

The Man who was Sherlock Holmes

Germany | 1937 | 112 minutes

Credits

Director	Karl Hartl
Screenplay	Robert A. Stemmle Karl Hartl
Photography	Fritz Arno Wagner
Music	Hans Sommer

Cast

Morris Flint / Sherlock Holmes	Hans Albers
Macky McPherson / Dr. Watson	Heinz Rühmann
Mary Berry	Marieluise Claudius
Jane Berry	Hansi Knoteck

Synopsis

Two confidence tricksters Flint and McPherson, stop a train to Brussels at night, and due to their behaviour and clothes, the train staff believe that they are Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. This is indeed their lead intention, but they claim not to be the famous detective and his friend, and they urge them not to tell anybody. They interrogate people in order to make their cover perfect, among them two attractive sisters, Mary and Jane Berry, who are travelling to claim an inheritance from their uncle.

In Brussels the would-be Holmes and Watson stay at Hotel Palace, and immediately police asks them to solve a case. During the 1910 World Exposition stamps have been stolen and replaced by forgeries, while they solve the case and are reunited with the but in a twist Flynn and McMacpherson are put on trial for impersonating the famous duo.

Lexikon des Internationalen Films calls it a swinging, lively comedy. Albers and Rühmann have been two longtime major stars of German cinema and are still known for the main song in this movie, *Jawohl, meine Herr'n*.

Karl Hartl occupies two special places in cinema history: one in the world at large as an artist of great stature during the mid-20th century, and the other in his native Austria as one of the country's most important filmmakers during that period, as well as one of its anti-Nazi patriots during World War II. His decision to stay in Germany (and then Austria) during the Hitler era kept him from gaining the recognition in America enjoyed by Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, and other German and Austrian exiles, but it allowed him to make an important contribution to his homeland, as a patriot and quiet resistance leader during the dark years.

The son of Adolf Hartl and the former Cecelia Franziska Meister, Karl Hartl was born in Vienna in 1899, a product of a working-class background. He showed no artistic aspirations as a boy, but at age 16, in search for work, he chanced to visit the Sascha Film Factory (founded by Count Alexander "Sascha" Kolowrat just outside of Vienna) in the company of a friend, Gustav Ucicky. The studio was shorthanded during World War I and the two boys were hired -- Ucicky (who would later become a major director) to move camera equipment, and Hartl as a general gofer, what the British then referred to as a "tea-boy" (although he was officially credited as an assistant director). By 1919, he really was working as an assistant director, and happened to be assigned to work with the visiting Hungarian filmmaker Alexander Korda. The two became friends as Hartl assisted Korda in his productions of *The Prince and the Pauper* (1920), *Masters of the Sea*, *A Vanished World*, and *Samson and Delilah* (all 1922). Eventually, Hartl left Vienna for Berlin as Korda's assistant and four successful films followed, with the younger man promoted to executive producer. (His assistant was the husband of Marlene Dietrich, who was then a young extra appearing in one of the movies.)

Hartl returned to Vienna and formed a partnership with Ucicky, serving as a screenwriter and co-director on a short series of movies. The pair left Vienna when Sascha Films went into bankruptcy in 1927, however, and they began a nomadic professional existence, working in Munich, then in Spain, and finally Berlin on three movies. Hartl became a member of a small cadre of highly talented Austrians living in Germany, including screenwriter Walter Reisch, future writer/director Billy Wilder, and actor Willi Forst. Hartl became a director in his own right in 1930 with *A Student Song From Heidelberg*, which was a hit despite his unhappiness with the film. He also served as co-director with Luis Trenker (the mountaineer-turned-actor and director) on *The Doomed Battalion* (a World War I story), during which Hartl was severely injured by an explosion on the set, which left him blind in his right eye. His vision partially restored, he returned to directing in 1932 with *The Countess of Monte Cristo*, which included Brigitte Helm in the cast and Franz Planer behind the camera.



Following the comedy *The Prince of Arcadia*, Hartl took on the first of two science fiction films, *F.P. 1 Doesn't Answer* (1933), a tale of espionage and romance surrounding the construction of a gigantic airplane landing platform in

The Man who was Sherlock Holmes

the middle of the Atlantic. Made at Berlin's UFA Studios, the movie was done with three different casts -- one German (led by Hans Albers), another English (led by Conrad Veidt), and another French (led by Charles Boyer) -- all directed by Hartl. The English version starring Veidt is the most familiar to English-speaking audiences, and the movie has a level of panache and sophistication virtually unknown in the field of science fiction. The mysterious pilot/adventurer hero even does a song at one point without seeming at all incongruous. F.P. 1 was a huge success in its time and helped establish Hartl as one of the top young filmmakers in Berlin. For a change of pace, Hartl's next film was an adaptation of Ralph Benatzky's operetta *Her Highness, the Saleslady* (for which he also did a French version), assisted by 26-year-old Henri-Georges Clouzot. Then it was back to science fiction with the futuristic thriller *Gold* in 1934. Shot on a grand scale with extraordinary sets, the movie captured the imagination of millions of filmgoers with its tale of a scientist's pursuit of modern alchemy. The movie's cutting-edge scientific orientation resulted in its subsequent suppression by the Nazi-era government, which tried to seize and destroy every known print.

Hartl was able to work in Germany after the rise of Hitler and did his best to keep politics out of his films. He was valuable enough to the studio that he was able to resist efforts to force him to join the Nazi Party. Hartl continued making movies on safely apolitical subjects, including Johann Strauss' operetta *Der Zigeunerbaron* (1935), which featured Adolf Wohlbruck (later to leave Germany and reestablish himself as Anton Walbrook). The director also made his first Austrian film in nine years when he returned home to direct 1936's *Die Leuchter des Kaisers*. He later released the adventure movie *Ritt in die Freiheit* (aka *Riding to Freedom*) and *Der Mann, der Sherlock Holmes War* (aka *The Man Who Was Sherlock Holmes*). The latter was a spoof of the Arthur Conan Doyle character and proved to be the greatest critical and commercial success of his career, praised by Holmes scholars around the world and recognized as one of the most charmingly witty movies ever made in Germany.

Hartl had hoped to crown his comedic achievements the following year with a series of movies starring the celebrated leading man Hans Albers and a historical spoof called *Casanova*, but the German takeover of Austria in the spring of 1938 forced him to abandon the film when its dual-identity plot ran afoul of German Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels' tastes. It was at this point that fate intervened in a most unexpected way in Hartl's career, when the German propaganda ministry announced the formation of Wien-Film, a production unit that would make movies on behalf of the Third Reich and its propaganda requirements -- and they wanted Hartl to head the studio, housed on the Sascha Films lot. He hesitated for months, but was persuaded to accept by his colleagues, who were fearful that if Hartl didn't accept, the ministry would send in a German (and a dedicated Nazi) to take charge. Thus, Hartl felt forced to accept the offer to head the group in order to protect Viennese cinema. This decision and the motivations behind it put him into the unexpected role of an Austrian patriot, which, in those days, implicitly -- though very quietly -- also made him an anti-German and anti-Nazi resistor.

Hartl ended up running Wien-Film for almost seven years and completely undercut the political goals behind the group for that entire time. He and his colleagues managed to keep their productions centered on Austrian history and Viennese themes, quietly memorializing the distinct culture that had been lost with Germany's invasion. He managed to put the propaganda films demanded by Berlin on the back-burner for years, claiming substandard scripts had been provided or that the necessary actors or technicians were unavailable, or the needed facilities were in use. The more pro-Nazi the subject, the more the obstacles seemed to pile up ahead of production, and in contriving to make these delays sequential and extensive, Hartl forced the ministry to concentrate on other matters. The worst of the movies demanded by Berlin were simply never made, though a tiny handful of lesser propaganda films did emerge, mostly to give Berlin something in order to keep them quiet, and partly as a cover to keep control of the unit from passing into German (and Nazi) control. On the whole, Hartl made sure that the movies produced during his tenure had their subjects buried safely in the pre-Nazi, un-German, Viennese past before the 20th century, and were totally apolitical -- costumed romances set in the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, all the men in 19th or 18th century uniforms and the women in gowns of similar vintage. Ironically, these very attributes made the resulting movies quietly political and turned Wien-Film under Hartl into a focus of quiet anti-German resistance.



Karl Hartl with actees Johanna Matz 1953

Hartl and his compatriots also took advantage another aspect of Vienna -- on occasions when officials from Berlin visited the studio, determined to find out why virtually none of the movies that were requested were being produced, they were always diverted by the wine, women, and song offered in abundance by the city, even in wartime. And oddly enough, as the war went worse for Germany and bureaucratic demands from Berlin stiffened, it became even easier to seduce and redirect the concerns of the officials who

The Man who was Sherlock Holmes

would come in as would-be troubleshooters. Vienna was being bombed by the Allies on a fairly regular basis, but not nearly as badly as Berlin, and visiting officials became that much more willing to take advantage of being removed from the brunt of Allied attacks and avail themselves of the many and varied Viennese diversions. The result was that, as the war dragged on, diversion and delay became riskier, though also simpler to accomplish.

During his entire seven years in charge of production, the only movie that Hartl himself directed was *Wen die Götter Lieben* (aka *Whom the Gods Love*, 1942), a biographical film about Mozart that he had to take over from the stricken original director. All of his quiet work resisting the Nazis from within served Hartl and Vienna well after the war, when he was permitted by the Allied occupation authorities to remain in charge of Wien-Film. The division of the city into four separate zones made it impossible for the company to produce much, however, and he left the job soon thereafter. His first postwar movie was *Cavalcade* (1948), a story of a century of Austrian history as seen through the lives of members of a Viennese family. He was soon at the top of his profession, drawing together the best cinematic and theatrical talents in the city for films such as *Der Engel mit der Posaune*. That movie was regarded with pride by Austrian critics, who saw in its creation the salvation of their national film industry's prewar/pre-Nazi quality. It was also sufficiently impressive to get Hartl an invitation from his old friend Alexander Korda -- now a knight of the realm in England -- to make an English-language version in London. It was all a little like the old days of making simultaneous versions of the same movie with German, French, and English casts. The resulting film, *The Angel With the Trumpet*, which co-starred Maria Schell and Oskar Werner in their first international roles, was successful enough to lead Hartl to make an Anglo-Austrian movie, *The Wonder Kid*, at the outset of the 1950s.

Hartl returned to making movies in Germany in 1952 with *Haus des Lebens* (aka *House of Life*) and two subsequent movies. One of them, *Alles für Papa* (aka *Everything for Daddy*, 1953) starred Curd Jürgens in the days prior to his emergence as an international star. Hartl's wife, Marte Harell, was also a major star of German films during this same period. From 1954, the director was back in Austria, where his last major movie was *Mozart -- Reich Mir die Hand, Mein Leben* (1956), his own production of a Mozart biographical film, which supplanted his wartime effort on the same subject. By that time, however, German cinema was dominating the marketplace even in Vienna and setting the tone for all German-language film productions, a situation with which Hartl grew increasingly less comfortable. His remaining career was confined to a tiny group of movies aimed exclusively at the Austrian market, including the Swiss historical epic *Wilhelm Tell* (1961), on which he served as artistic supervisor. He was also the editor and designer of the documentary *Flying Clipper* (1962).

Hartl was largely retired in the final 15 years of his life, revered in his native Austria and beloved in the German-speaking world, though almost completely forgotten elsewhere. Of his two renowned science fiction films, *F.P. 1 Doesn't Answer* has been little shown outside of England since the early '80s, while *Gold* has all but disappeared. Ironically, its dazzling climactic scenes in the huge laboratory become much more familiar through their use by producer Ivan Tors in his 1953 sci-fi thriller *The Magnetic Monster*. Hartl's films of various operettas are his other international legacy, beloved of aficionados of that musical genre.

In 1978, his beloved Sascha Films, where he'd spent so many years -- and which had receded to the production of small-scale light entertainment movies, mostly for the German-speaking market, since the end of World War II -- produced its first major film in decades, *A Little Night Music*. The Harold Prince-directed movie, based on Stephen Sondheim's hit stage musical, and co-starring Elizabeth Taylor, Diana Rigg, and Len Cariou, opened on six continents, the first Sascha release since the 1930s to be seen across the globe. It also proved to be a swansong for the studio on the world stage, in the same year that the man who protected and preserved it from the Nazis left this Earth. Hartl died that year in Vienna. He was 79. ~ Bruce Eder, Rovi

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