



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Walter Slezak papers

1905-1983

*T-Mss 1983-003

Summary

Creator: Slezak, Walter, 1902-1983

Title: Walter Slezak papers

Date: 1905-1983

Source: Gift, Johanna Slezak (Mrs. Walter Slezak), 09/19/1983

Abstract: The Walter Slezak Collection contains correspondence and ephemera (in the form of photographs, clippings, a photo scrapbook and sheet music.).

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult: <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Conditions Governing Access:

Photocopying prohibited.

Conditions Governing Use: For permission to publish contact the Curator, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

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Processing note: Processed and machine-readable finding aid created by John Burchard. The complete collection was reprocessed with a finding aid in 1999.

Creator History

Walter Slezak, son of the operatic tenor Leo Slezak and the actress Elsa (Wertheim) Slezak, was born in Vienna, Austria, on May 3, 1902. He began a film and stage career in Berlin in 1921. Coming to the

United States in 1930 in the musical comedy *Meet My Sister*, Slezak played many roles in the live theater during the next four decades - his performances on Broadway as Joseph in the comedy *My 3 Angels* [1953], and as Panisse in the musical *Fanny* [1954], were probably his greatest triumphs. Between 1942 and 1976 he appeared in dozens of movies - usually typecast in character roles because of his portliness. Slezak also appeared in numerous radio and television productions.

In 1959, at New York's Metropolitan Opera, Walter Slezak made his operatic debut as Szupan in Johann Strauss' *The Gypsy Baron* - exactly 50 years after his father's Metropolitan debut in Verdi's *Otello*. In 1977, Slezak wrote a unique "recipe-plus-travelogue" book called *Mein Magen geht fremd* [*My Stomach Goes Abroad*]. Walter Slezak died on April 22, 1983.

Leo Slezak was born in Moravia on August 18, 1873. Making Vienna his home base, Slezak forged a highly successful international career as an operatic tenor - known especially for his Verdi and Wagner roles. Slezak also became a celebrated interpreter of German Lieder, and in later life appeared as a character actor in German and Austrian films. A prankster and wit, Slezak's irrepressible sense of humor was revealed in his four volumes of memoirs. After his death on June 1, 1946, other literary works by or about him appeared, including two that linked him with his son Walter: *What Time's the Next Swan?* [New York, 1962], Walter's book of memoirs that included many anecdotes about his father's life and career; and *Mein lieber Bub: Briefe eines besorgten Vaters* [Munich, 1966], Walter's selection of letters written to him by his father.

Johanna Van Rijn Slezak married Walter on October 10, 1943. In correspondence from friends, she is often referred to by her nickname, Kaasi. The Slezaks had three children: Ingrid Slezak, oldest child of Walter and Johanna, was born ca. 1944; Erika Slezak (also known as "Ricki" or "Rickie") was born ca. 1946; Leo Lauritz Slezak was born in 1948.

Custodial History

The Walter Slezak Papers were received by the Billy Rose Theatre Division as a gift from Mrs. Slezak after her husband's death in 1983.

Scope and Content Note

The Walter Slezak Papers span the period from 1905-1983 (one letter dates from 1878) and contain correspondence, personal papers, and ephemera (in the form of photographs, clippings, a photo scrapbook, and sheet music).

Of the more than 150 documents included in Walter Slezak's correspondence (many of them written in German), over 90 percent are messages to Slezak from a wide range of important figures in the arts: composers such as Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, and Erich Korngold; playwrights such as Lillian Hellman, George S. Kaufman, and S.N. Behrman; actors such as Lynn Fontanne, Charles Boyer, and Katharine Cornell; singers such as Lotte Lehmann, Geraldine Farrar, and Ezio Pinza; writers such as Phyllis McGinley, Sinclair Lewis, and Dorothy Parker; also orchestra conductors, theater critics, and artists. There are even two letters from astronauts.

The collective portrait of Slezak that emerges from these letters is that of an admired actor, a charming host, a proud parent, a witty raconteur, a devoted custodian of his father's legacy, and a gourmet chef. Slezak was also an avid collector of original manuscripts: included in the correspondence are a ribald poem by Dorothy Parker; a handwritten Shakespearean sonnet by Phyllis McGinley (dedicated to

Slezak); a handwritten copy of Lillian Hellman's favorite speech from her favorite play (*The Autumn Garden*, 1951); a type-written manuscript (replete with penciled revisions) of Sinclair Lewis's introduction to a biography of Henry Ward Beecher; and a number of letters relating to Slezak's acquisition of original musical scores.

Walter Slezak's Personal Papers fall into several categories: 1. A group of letters to Leo Slezak, dating from the first two decades of this century; 2. "*Agaloo*": a humorous story (comprising 13 manuscript pages and 4 illustrations) which Walter Slezak wrote for his grandchildren Toby and Alexander; 3. *25 Jahre Lubitsch*: a manuscript (in German) for a satirical skit written by Friedrich Hollander in honor of Ernst Lubitsch; 4. An untitled, hand-written manuscript - probably by Walter Slezak - that seems to be part of a play or allegory.

The bulk of the ephemera in this collection are photographs, falling into five categories: 1. Personal photos of Slezak and/or various celebrities and friends; 2. Family photos - mostly from Slezak's childhood family; 3. Family photos with celebrities; 4. Head shots of Slezak; 5. A scrapbook composed mostly of publicity photos from Slezak's acting career in Germany and Austria during the 1920's. Also in the ephemera series are 13 clippings, which include American and Austrian newspaper articles about Slezak's private life, along with photographs, interviews, a cartoon, a playbill, an article by Slezak, and an excerpt from *What Time's the Next Swan?* in *Theatre Arts Magazine*. The final category of ephemera is original sheet music: Harold Rome's song "Pansie and Son" for the Broadway musical *Fanny*, and Alec Wilder's song "Pinocchio's Lullaby" for a television production of *Pinocchio*.

Arrangement: The Walter Slezak Papers consist of three series. They are: Series I: Walter Slezak Correspondence Series II: Personal Papers Series III: Ephemera

Key Terms

Subjects

Theater -- United States

Names

Slezak, Walter, 1902-1983

Kerr, Jean

Lehmann, Lotte

Mahler, Alma, 1879-1964

Neumann, Alfred

Container List

Series I: Walter Slezak Correspondence 1913-1983 (22 folders)

Most of the general correspondence in this series consists of a collection of letters to Slezak from more than 60 famous people - almost all of them involved with the arts. Represented by the greatest amount of correspondence are Jean Kerr (17 letters), Lotte Lehmann (21 letters - many in German, with English translations), Alma Mahler-Werfel (15 letters in an almost indecipherable German handwriting), and Alfred Neumann (10 letters in German). Some of Slezak's other correspondents include: Brooks Atkinson, S.N. Behrman, Charles Boyer, Scott Carpenter, Katharine Cornell, Noel Coward, Geraldine Farrar, Lynn Fontanne, Oscar Hammerstein II, Moss Hart, Lillian Hellman, George S. Kaufman, Jerome Kern, Walter Kerr, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Sinclair Lewis, Phyllis McGinley, Mary Martin, Eugene Ormandy, Dorothy Parker, Ezio Pinza, Richard Rodgers, Miklos Rozsa, Walter M. Schirra, Sidney Sheldon, Barbara Tuchman, and Bruno Walter.

The general correspondence also includes several letters by Walter Slezak himself. In a 1948 letter (in German) to the novelist Alfred Neumann, he reveals his joy in receiving a treasured Beethoven letter from Alma Mahler-Werfel, and his pride in recently becoming the father of a son. In a 1967 letter (in German) to Carl Zuckmayer, Slezak expresses great admiration for the playwright's writing style, and also discusses the reasons why many of Leo Slezak's politically sensitive letters were omitted from *Mein lieber Bub*. The 1965 correspondence between Walter Slezak and Gower Champion (five letters in all) forms a complete mini-drama: Champion woos Slezak for the role of Soren ("a marvelous, tatterdemalion ham actor failure") in the play *He to Hecuba*; Slezak, after much hesitation and with great regret, finally turns down the role because he has other theater, film and television commitments, and because "an attack of hardening of [the] theatrical arteries" makes him afraid of the role's formidable acting challenges.

The Walter Slezak Correspondence contains 15 miscellaneous letters and cards. Included are postcards, telegrams, and a letter of February 16, 1878 from the American operatic soprano and impresario Clara Louise Kellogg [1842-1916] to a "Miss Hale". A May 19, 1977 letter to the mayor of Vienna contains the collection's only example of Walter Slezak's signature. The miscellaneous folder also includes a photocopy of an award given to an Austrian broadcasting company for its August, 1973 program honoring the centennial of Leo Slezak's birth.

- b. 1 f. 1 Brooks Atkinson correspondence 1962 (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 2 Miscellaneous correspondence "B" 1941-1982 (9 items)
- b. 1 f. 3 Miscellaneous correspondence "C" 1959-1965 (8 items)
- b. 1 f. 4 Miscellaneous correspondence "F" 1958-1977 (8 items)
- b. 1 f. 5 Miscellaneous correspondence "G" 1971-1979 (2 items)
- b. 1 f. 6 Miscellaneous correspondence "H" 1926-1969 (7 items)
- b. 1 f. 7 Maria Jeritza correspondence (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 8 Jean Kerr correspondence (17 items)
- b. 1 f. 9 Miscellaneous correspondence "K" 1925-1963 (9 items)
- b. 1 f. 10 Lotte Lehmann correspondence 1946-1973 (21 items)
- b. 1 f. 11 Miscellaneous correspondence "L" 1913-1973 (6 items)
- b. 1 f. 12 Alma Mahler-Werfel correspondence 1943-1962 (15 items)
- b. 1 f. 13 Miscellaneous correspondence "M" 1954-1973 (11 items)
- b. 1 f. 14 Alfred Neumann correspondence 1940-1948 (12 items)
- b. 1 f. 15 Eugene Ormandy correspondence 1963 (2 items)
- b. 1 f. 16 Miscellaneous correspondence "P" (2 items)
- b. 1 f. 17 Miscellaneous correspondence "R" 1945-1983 (10 items)
- b. 1 f. 18 Miscellaneous correspondence "S" 1953-1982 (8 items)
- b. 1 f. 19 Barbara Tuchman correspondence (2 items)
- b. 1 f. 20 Miscellaneous correspondence "W" 1946-1960 (4 items)

Series I: Walter Slezak Correspondence (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 21 Carl Zuckmayer correspondence 1967 (3 items)
- b. 1 f. 22 Miscellaneous letters & cards 1878-1982 (15 items)

Series II: Personal Papers ca. 1905 - 1983 (4 folders)

The 10 miscellaneous letters to Leo Slezak, dating mostly from 1905-1914, are all handwritten in German. A letter of 1908 (?), written on stationery from New York's Hotel Majestic, seems to include some writing by Leo Slezak himself on the back side of the final page (the primary topic of the letter is opera - in particular the Metropolitan premiere of Eugen d'Albert's *Tiefland*). Also notable are the several letters from "Mama & Papa Robinson" - Adolf Robinson was a baritone singer and teacher who discovered Leo Slezak's vocal talent and trained him as a youth.

Agaloo is a humorous children's story, evidently written by "Opa" Slezak for his grandchildren Toby and Alexander: it is about a family of Eskimos, headed by the clever Agaloo, who live in an igloo right next to the North Pole (which is marked with a hockey stick). The 13 manuscript pages break down into four different, heavily edited versions of the story. Included also are four 6"x 8" sheets of fanciful colored illustrations.

25 Jahre Lubitsch probably dates from the mid-1940's. This satirical skit (in German) by Friedrich Hollander honors Ernst Lubitsch [1892-1947] by means of a garland of songs (ein Liederkranz) sung by 4 women and 5 men (including Walter Slezak and Peter Lorre). References to Lubitsch's career - *Trouble in Paradise*, Madame Du Barry, "the Lubitsch touch" - abound. The typewritten manuscript is 5 pages long.

The untitled, 3-page manuscript (in German) appears to be in Walter Slezak's handwriting. The lead character [a 19-year-old named Kurt Gerber (?)] evidently hurls himself from a 3rd-floor window; a newspaper notice states that he had feared "Durchfall" [failure] in an examination.

- b. 1 f. 23 Miscellaneous letters to Leo Slezak ca. 1905-1914 (? (10 items)
- b. 1 f. 24 *Agaloo* (Story for children) (2 items)
- b. 1 f. 25 *25 Jahre Lubitsch* (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 26 Untitled manuscript (in German) (1 item)

Series III: Ephemera ca. 1905 - 1970's (7 folders)

Most of the ephemera in this collection are photographs - 60 individual photos, plus a set of 36 photographs glued into a scrapbook.

The Personal folder consists of 36 separate photographs of Slezak and/or various celebrities and friends. There are large [8" x 10"] photos and small photos; color photos and black and white photos; snapshots at parties as well as official photos taken at public events, or on theater stages or film sets. Among the more memorable photos of celebrities are two autographed pictures mounted on thick cardboard [of Andrew Carnegie and of William Howard Taft]; a black and white photo of Jerome Kern seated at a piano; and a black and white photo of Arturo Toscanini on a ship's deck wearing pajamas. Some of the photos of Slezak show him in his leisure pursuits: sitting on the cockpit of a plane named Kaasi, or feeding a cow on what is probably his Redhill Farm property in Pennsylvania.

The Family folder consists of 8 black and white photographs: 7 of various members of Slezak's childhood family (Walter, his older sister Gretchen, his father and his mother), and one of Walter and Johanna (Kaasi) Slezak having breakfast at home.

The five photographs in the "Family Photos with Celebrities" folder contain images of Walter Slezak, his wife Johanna, or his daughter Erika - together with such celebrities as Ethel Merman, Enrico Caruso, and Danny Kaye.

The Head Shots folder consists of 11 black and white photographs of Slezak. The two earliest photos -- taken in Vienna -- show Slezak as a boxer and as a soccer player at the age of about 20. Other photos show him in his 30's, and as a middle-aged and older man.

The Scrapbook contains mostly 3 1/2" x 5 1/2" black and white publicity photographs of Walter Slezak from his film and stage career in Berlin and Vienna during the 1920's. There are also a few photos of Slezak from his later career in the United States. Of greatest historical interest is a photograph taken at the Cologne Opera House in 1906 or 1907: it shows a four-year-old Walter Slezak standing next to his father - each of them decked out in the costumes used for the role of *Lohengrin* (including helmets, swords, and beards).

The 13 clippings are especially useful for obtaining information about Walter Slezak's private life. Several newspaper articles from the 1950's (which include black and white or color photos) depict Slezak as a host entertaining friends at his Larchmont, New York home, or Slezak as a gourmet chef and collector of original manuscripts, or Slezak as a tourist visiting his native Austria with his wife and three children. The clippings also include some photos, articles, and interviews that relate to Slezak's acting career in Austria and Germany, a 1953 article by Slezak (about his life and career) that appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*, and an excerpt from *What Time's the Next Swan?* that appeared in *Theatre Arts Magazine* in October of 1962.

The folder for Music Manuscripts (Scores) contains the original manuscripts for two songs. The one - "Pansie and Son", sung by Walter Slezak in the Broadway musical *Fanny* [1954] - consists of 9 pages of heavily edited manuscript (in both pencil and pen) by the song-writer Harold Rome. The other - "Pinocchio's Lullaby", written for a television production of *Pinocchio* - is a three-page fair copy of a song by Alec Wilder, with lyrics by William Enguick.

- b. 2 f. 1 Personal photographs (36 items)
- b. 2 f. 2 Family photographs (8 items)
- b. 2 f. 3 Family photographs with celebrities (5 items)
- b. 2 f. 4 Portraits (11 items)
- b. 2 f. 5 Scrapbook of photographs (36 items)
- b. 2 f. 6 Clippings ca. 1928-1962 (13 items)
- b. 2 f. 7 Music Manuscripts (Scores) (2 items)