Constantin Carathéodory, a Greek-German Professor of Mathematics at the University of Munich in the Years 1924–1945 — A Personal Statement

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Abstract  The present paper reflects the life of the Greek-German mathematician Constantin Carathéodory as a professor of mathematics at the University of Munich from the year of his call in 1924 over the terrible era of the National Socialist dictatorship until the end of World War II. Although Carathéodory’s biography seems to be widely known, at least among mathematicians, little seems to be known of his life during the pandemonium of darkness that strangled millions in the German name.

Two more or less recent publications seem to provide points of attack for casting a cloud, resp. actually do cast a cloud over Carathéodory. The present paper discusses these criticisms in terms of the history of the backdoor acquisition of power by the Nazis and the backdrop of day-to-day life outside and inside the university system at that time. The available historical sources, in particular those of the mentioned publications, disburden Carathéodory in the opinion of the author and lead to the conclusion that he must have had a hostile attitude toward the NS regime despite his decision to accept the call from the University of Munich in 1924, at a time, when nationalistic and xenophobic assaults began to occur more and more, and despite his decision to reject possibilities to emigrate to the US or Greece before 1933. Particularly the many events speak in his favor, when he showed a remarkable moral courage in being committed to finding possibilities of new secure existences for quite a few of his persecuted colleagues — tacitly and tactfully, since any open protest would certainly have jeopardized him and would have left his wife and son, both in precarious health condition, abandoned.

Keywords Carathéodory

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1 A short retrospection on Carathéodory’s biography

Much has been written on Constantin Carathéodory’s life. See, for example, the biographies within the obituaries by Perron [23] and Tietze [35] as well as, from a more temporal distance, the article by Behnke [1] on the occasion of the centennial of Carathéodory’s birthday. Moreover, Carathéodory himself has taken some autobiographical notes [8]. A short curriculum vitae of Carathéodory can also be found in Pesch, Bulirsch [26]. In particular, Bulirsch [3], [4] has given two notable speeches on the life and work of Constantin Carathéodory.

One of the two publications which the author would like to greatly dispute is the comprehensive biography of Constantin Carathéodory written by Georgiadou [11]. This book also includes the historical and political background, the “turbulent times” of Carathéodory’s life.

From these sources, we now give a short summary of Carathéodory’s biography: Constantin Carathéodory was born on the 13th of September 1873 in Berlin as a scion of a noble, influential Greek family. His father Stephanos Carathéodory was the attaché of the Ottoman embassy in Berlin. He stood in the family tradition of the Phanariots, a group of well-educated, westernized, wealthy Greeks of Greek Orthodox faith which exercised great influence in the administration of the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century, usually in key positions of the diplomatic service. His mother Despina Petrochoino-Carathéodory originates from a dynasty of Greek merchants in Marseille. Her family tradition went back to the Island of Chios known because of the massacre by Ottoman troops during the Greek War of Independence in 1822, from which her grandparents escaped.

Constantin Carathéodory grew up in Brussels, where his parents moved when his father became the ambassador of the Ottoman Empire in Belgium. His parental home was intellectually and cosmopolitanly formative for Constantin. Frequent contacts to distinguished and important persons of diplomacy, science, music, and art from different countries, from Orient and Occident, formed Carathéodory into a multilingual cosmopolitan of an extraordinarily intensive education, who thought nothing of living and working in different countries.

Carathéodory graduated in 1895 as engineer officer from the École militaire de Belgique. After some years working as engineer on Samos, Greece, and in Assiout, Egypt, he decided to the astonishment of his family and friends to follow his “romantic inclination” ("Zwangsvorstellung") to study mathematics. He came to the decision to choose Berlin, cp. [8]. This choice was greatly influenced by his father’s friendship with Alexander von Humboldt, a steel engraving of whom decorated Carathéodory’s office; cp. [8], too.

His scientific career was extraordinarily remarkable: After receiving a doctorate in Göttingen in 1904 with a sensational dissertation on discontinuous solutions of variational problems, he completed his Habilitationsschrift encouraged by the famous mathematicians David Hilbert and Felix Klein only one year later. The habilitation allows him to apply for a professorship. Thereafter, he indeed was offered and accepted a great many professorships in Bonn, Hannover, Breslau, Göttingen, here the prestigious chair of Felix Klein, and finally in Berlin, where he stayed until he was called upon to found and lead the Ionian University of Smyrna. Carathéodory also was intended to be its first rector. However, Smyrna fell to Greece after the Armistice of Moudros in 1918 and the project of founding a new university in the eastern part of Greece ended in 1922 with the Greco-Turkish War, before the first student could enter the university. Massacres of thousands of Christians by Turkish troops forced Carathéodory to flee from Smyrna via Samos, where he managed to secure many books from the university library, to Athens. Today Smyrna is the Turkish city Izmir.

In Athens, Carathéodory hunkered down in its two universities until he again got a call from a German university, now from the university of Munich in 1924.

Some words to Carathéodory’s scientific achievements shall conclude this short curriculum vitae: Constantin Carathéodory contributed to many diverse fields in mathematics such as partial differential equations, calculus of variations, complex analysis, and measure and integration theory, and also in physics with thermodynamics and geometrical optics, even the curvature of the Stylobate of the Parthenon and its Intercolumnia. His research has in-

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2 See, for example, the surveys of Carathéodory's scientific work in Perron's [23] and Tietze's [35] obituaries as well as in Behnke's article [1].

3 Περί των καμπυλῶν του στυλοβάτου του Παρθενώνα και περί της απαστάσεως των κοσων αυτών; Αρχαιολογική Εφημερίς, 1937, pp. 120-124.
fluenced not only many mathematicians until today\(^4\), but also physicists as, for example, his coeval Albert Einstein, who was among the sponsors who recommended Carathéodory for the membership of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1918; cp. [11], p. 127, and whom Carathéodory vice versa suggested as corresponding member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences in 1927; cp. [11], p. 219.

In Carathéodory’s works [6] and [7] even results of the modern theory of optimal control were either anticipated or loomed on the horizon; see [26] and [25].

In the following we will focus on Carathéodory’s life in Munich from 1924 on.

2 Critical questions

After the eviction of the Greeks from Asia Minor, Carathéodory decided to leave Athens in 1924 and to accept, as mentioned above, a call from the University of Munich to become a full professor in mathematics as successor to the famous mathematician Ferdinand von Lindemann, although he personally argued fiercely against his successor because of his Greek nationality; cf. [11], pp. 183f. Nationalism as well as anti-Semitism was a common attitude at that time; compare Litten [19].

Carathéodory filled this position until his retirement in 1938 at the age of 65, when the Nazis had already taken over Germany. He stayed there during World War II until he died on February 2, 1950.

Georgiadou in her book [11] as well as Hashagen in his articles [12], [13] raise critical questions about the motives of Carathéodory to return to Munich and to stay there during the entire reign of terror of the National Socialists. In particular, they scrutinize Carathéodory’s behavioral pattern against the

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\(^4\) See, for example, the comprehensive collection of papers tributed to Carathéodory, edited by Rassias [29].
background of repression against his “non-Aryan” colleagues, his acting in the institutions university and academy, and his appearance as representative of the German Mathematics abroad; compare [13], p. 151. While Georgiadou’s book is solely devoted to Carathéodory’s biography, Hashagen claims his articles to be case studies to answer the general position of foreign scientists in Nazi Germany, but is exclusively focussed on Carathéodory. Moreover, in his earlier article [12] Hashagen uses many speculative phrases — see, e.g. pp. 4, 5, 9, 15, 19, 20, 22, 25 —, which can be misread as incriminations.

In this paper we will summarize their arguments. By using their own sources, by invoking witnesses for Carathéodory’s defense, and, notably, by incorporating both the everyday-life situation under a regime with its brutal justice and with its omnipresent and omnipotent secret police (“Gestapo”) and by considering the personal situation of Carathéodory, we will particularly disprove the conclusions of Hashagen [13] while the “reasonable compromise” of Georgiadou [11], pp. 418f, maybe, in the main, acceptable, although some overtones leave room for incriminations.

2.1 Return to Munich.

First, what were the motives of Carathéodory to leave Athens after the Asia Minor Disaster? Certainly, the too low level of education and the lack of an ambitious scientific environment in Athens at that time must have worried Carathéodory as one of the leading mathematicians of his time. Moreover, he was convinced that he could no longer serve his native country, and, in addition, still believed at the philhellenic tradition from the times of the Bavarian King Ludwig I. These surely were the major reasons to accept the call from the University of Munich. He most probably might not have known of the upcoming nationalistic tendencies in Munich after the Republic of Councils (“Räterepublik”) in 1919 before he accepted the call or may have considered them to be insignificant. The upcoming tendencies of provincialism prepared a fertile soil for nationalism and anti-Semitism in Munich in the early 1920s, and thereafter for Hitler’s “movement”, see [19] and [11], pp. 183ff. Nevertheless, no one could foresee the cataclysm commencing a decade later with the take-over of Germany by the Nazis.

On the other side, Carathéodory found a flourishing mathematical research atmosphere in Munich due to previous changes of some key positions, which, with the acceptance of his call, led to the famous trio Perron-Tietze-Carathéodory in mathematics, which was moreover completed by Sommerfeld in Theoretical Physics. It is known that Carathéodory relied on intensive discussions with his colleagues who often referred to him by “according to an idea of Carathéodory”, even if nothing in this vein was published by him afore.

\[5\] This is the name used by the Greeks for the defeat of the Greek Army in 1922 in the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) with the subsequent eviction of the Greek population out off Asia Minor, also known as the Asia Minor Expedition.
2.2 Can we blame?

Can we blame Carathéodory for his decision to go to Munich instead of shrinking scientifically in Athens? Can we blame Carathéodory for not having foreseen into which catastrophe the political situation of the 1920s was bound to discharge?

3 Carathéodory in Munich during the Weimar Republic

3.1 Life and Work in Munich before 1933.

Carathéodory’s scientific life in Munich took place in two institutions, the Ludwig-Maximilians University and the Bavarian Academy of Science to which he was elected in 1925; cf. [11], p. 217. With great effort he immediately continued his research, gave inspiring lectures at the university and liked to discuss mathematical questions with his especially talented students at his home, where his wife served tea, cake, and sandwiches. Further on, he cultivated his national and international scientific relations.

As academician, Carathéodory was a member of the council who suggested Einstein for a membership of the Bavarian Academy of Science in 1927. Herewith, Carathéodory surely hoped to continue their scientific cooperation and to tie in with the time when he already was full professor of mathematics in Göttingen. From their correspondence at that time, it is known that Carathéodory gave Einstein some important mathematical explanations for Einstein’s relativity theory based on the Hamilton-Jacobi Theory.

In 1916, Carathéodory received an undated letter from Albert Einstein [9] written on a Sunday in Berlin (translated by the author from German, compare Fig. 3):

Dear Colleague!

Your wonderful derivation gains my recognition. Although the small writing mistake on the second page has caused me some difficulties, I now understand everything. You should publish the theory in this form in the Annals of Physics since the physicists normally do not know anything about this subject as it also was the case with me. With my letter I may have come across to you like a Berliner who just has discovered the Grunewald and wonders whether people have already been there.

If you wouldn’t mind also making the effort to present to me the canonical transformations, you’ll find a grateful and attentive audience in me. If you, however, answer the question about the closed time-trajectories (nowadays called time-like curves), I will appear before you with my hands folded. . . . There is something hidden well worth of the perspiration of the best.
Best regards,
Your A. Einstein.

Carathéodory responded on December 16, 1916: Dear Colleague, the main ideas of the theory of canonical substitutions can be most easily seen, for my opinion, as follows. ... This letter ends with With best regards, yours truly, C. Carathéodory.
From Carathéodory’s theoretical explanations, Einstein hoped to get some deeper insight into a mathematical foundation of his relativity theory. During his time in Munich, it is known that Carathéodory worked on several questions related to physics (cp. [11], p. 106, pp. 196–202), including an axiomatic relativity theory; see [5]. In a newspaper article on the occasion of Carathéodory’s 60th birthday, a remark on his research related to Einstein’s relativity theory was stressed in his personnel records at the Bavarian Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs (see [12], p. 10) and could be interpreted negatively.

The Albert Einstein museum possesses the correspondence between Carathéodory and Einstein of the years 1916–1930. Yet after World War II, there were at least two indirect contacts between Carathéodory and Einstein via Arnold Sommerfeld and via an old friend of Carathéodory, Kalitsounakis, a professor of Ancient Greek philology, who asked Einstein for help to facilitate Carathéodory’s return to Greece, which however did not work out. Einstein about Carathéodory: “He is a fine man.” See cf. [11], pp. 33, 431.

In Carathéodory’s inheritance, there is an undated picture of Albert Einstein with a personal dedication to Carathéodory: To the amicable remembrance (Zum freundlichen Gedenken).6

3.2 Travel abroad before 1933.

In 1927, Carathéodory got an honorific invitation to spent six months at Harvard University. In addition he also got an invitation from the American Mathematical Society to hold lectures at several universities in the US. Finally, Carathéodory got the concession for a paid sabbatical leave despite the initial refusal of the Bavarian Ministry of Finances due to the encouragement of the Bavarian Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs. It had to explain the impact of scientific exchange, especially because of the reticence about Germany after World War I; cf. [11], pp. 220–222, [13], p. 157. In 1928, Carathéodory visited, together with his wife, the University of Pennsylvania, became a visiting lecturer at Harvard, where he even was under consideration for an appointment, and finally visited also Princeton, Austin, and Berkeley. For more details, see [11], pp. 220–226, 228–229. At this time the international exchange in science seems to have somehow normalized. Although he usually was introduced as a professor from Germany he often refers to his Greek origin and was proud to improve the esteem of Greece in the US; see [11], p. 229.

Because of the increasing tendency to exclude foreigners from higher university positions in Munich and due to the virulent anti-Semitism, Carathéodory took the chance to recommend Salomon Bocher, for whom he and Perron tried to get an assistant professorship at the University of Munich, for a position at Harvard, at that time still unsuccessfully. Carathéodory: “These silly people mix their political passions with the scientific development of our university”; cf. [11], pp. 226f.

Obviously, Carathéodory, whom international contacts were offered due to his worldwide reputation as scholar, used these possibilities not only to preach his affection for mathematics, but also to consolidate the prestige of German mathematics, to advertise for Greece, and, last but not least, to help Jewish mathematicians to find places of existence for whom it became more and more difficult to find an adequate position in Germany, years before the organized persecution of the Jewish population by the Nazis began.

Constantin Carathéodory must have left a mark in the US, because he immediately thereafter was offered a full professorship at Stanford University. The salary that he was offered was not as high as those of other American high ranking mathematicians; cf. [11], pp. 229–233. Reasons for the lower salary might have been an aloofness against foreigners as it was the case when the offer of a full professorship at Harvard fell through ([11], pp. 224–226), or Carathéodory’s modest manner of appearance. However, Carathéodory could renegotiate his salary in Munich, which was comparably low, probably also because he was a foreigner and obviously had been too eager to leave Athens. Despite the fact that he and his wife liked their stay in California, the decisive reasons for Carathéodory to reject the offer from Stanford were surely the loss of his pension — he was at the age of 56 then — and the insecurity concerning the medical treatment of his son, who suffered under the aftermaths of a poliomyelitis. Moreover, Carathéodory, culturally deeply rooted between Orient and Occident, considered the USA being “the other end of the world”; cf. [11], p. 288. Hashagen [13], p. 157, censures the rejection of the call from Stanford as typical of the attitude of Carathéodory, because he refused to give up his right to a pension.

In 1930, Carathéodory was called by Eleftherios Venizelos to rescue the Greek university system. Venizelos was an influential politician; he was a former prime minister during and after World War I. He was defeated in 1920, went into exile, but was re-elected in 1928. Carathéodory felt obligated to help him since he expected overcoming of a schism in Greece through him which divided the population into royalists and republicans. In the years 1930–1931 he traveled several times to Greece to advice and supervise educational reforms. Before, he had rejected a ten-year appointment as rector of the University of Athens as well as a half-year post per year as commissioner of the Greek government.

Carathéodory’s final travel abroad before the take-over of the Nazis in Germany was the International Congress of Mathematicians in Zurich in 1932, where he gave one of the plenary talks, a last opportunity to live scientific normality.

3.3 Can we blame?

Can we really blame Carathéodory for not having accepted those offers at a time still before the National Socialists’ sneaking into power by devious means, which either would have moved him away from his cultural background or away
from his passion “mathematics” into a financially less secure future? Note that the election results of the Reichstag of the Weimar Republic for the Nazi Party (NSDAP) were 2.6% in 1928, resp. 18.3% in 1930.

4 The collapse of the Weimar Republic

In order to judge the motives of Carathéodory to stay in Munich despite the political situation which began to emerge in the early 1930s, one certainly has to take into account also the “Coming of the Third Reich” (cf. Evans [10]), the so-called “seizure of power” by the Nazis in 1933. 8

4.1 Sneaking into power by the Nazis

According to Kolb [14], known to be one of the leading historians for the Weimar Republic, the political development from the Weimar Republic to the Hitler regime is polycausal: The Weimar constitution allowed the erosion, even the abolishment of democracy. The German people felt humbled after the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the state of war between Germany and the Allied Powers after World War I, and abetted nationalistic tendencies. Caused by the world economic crisis beginning in October 1929, the disaffirmation of the republic increased. Many people had acquiesced, but not really accepted the republic. They rather adhered to the German Empire, having no confidence in democracy. Simultaneously, a social regrouping within the middle class took place. In the wake of these developments, extreme left and right wing parties enjoyed a large clientele. Ideological factors such as the “stab-in-the-back legend” (“Dolchstoßlegende”), mass psychological factors such as proclaiming Hitler as “saviour”, and the role of certain politicians such as the Reich President and former Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, who could not resist the pressure of the industrial magnates and of conservative and radical political powers and who finally appointed Hitler as Chancellor of the Reich. 9

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7 Evans’ works concerning German history of the 19th and 20th century were awarded with the “Wolfson Literary Award for History” and the “Medal for Art and Science of the Hanseatic City of Hamburg” (“Medaille für Kunst und Wissenschaft der Hansestadt Hamburg”).

8 Since Adolf Hitler’s take-over of power in Weimar Germany was more a result of intrigue rather than of an active revolution, historians have criticized the term “Machtergreifung” (seizure of power), which was coined by the Nazis themselves in order to portray their accession to power as an active heroic seizure. They replaced it with “Machtübertragung” (handing-over of power) or, less neutral, with “Machterschleichung” (sneaking into power or acquiring power by devious means).

9 The notion “stab-in-the-back” legend was used by right-wing circles in Germany after World War I. It says that the German Army did not lose World War I on the battle field but was betrayed by the republicans at home who overthrew the monarchy. With this lie, the Nazis justified their course of action against the Social Democrats, liberal politicians, communists, and “international Jewry”.

10 Other historians reach slightly different conclusions: Winkler [36] sees no necessity for von Hindenburg to call Hitler as Reich Chancellor. The real political power behind von Hin-
4.2 Nazi Dictatorship

The collapse of the Weimar Republic proceeded as follows, cp. Sturm [34] and Evans [10]: The civil-war like conflicts with violent street battles between the Nazis and the communist party, which wanted to establish a Soviet republic, grew more acute in 1932. The two Centre Party minority governments under Heinrich Brüning, although supported by the Social Democratic Party, failed to solve the horrendous unemployment rate and the widespread economic misery. They were displaced by another so-called “presidential cabinet” headed by the party-less Franz von Papen who wanted to erect a conservative and authoritarian state (“Cabinet of the Barons”). von Hindenburg thought he could provide Papen’s cabinet some freedom of scope by the dissolution of the parliament. von Papen strove for a collaboration with the National Socialists, which fell through, since Hitler demanded the chancellorship for himself. This made the Nazis socially acceptable. von Papen’s government enacted, as Brüning’s, too, state-of-emergency acts, which contributed to the erosion of the parliamentary democracy. The social democrats filed a complaint of unconstitutionality against these acts — too late, since Hitler was installed as chancellor of a coalition government by von Hindenburg, who abided strictly by

Moreover anti-democratic thinking was widespread. Too few groups felt up to perpetuating democracy. Bracher [2] holds the view that Hitler came to power only by intrigues, since he never would have reached power legally. The National Socialists (NSDAP) never won the absolute majority, neither in the population nor in the parliament. Moreover, they stood shortly before a schism. von Hindenburg was assured that the conservatives would tame Hitler. Conservative circles wanted Hitler as Reich Chancellor, since he wanted to abolish the republic and to install a monarchistic-like reform. Nolte [22] is of the opinion that the Social Democrats and the German Centre Party (a Catholic political party in Germany during the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic) did not believe in democracy, since they both strived after socialism. The Socialists inhibited, in Nolte’s opinion, a coalition between national and left parties. He also sees von Hindenburg as too weak against Hitler. Nolte’s theses precipitated the “Historikerstreit” (historians’ dispute), a political controversy between left-wing and right-wing intellectuals at the end of the 1980s about a subsumption of the Holocaust. Finally, Pyta [27], [28] sees the German people wanting a secure system and von Hindenburg seeing the presidential system as a solution which annulled the democratic system of the Weimar Republic. von Hindenburg was old, tired of bearing responsibility, and saw, in Pyta’s opinion, Hitler as a “risk option”.

11 The last governments of the Weimar Republic under Brüning, von Papen and von Schleicher are referred to as “presidential cabinets” or “presidential dictatorships”, because the Reich President von Hindenburg not only constituted them according to the Weimar constitution but also authorized these governments via state-of-emergency acts which allowed them to bypass the parliament. The reason of von Hindenburg for these means was the failure of the Great Coalition in March 1930 due to the disability for compromises and the Reichstag elections of September 1930 with losses for all republic-friendly parties, but gains for the National Socialists. Thereafter the opponents of the republic held an absolute majority and hence could execute a destructive power in parliament, since they were able to overthrow every government.
the constitution, but never developed a personal commitment to the republic. This happened only one year later on January 30, 1933.\footnote{after another unsuccessful “presidential cabinet” headed by the party-less Kurt von Schleicher, who tried to pursue a so-called crosswise coalition (“Querfront”, a right-wing strategy to catenate Nationalists and Socialists) by splitting the Nazi Party.}

Hitler’s major steps to an absolute dictatorship were (see, e.g. [10]): Dissolution of the parliament by von Hindenburg (Feb. 1), encroachments in the freedom of press and assembly (Feb. 4), burning of the Reichstag (Feb. 27) which gave false pretenses to cover Germany with a wave of terror and to persecute, torture, and liquidate political enemies, basic rights were overruled (Feb. 28). All this happened in one month in February 1933. Despite their massive intimidations of other parties, the snap elections on March 5, 1933 did not bring the absolute majority the National Socialists hoped to get. However, they got a narrow majority together with other conservative parties. The constitutive session of the new Reichstag (March 21) took place without the Social Democrats and the Communist Party; the seats of the latter were denied (March 8). In the presence of armed storm troopers (“SA”) and the Shield Squadron (“SS”) of the NSDAP, the legislature was concentrated in the hands of the government on March 23, 1933. Only those members of the Social Democrats, not in prison or on the run, voted against this enabling act (“Ermächtigungsgesetz”). It followed the dissolution of the parliaments of the states (first law of the “Gleichschaltung”, March 31), uncontrolled waves of detentions and first “concentrations” of disliked people in concentration camps (March/April), alleged “spontaneous” boycott actions against Jewish enterprises (April 1), which, however, did not find as much appeal within the German population as hoped for by the Nazis.

On April 7, 1933, the “Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service” (“Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtenums”) permitted the regime to dismiss disliked and “non-Aryan” civil servants. This law exerted an enormous influence on the university system and on science in its entirety, too.

Within weeks, Hitler succeeded in eliminating all his coalition partners by means of overt terror, and establishing a “Führer state”. He staged this as a “legal revolution”, so that all others who wanted to obstruct his dictatorship had to enter into illegality. Until the mid of July 1933, labor unions and the Social Democrats as well as all other parties were either prohibited or were forced to disintegrate, except for Hitler’s NSDAP. By his strategy of “Gleichschaltung” (the historian Richard J. Evans translated the term as “forcible-coordination”), the Nazi regime finally established successively a system of “totalitarian control and tight coordination over all aspects of the society”. After the death of von Hindenburg (Aug. 2, 1934), Hitler gave himself the title “Führer und Reichskanzler” and on Aug. 19, 1934, the two administrative offices Reich President and Reich Chancellor were combined in his hands. A supervisory body existed no more. All democratic barriers had been broken down. A brutal justice system with an omnipresent and omnipotent secret police (“Gestapo”) had been established instead.
The very end is well-known: Although it was beyond peoples’ imagination what the Nazi thugs did to the Jews and others in their “Final Solution”, the history must needs chronicle the pandemonium of the Shoah and systematic euthanasia with an estimated death toll of 6 Million, and World War II with an estimated 50 to 80 million casualties and vast destructions in many countries worldwide.

5 Carathéodory in Munich during the “Third Reich”

5.1 Life and Work in Munich after 1933.

In order to judge the situation for a Greek professor in Germany after 1933, one has to know that Carathéodory possessed both Greek and German nationality. The latter was bound to his employment as full professor at the University of Munich. Carathéodory surely did not live in life-threatening situations under the National Socialist terror regime solely because of being a half-foreigner. He was rated to be an “Aryan” and had to prove this through a questionnaire like many Germans of certain professions; cp. [11], pp. 279f. Actually the Nazis, in particular Adolf Hitler derived their/his crude ideology from a “common race” of Greeks and Germans, but this does not mean that Carathéodory is to be suspected of having been mired in this regime.

On the other hand, the consequences of the “Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service” could not have remained concealed to Carathéodory. Until the winter term of 1934/1935 already 14% of the university professors were dismissed, while about 35% of the German university professors supported a “Declaration of Belief in Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State”; see [11], p. 276. Also some of Carathéodory’s friends were among the victims of the 1933 racial laws and their intensification through the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935; cf. [11], pp. 278–288, 294–296, 299–301. Among those from the University of Munich there were the full professors Friedrich Hartogs and Alfred Pringsheim who both were classified as “non-Aryan” and dismissed in June 1933. Pringsheim refused the oath upon the “Führer” and was permanently retired in 1935. Alfred Pringsheim was a comprehensively intellectual person; we will speak about him later. As a consequence of the denial of the oath of allegiance, he was oppressed, harassed, and evicted from Nazi Germany. At the age of 89, Pringsheim and his wife became refugees, humiliated, disenfranchised, and bereft of all of their considerable patrimony. Two years later (in 1941) he died in Zurich, Switzerland; cp. [13], pp. 157f. HARTOGS

It was Pringsheim, who supported Carathéodory’s petition for membership in the Bavarian Academy of Science. Shortly before his eviction, Pringsheim endowed Carathéodory a precious treasure from his library, an extremely rare print of a letter of 1700 in Latin language from Jacob Bernoulli to his brother Johann. The appendix of the letter shows the solution of the isoperimetric problem and a witty dedication to Carathéodory as the “Isopérnaire incomparable” [23]. Concerning the fate of Pringsheim, see Perron’s obituary [24], who accompanied the Pringsheims to the Munich main station before they left Germany, although he was under the observation by the “Gestapo”.
was permanently retired in 1936, arrested and sent to the Dachau concentration camp for several weeks after the Nazi November pogrom in 1938 and committed suicide in 1943, after his “intermarriage” was “legally” dissolved which left him unprotected; see [13], p. 158. He shared the misery and fate of so many other persecuted German scholars.

The pressure on German academics to emigrate immediately provoked a reaction abroad, such as the foundation of the “Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars” in New York in May 1933.

In Munich, Carathéodory convinced Salomon Bochner to emigrate, after Carathéodory’s earlier attempts failed to promote his habilitation (in 1928) [see [11], pp. 266f and [13], p. 157] as well as to get a position in Harvard for him [as mentioned above], in both cases because of anti-Semitic attitudes, either openly or subliminally. Bochner could later escape the Nazi terror and became associate professor at Princeton in 1933 and full professor in 1946. After his retirement in 1968, he became Professor at Rice University in Houston.15

Concerning Carathéodory’s former colleagues in Göttingen, one especially has to mention Richard Courant who asked Carathéodory for advice since he was offered a position at the University of Istanbul. With Courant and Max Born as well as James Frank, all Jewish, the leading heads of three of the four institutes for mathematics and physics in Göttingen were forced to emigrate. Carathéodory together with Sommerfeld were among the 27 scientists who signed a petition in favor of Courant; see [11], pp. 282f.

Georgiadou [11], pp. 284f, argues that Carathéodory has not raised a similar word in favor of Einstein, who resigned from the Prussian and the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and applied to be released from German nationality, while he called for a world-wide protest against Hitler during his lecture tour across the USA. From there he never returned to Germany. However, the situation for Einstein was different from that of Courant. The first was in safety at that time in the USA, while the latter was threatened by the Nazis.

In addition, another petition signed by Carathéodory against the dismissal of a “politically unreliable” colleague, here Kurt Reidemeister from Königsberg, is reported by Georgiadou [11], p. 287.

In 1935, Carathéodory, Perron, Sommerfeld, and others abstained from the celebration of the foundation of the University of Munich as protest against the appointment policies of the Bavarian Ministry of Education [11], pp. 304f. This was the first event, when lecturers appeared in SA uniforms.

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14 also called Progronnacht (“Night of Broken Glass”). On November 9–10, Jewish homes, synagogues, cemeteries, and quarters were ransacked and demolished throughout Germany and Austria by SA stormtroopers and civilians. Many Jews were killed or driven to suicide, about 30,000 were taken to concentration camps. Instantly, the atrocities of the Nazi terror did not pass unnoticed throughout the German Reich and the western democracies. The Programnacht marks the onset of the systematic persecution and genocide of the Jews in the German Reich.

15 Georgiadou [11] cites Mrs. Despina Carathéodory-Rodopoulou, Carathéodory’s daughter: Bochner was a quiet young man, who resisted the idea of emigrating, a thing that made my father become frantic and yell at him behind the closed door of his office. This event was similarly reported by Mrs. Carathéodory-Rodopoulou to the author, too.
Carathéodory always felt obliged to intervene in appointment policies in favor of the best candidates, in order to preserve high scientific standards, such as in the case of Sommerfeld’s successor [11], p. 305, [13], pp. 163f. In [13], p. 160, Hashagen commendatorily accented the trio Carathéodory, Perron, and Tietze also for preventing a “national socialist reformation” of the faculty.

Georgiadou comments on this stupidly enforced brain drain with an accusation of Carathéodory [11], p. 288: The emigration of scientists who were not discriminated against on racial or political grounds seems to have been rather the exception. Those who decided to stay in Germany belonged to three broad groups: convinced National Socialists, those who saw an opportunity to improve their careers under that regime and shamefully used every sort of denunciation of their colleagues, and those who might have wished to leave but believed they would have had no other opportunity elsewhere. Carathéodory decided to remain in Germany, but he belonged to none of these three categories. Although he had been dismissed from the post of governmental commissioner in Greece the year before, and regarded the USA as “the other end of the world”, he could have taken steps to leave Germany. But it seems that he viewed his decision to remain as his “patriotic duty” and believed that he could get by in life under the Nazis as best he could and, moreover, he would be able to have influence on affairs.

Hashagen pronounced a sharper judgement [13], p. 158: Carathéodory, Perron, and Tietze did not protest publicly, but they stepped forward with “symbolic acts of solidarity at least partially”. After the Pogromnacht any public protest would certainly be perilous. On the other hand, Litten [15] called Perron an “example for civil courage in the Third Reich”.

More insights into the possibilities of resisting the National Socialist oppressiveness at the University of Munich can be obtained by Litten’s description of the situation at the university’s Chemical Laboratory [18]. On the other side Litten [17] also reports on the possibilities of promoting a scientific career at the University of Munich through commitments in Nazi organizations to compensate for mediocre scientific achievements. Litten’s papers describe that the intensity of suppression varied during that time and that also position and luck played a role when affording a certain degree of resistance.

Concerning his daughter Despina, Carathéodory sent her to Athens in 1935 to save her from the Brown ideology. As Despina told the author, her father had forbidden to speak German at home and became furious when she argued in favor of the Nazis after having learned something about their alleged accomplishments in the indoctrinated law education at the university in Munich. She even remembered the only slap in the face she ever got by her father: she got it because of a positive remark about the “merits” of the Nazis. Although Carathéodory’s daughter emigrated to continue her studies of law in Athens, she soon gave them up because of her marriage to a Greek engineer in 1937. Note that Despina as well as her mother and older brother were considered to be aliens in Germany. Despina’s brother Stephanos might have been too immobile to emigrate; he suffered from the aftermath of infantile paralysis.
On her last visit to her parents with her husband and baby-son, she was able to leave Munich for Switzerland one day before Germany invaded Poland, since her father was duly informed by an officer. From 1941 to 1946 neither Despina nor her father had known whether the other was still alive, as she told the author.

5.2 Can we blame?

Can we really blame Carathéodory for his continuance in Germany, for not giving up his entire existence at an age of over 60, at an age at which German scholars were not unhesitatingly offered secure positions abroad? Can we blame Carathéodory for not refusing the required proof of “Aryan” ancestry (compare [11], pp. 279f)? Can we blame Carathéodory for his decision to relinquish support of Einstein, who was in safety, and to support others instead, whom still could be helped by signing petitions? Can we blame Carathéodory for misjudging the sneaky acquisition of power by the Nazis and the subsequent abrupt shift towards inhumanity?

No! Rather another assessment of his behavior is undoubtedly self-evident: With his vouching for dismissed colleagues he has shown a remarkable civil courage in standing up for the ideals of humanity — even not taking a back seat, when a little bit more could have jeopardized him and his family. Carathéodory’s advocacy has to be contrasted with the “icy breath”, which blew through the German Society of Mathematicians (DMV) immediately after the decree of the “Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service” in the spring 1933 (see Remmert [30]), and with the cancellation of all “non-Aryan” members and of all political emigrants from the member list of the DMV. How aggressively the “Jewish matter” (“Judenfrage”) was pursued by the former DMV president Süss is in detail described in Remmert [31]. The extent of collaboration between DMV and Nazi authorities was not widely known after the war; see [31], p. 243. In this respect, Carathéodory has done more than later was reported to have been done by most of the Germans of that time.

5.3 Carathéodory’s succession after his retirement in 1938

Another incident, which dragged on over years after Carathéodory’s retirement in 1938, documents his courageousness, too. This event is closely connected with Carathéodory’s friends, the highly respected mathematicians Oskar Perron and Heinrich Tietze, as well as the famous mathematician and theoretical physicist Arnold Sommerfeld. All these strong characters were acknowledged opponents of the National Socialists; see Litten [15], [16], [20], pp. 145ff, [21], pp. 38–40, Georgiadou [11], chs. 5.5, 5.8, 5.15, and Hashagen [12], pp. 9, 18, 20. The so-called Munich “Dreigestirn” (“Luminary of the Three”) — Carathéodory, Perron, and Tietze — were considered to be a “self-appointed triumvirate” of “incorrigible opponents” who always “rejected unreasonable
Fig. 4 Oskar Perron (1880–1975), Heinrich Tietze (1880–1964, with Friedrich Hartogs), and Arnold Sommerfeld (1868–1951).

Constantin Carathéodory in Munich

political demands during faculty meetings and also made unfavorable political remarks about the regime during their lectures". Carathéodory was said to have even used his cane to strike nationalistic and anti-Semitic students who were boycotting Sommerfeld's lecture on relativity; see [11], 290f. Moreover, all these three were members of the “Munich Mathematical Colloquium”, on which “the Nazis started to keep a close eye” after 1933, a circle of “politically untrustworthy” full professors of the two universities in Munich headed by Alfred Pringsheim, see again Georgiadou [11], p. 291, and [13], p. 158.

Particularly Litten [16] describes in detail the active role Carathéodory played together with his colleagues Perron and Tietze in preventing the Nazi party to force a party member or at least somebody who had a positive attitude toward the regime as successor to Carathéodory's distinguished chair, independent of the candidate's mathematical qualification. Over and over again this group, all members of the Mathematisch-naturwissenschaftliche Klasse (Department of Mathematics and Natural Sciences) of the Bavarian Academy of Science, solely argued in favor of the qualification of some of the most prominent mathematicians of those days, all of which were rejected because of their “political untrustworthiness”. This unworthy procedure of deciding the successor to Carathéodory's chair lasted incredibly five and a half years until April 1944 when the call finally was issued to Eberhard Hopf. Herewith, the group around Perron, Tietze, and Carathéodory succeeded in appointing an excellent mathematician as well as a person who was definitely not involved with the Nazi despots. Far from it, Hopf was even known to have a critical attitude to the Nazi regime [11], pp. 354ff.

Hashagen finds fault that Carathéodory acted in combination with others only, but never set himself off particularly and deployed all his scientific reputation backstage only; cf. [13], pp. 164f. Nevertheless, even this cautious behavior later has had negative consequences for Carathéodory; cp. [13], p. 165, p. 170.
The strong role of the Mathematisch-naturwissenschaftliche Klasse of the Bavarian Academy of Science during the “Third Reich” is also confirmed by Stoermer [33]. She points out that only the Mathematisch-naturwissenschaftliche Klasse under the leading role of Tietze was able to play — almost until the end of the “Third Reich” — a remarkable opposing role against the increasing influence of the Nazi party in evicting “non-Aryan” members and enforcing new politically opportune members. See also Hashagen [13], pp. 165–167, who again criticized Carathéodory’s diffident role.

5.4 Travel abroad after 1933.

Despite the oppressive situation arising in Germany after the Nazis’ “seizure of power”, Carathéodory was still allowed to participate at some conferences abroad: in Pisa in 1934, [11], p. 297, in Bern and Brussels in 1935, [11], pp. 301f, as well as at the Academy of Athens, at the International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) in Oslo, and at the tercentenary of Harvard University, all in 1936.

Note that Carathéodory was elected to the International Commission of Mathematicians (ICM) in 1935, to which the Bavarian Ministry of Education agreed and through which Carathéodory represented German Mathematicians internationally. Georgiadou and Hashagen suspected, why Carathéodory accepted this nomination despite the racistly enforced brain drain; see [11], p. 304, and [13], pp. 167–173. Taking into account the protest on behalf of the foundation of Munich University, Carathéodory obviously must have had his reasons, maybe he was convinced that scientific cooperations must be preserved or that he still saw chances to help persecuted colleagues to emigrate due to his international relations or that he simply hoped that the Nazi spook would soon end and science would return to normality.

Carathéodory’s last visiting professorship was as Carl Schurz Memorial Professor in Madison at the University of Wisconsin in 1936–1937 (cf. [11], Chapter 5.26), two years before the Progromnacht. Again, Carathéodory used his stay in the US to help a Jewish colleague, here Otto Blumenthal, in organizing a series of lectures in the USA, unfortunately unavailingly; 19 cf. [11], p. 297, pp. 327ff, and [13], p. 168.

During World War II, only two travels abroad took place: First, to Brussels in March 1940, two month before the invasion of German troops into Belgium, despite certain objections of the NSDDB (Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Dozentenbund, National Socialist German League of Academics) because they disbelieved Carathéodory’s political trustworthiness — cf. [12], pp. 22f. Secondly, to Rome in 1942, where Carathéodory’s talk was given exclusively at the Pontifical Academy of Science, whose member he was since 1936 and which later was negatively noted by the NSDDB; cf. [13], pp. 170f, p. 173. See also the letter of Hiltner in the following section.

19 Blumenthal and his wife were deported by the Nazis; both died, he in the Ghetto of Theresienstadt from pneumonia.
A lecture tour through Finland in 1943 was forbidden, since again doubts concerning Carathéodory’s allegiance occurred; see [12], pp. 24f, [13], p. 172, and particularly again the letter of Hiltner.

Can we blame Carathéodory for taking the chances traveling abroad, for keeping scientific life as normal as possible in abnormal times? Maybe hoping for less “turbulent times” to come?

6 Witnesses

The best witness for Carathéodory’s oppositional role against the Nazi Party might be a letter from the NSDDB (National Socialist German League of Academics), dated May 27, 1943, about its opinion on Carathéodory, which was asked for by the Nazi Party Office (Partei-Kanzlei) in Munich. This letter, signed “Hr. Hiltner”, contains several warnings about Carathéodory, who has asked permission to accept an invitation of the Finnish Mathematical Association by Ernst Leonard Lindelöf, as already mentioned above. Some of these telling warnings shall be cited here in parts from the English translation of Georgiadou’s book [11], where the entire letter can be found on pp. 390f: … if we could agree that Professor Dr. Constantin Carathéodory … travels to Helsinki, we should inform you that it is urgent to warn you of a further trip of Professor Carathéodory abroad. Unfortunately, his trip to Rome in November 1942 could not be prevented in time.

Then, some aspects of Carathéodory’s vita are reported ending with the following description of Carathéodory’s engagement in founding the University of Smyrna: After the war [here: World War I] he was invited by Venizelos, whose intimate friend he was, to found the University of Smyrna. Here and in Athens he “organised” the Greek university relations, that is he moulded them to the way of thinking of Venizelos, who is a half-Jew. After expulsion by the Turks, he became a professor at the University of Munich. … He maintains a large international correspondence and relationship and … he is particularly friendly toward Jews. Further, it has once been claimed that he provided the Jewish mathematician A. Rosenthal with an appointment in Giessen. His partiality toward the Jews is especially cultivated. So, he decisively supported the appointment of the dreadful East-Galician Jew Salomon Bochner to Munich University.

Then the writer of the letter complains about Carathéodory’s appreciation of Bochner as a “Jewish genius” and Carathéodory’s “quite cosmopolitan attitude”. He concludes: It is to be feared that professor Carathéodory will be active, and also report in a manner harmful to the German Reich in Finland, where a clique, Jewish-friendly and closely sympathising with the liberal science of the democratic countries, indeed exists to a certain percentage. Therefore,

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20 Among the 50 letters of Carathéodory from the library of the University of Göttingen, edited by Sidera-Lytra, Siriadas, and Stamou [32] there is definitely no evidence of a merest hint of a positive attitude toward the Nazi terror regime.
we raise the sharpest doubts against Professor Carathéodory’s trip abroad. Heil Hitler! Hr. Hiltner

6.1 Can we blame?

There is no doubt that the Nazi regime has, at the beginning, exploited Carathéodory’s reputation and his striving for the conservation of international relations and cooperations. Herewith, it intended to convince the international community of scientists that Germany still plays a leading role in mathematics — despite the bloodletting of about one third of all mathematicians exposing the stupidity of expelling a major part of Germany’s intelligentsia. On the other side, these travels surely allowed Carathéodory to seize every chance of finding new secure existences for quite a few of his persecuted colleagues, inwardly, as this was his style. Moreover, any open protest would certainly have jeopardized him and his remaining family members.

7 Carathéodory’s life during the last years of World War II.

In the last years of World War II Carathéodory was sick due to prostate hypertrophy and uraemia, according to his daughter he even suffered from prostate cancer at the end of his life. His son Stephanos, who suffered from the aftermath of poliomyelitis as already mentioned, contracted pneumonia and, in the last days of the war, his wife Euphrosyne was also in a precarious health condition due to an apoplectic stroke. When daily alarms and air raids were taking place in Munich, she was too sick to descend the stairs into the cellar. Euphrosyne died shortly after the War in 1947. All this confined him and his family’s lives to the fundamental questions of survival.

Constantin Carathéodory lived a secluded life during the last years of the war. He was parish counsel of the Greek Church of the Redeemer at the Salvatorplatz in Munich.

This is the summary of Carathéodory’s last years during World War II as it was told to the author by his daughter Despina; see [11], Chapters 5 and 6, for more details.

7.1 Can we blame?

May be, Oskar Perron, Heinrich Tietze and Arnold Sommerfeld held off the forces of evil from Carathéodory in those days of horrific madness; they possessed the courageousness of lions which cannot be expected from everybody. Nevertheless, Carathéodory seems to have survived this most horrible time of German history without abandoning his exceptional moral courage, in those perilous times when people were killed without reason.
8 Résumés and counterstatements.

Despite her many remarks in Carathéodory’s favor, which permeate her entire book and of which only a selection could be quoted here, the author does not share Georgiadou’s opinion (see p. 288), her accusation, Carathéodory should have left Germany at the ripe old age of about 65, himself sick, his wife and his son in precarious health conditions. That certainly would have meant also loss of his pension, his belongings — Carathéodory possessed an extraordinarily valuable library [11], pp. 444–447. That would inevitably have meant he should have foreseen what harmed millions, at the latest during his last visit of the USA, that means even before the year 1938 when Britain and France headed by their Prime Ministers Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier signed the Munich Pact, an agreement permitting Nazi Germany the annexation of Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland, today known as a failed act of appeasement toward Nazi Germany.

Georgiadou’s “Reasonable Compromise” ([11], Chapter 5.64, pp. 418f), however, seems to be reasonably balanced, but allows, in the author’s opinion, too much space for misinterpretations if Carathéodory’s actions and his opportunities to emigrate are not seen against the background of the Nazi terror regime.21

Georgiadou’s comment: Despite all the demoralisation, Carathéodory had stayed in Munich and his motives should be examined. He had always seen Germany as the basis of his material existence. He himself was not persecuted and would not deliberately risk losing his salary or his pension after 1938. He had his residence in Munich and, what mattered even more to him, his remarkable library, which he was not prepared to abandon in any way. He had been able to get his daughter out of Germany, hoping the rest of the family would cope in some way with the conditions. Although he depised the Nazis, participation in active resistance against the regime was beyond his horizon. He considered himself as a servant of science alone, pretending to ignore its political connections. His basic concern in the Nazi era was to find a balance between a “reasonable compromise” with the regime and the autonomy of his profession, a utopian enterprise under the conditions of a dictatorial system.

Indeed there have been some irritations and suspicions because of Carathéodory’s decision to stay in Nazi Germany, particularly in Greece. According to several private communications of the author with Greek mathematicians after the publication of Maria Georgiadou’s book, these suspicious may have their non-obvious roots deep in Greek history since Carathéodory’s father stood, as already mentioned, in the tradition of the Phanariots, a group of moneyed Hellenised citizens of the Byzantine Empire, who had a great influence in the administration of the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century and who played a controversial role in Greek history. Note that the Greco-Turkish war (1919–1922) caused by the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire after World War I has polluted the relations between Greece and Turkey until today. Georgiadou reproaches Carathéodory for his decision not to return to Greece thereby not giving any evidence of loyalty for Greece which during those years suffered bitterly under German occupation. Compare [11], p. 430. Maybe the publication of Georgiadou’s book coincides with the at that time upcoming aversion among some left-wing academics to what is considered as elitism, which was most strikingly expressed through the negative reference to the “stigma of excellence” (η ρετσινια της αριστειας).

21
Hashagen draws a predominantly negative picture of Carathéodory in his “attempt of interpretation” [13], pp. 176–181. On the one hand he also reproaches Carathéodory with the adherence to his existential basis, his “villa”, his valuable library, but also to his outstanding position as “ordinary one of the most distinguished German universities”. He further on describes Carathéodory as a person, who saw himself as part of an “international elite”, therefore disrespectably easily exploitable, who moreover conceded mathematics “an extraordinary significance”. Therefore he was not ready to emigrate. On the other hand, he alludes to the familial situation and his role in “symbolic” — “but not public” — acts in favor of persecuted scientists and against the “nazification” of science, however, “without playing a prominent role by himself”, “only within the collective of other colleagues”.

In the opinion of the author, Hashagen’s “instead of a résumé” ([13], p. 176) as well as Georgiadou’s “reasonable compromise” ([11], Chapter 5.64, pp. 418f, lack the consideration of the impossibility of the presentiment and assessment of the worsening of the up-coming political situation, the realistic appreciation of what kind of steps against a dictatorial terror regime a single man can take and the consideration of the prevalent life-threatening situation under a dictatorship of utmost cruelty, the more so as his wife and son were non-Germans, both in precarious health conditions, while he was either close to retirement or later even beyond it. To expect “active resistance” ([11], p. 418) against such a regime would be far beyond responsible ethical requirements. Moreover it was certainly impossible to explore the boundaries between riskless and risky actions.

After World War II, Oskar Perron [23], p. 41, a recognized opponent of the Nazis as already mentioned, said in his obituary to Constantin Carathéodory: He himself tried to spend the times of political pressure as seclusively as possible, naturally without concessions, however also without going out on a limb willfully. He looked at the “Third Reich” through the eyes of a historian who is always drawing parallels to dictatorships of bygone times, and also through the eyes of a foreigner whose attention is attracted by many strange cultic customs which he however can simply accept without having to be ashamed. … Because of his world-wide relations, he also succeeded in finding opportunities of existence through emigration for quite a few of his “non-Aryan” colleagues.

Heinrich Tietze, another recognized opponent of the Nazis, honored Carathéodory in his Dem Andenken an C. Carathéodory (In memory of C. Carathéodory) [35], p. 95: We, his colleagues at the university and in the academy, however know, how Carathéodory has rendered outstanding services to our scientific lives in a certain manner at that time, when it was necessary to curtail influences hostile to science as far as this was possible. Particularly, his contribution against these attempts shall be unforgotten which have threatened the significance and continuance of our academy.

Finally, Behnke [1], p. 163, who was among the rejected “politically untrustworthy” mathematicians recommended as successors to Carathéodory’s chair, wrote on the occasion of the centennial of Carathéodory’s birthday: In those turbulent times from 1933 on, the Nazis initially let Carathéodory be.
However, as a man standing between nations, he was often called for help. He gave it tacitly, tactfully, and with warm heart. However, he did not let himself get carried away by a political statement.

Perron as well as Tietze have edited the collected works of Constantin Carathéodory after World War II which they surely would not have done if Constantin Carathéodory had been in any way favorably disposed towards the Nazis.

9 Summary: Who will blame?

Once more, who will blame Carathéodory for not having accepted calls from American universities at the end of the 1920s, years before the take-over of the Nazis in 1933 and even long before the full truth of the barbarities of the Nazis were unearthed? Who will blame Carathéodory for trying to preserve the internationality of Mathematics before World War II by accepting invitations from abroad, maybe not seeing that the Nazis have encroached his reputation to distract the mathematicians worldwide from their cruelties against Jewish scientists, while he succeeded, due to his world-wide relations and due to his outstanding reputation, to find new existences through emigration for quite a few of his persecuted colleagues? In contrast to the official policy of the German Society of Mathematicians! Carathéodory had the chances to do this and seized them. Who will blame Carathéodory for not having endangered his and his family’s life, while all family members were in more or less precarious health conditions? — Not everybody possessed the courageousness of lions as

20 The photograph of Constantin Carathéodory (1935) is courtesy of Mrs. Despina Carathéodory-Rodopoulou; compare Footnote 1.
Perron and Tietze in those times of darkness in Nazi Germany. Finally, who will blame Constantin Carathéodory for not having been a “hero”?

Litten pleads for exercising care in his article [21], pp. 42f, on the geologist Leopold Kölbl, who was a former president (Rektor) of Munich University during the “Third Reich” and a member of the NSDAP and the SA, but was lauded by adversaries of the Nazi regime such as Sommerfeld and others for his “merits”. Litten verbatim says (translated by the author): One has to exercise care not only because of fairness against persons which are affected and typically can not comment on it, but also because we can learn from history only, if at all, if it is correctly covered and imparted in its complexity and intricacy.

Dedication

The author would like to dedicate this article to his long standing friend George Leitmann, born on May 24, 1925, in Vienna, Professor Emeritus of Engineering Science, Department of Mechanical Engineering at the University of California, Berkeley, still active as Special Adviser to the Dean, and one of the leading authorities in optimal control theory, differential games, and its applications with more than 300 publications. Professor Leitmann received the highest awards and honors from countries all over the world for his contributions to science and for his role in fostering international scientific collaborations, amongst others the Commander’s Cross of the Order of Merit, Germany (Großes Verdienstkreuz). He is, inter alia, a Corresponding Member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, Founding President and Permanent Member of the Board of Directors of the Alexander von Humboldt Association of America, recipient of the Humboldt Medal, and last but not least, in 2013 the government of France made him a Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur.

George Leitmann was expelled from his native city, Vienna, at the age of 15, when darkness came over Germany and Austria. In 1943, George joined the US Army and served in the reconnaissance unit of the 286th Combat Engineer Battalion. He was involved in the battle of Colmar and assisted in the liberation of the concentration camps in Landsberg and Kaufering. At the end of the war, George served as an interrogator at the Nuremberg war crimes trial.

References


