</sup> Josef Wirsching worked as a cameraman on both these films.

The third incarnation of the Emden was visiting Bombay as one of the ports on its voyage around the world between 1936 and 1937, arguably a

that episode.

91 Cf. A passing bombardment, in: Times of India, 24 September 1914, 5.

92 Cf. Drowning women and children rescued, in: Times of India, 8 March 1937, 6.

93 Emelka/Bavaria Film also made a series of documentaries about the Kreuzer Emden, produced by Hugo Engel.

propaganda exercise in the prelude to war, given that a documentary film was being produced about this voyage for Germany's Naval High Command (Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine), directed by Louis Ralph, veteran of films about the same battleship.<sup>94</sup> Bombay Talkies also made their own newsreel which received its certificate from the Bombay Censor on 15 April 1937. "There are at least 300 Germans in the community in Bombay and most of them were in the vicinity of the Gateway of India", wrote the *Times of India*.<sup>95</sup> That evening Bombay Talkies held a special screening of *Izzat* at the Opera House, to which the Emden's crew were invited. "Nearly 200 of the crew of the German cruiser Emden, marched from the Gateway of India to the Royal Opera House [...] the march lasted nearly an hour" – quite a spectacle; although what the German sailors made of a film in Hindi without subtitles, is anybody's guess.<sup>96</sup> Several members of the studio were present, including Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar who both gave speeches, the former talking in German. The screening was followed by a dinner to which the Emden's captain was invited; Karl von Spreti's attendance might be reasonably assumed.

### Leaving Bombay Talkies

Where Karl von Spreti had previously expressed enthusiasm for his work in the studio, by 1937 he was beginning to tire of the internal politics and, having been unable to make a journey to Europe, was increasingly missing his family. Remaining at Bombay Talkies with Osten as director was no longer an option for him and he began to focus on alternatives both within and be-

94 Ralph also directed *Heldentum und Todeskampf unserer Emden*, 1934.

95 German Cruiser in Bombay, in: *Times of India*, 5 March 1937, 16.

96 Emden crew march to Opera House to see Indian film, in: *Times of India*, 9 March 1935, 7.

yond the film industry. His letters record that he considered working with other studios in India such as Mohan Bhavnani's<sup>97</sup> and he even flirted with the idea of using fraternal contacts to get into Italy's film industry.<sup>98</sup> But he also considered opening an architectural practice in Bombay, a detail that caught the attention of the *Bombay Chronicle*: "Karl von Spreti the German architect, who has been responsible for designing of sets of all Bombay Talkies [productions] so far – building from the mud huts of *Achhut Kanya* to the palaces of *Savitri*. He is now proceeding to Germany to renew his acquaintance with modern architecture. On his return he may set up in Bombay as an independent architect."<sup>99</sup> Von Spreti refers to these possibilities when he tells his family that he has not renewed his contract at Bombay Talkies.<sup>100</sup> Eventually he decided to remain in Germany, although after the war he did consider returning to India again.<sup>101</sup> The Studio's first film without him, *Bhabhi*, was designed by Y. E. Hate and N. R. Acharya, both of whom had acquired their skills under his guidance.

Perhaps because his work as a film architect was relatively brief, Karl von Spreti's contribution to film design in India has received little attention. Yet contemporary accounts of the film sets he created for Bombay Talkies received positive applause for detail and authenticity: "If you walked into the Bombay Talkies' studio at Malad these days you are liable to get the impression that you have wandered into some primitive Indian village. Thatched cottages, complete to the last detail, and every feature typical of Indian rural life, dot the grounds to create an astonishingly realistic impression of the Indian countryside. The studio architect, von Spreti, has done his work with re-

97 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 96, 31 December 1937.

98 Cf. *ibid.*, letter 95, 24 November 1937.

99 *Bombay Chronicle*, 29 December 37, 10.

100 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 95, 24 November 1937.

101 Cf. ZEDLER, Bilder (fn. 1), 34.

markable precision. In the uneven, narrow lanes of the 'village' you will find even the kerosene-oil street lamp with its weather-stained glasses perched on a crude and crooked lamp post. In the sound proof studio itself, the interiors of village huts have been built with meticulous regard to the correct details. Even the smallest trifle of furniture in the huts bears the unmistakable stamp of the Indian village on it."<sup>102</sup>

The stylised screen village subsequently became a regular feature of Bombay Talkies, appearing in *Janma Bhoomi*, *Izzat* and *Durga*, as well as fleetingly in *Nirmala*. This imaginary space created for the screen, raises the question of creative authorship: who actually designed the village? Was it Karl von Spreti, who had grown up in a castle in rural Germany, but who might nevertheless have been influenced by the intense visual iconography of India that was available in Germany? Was it through in-depth consultation with the academic specialists he sometimes refers to in the letters?<sup>103</sup> Or were the aesthetics of the screen village determined by his Indian colleagues, simply leaving him to render their designs architecturally so that synchronous sound recording could take place?

## Afterword

When war was declared in September 1939, Bombay Talkies was working on the production of *Kangan* (*Bangles*, 1939) and Osten, Wirsching and Zolle were all arrested and interned. Their Indian colleagues took over, successfully completing production of what is arguably the studio's most mature film from the period. Because he was over 60, Franz Osten was deported to Germany in April 1940; his work as a director was over. Himansu Rai's

102 Cf. The Romance of an Untouchable Girl, Times of India, 12 June 1936, 7.

103 Cf. ZEDLER, Briefe (fn. 13), letter 46, 6 February 1936.



death on 19 May 1940 brought this initial phase of the Studio to an end. Although work continued under Devika Rani until 1945, without Rai's unifying force the studio appears to have struggled with division and conflict. Josef Wirsching remained in internment at Satara until at least 1948, when he was re-engaged by Ashok Kumar and Savak Vacha to work with the revived Bombay Talkies on *Ziddi* (*Obstinate*, 1948). Wirsching remained in India for the rest of his life, dying in 1967 during the production of *Pakeezah* (*Pure Heart*, 1972). The discovery of these letters reveals Karl von Spreiti's contribution to the development of Bombay Talkies, granting him a place in film history beside Osten and Wirsching.