The Austrian-born musician Fritz Kreisler was the world’s leading violinist in the first decades of the twentieth century. He became especially popular with U.S. audiences in 1888 after his Boston and New York debuts as a twelve-year-old prodigy (a highly talented child). When World War I broke out in 1914, he served briefly in the Austrian army and was wounded in combat against the Russians. He was on a U.S. concert tour in 1917 when the United States entered World War I on the side of the Allies, which was composed of France, Great Britain, Russia, and later the United States. Because of Kreisler’s previous war service, he was branded an “enemy alien” by many American patriotic and civic organizations. As public prejudice grew against him, first Pittsburgh and then other U.S. cities banned his performances, and he was forced to abandon his concert tour.

After the war, Kreisler was eventually welcomed back to American concert halls, and he firmly reestablished his reputation as a violin virtuoso (a highly skilled musician). Though he lived in Berlin, Germany, he made many concert tours abroad. In 1938, after Germany annexed his native Austria, “As an Austrian and as a soldier, I owe every drop of my blood, every dollar that I can earn, to my country; but as an artist I am above all politics and owe my best to the world.”

Kreisler was drafted into the German army. In order not to serve in the army, however, he became a French citizen the following year and fled with his wife to the United States, where they lived for the rest of their lives. He became a U.S. citizen in 1943. His final public performance took place in 1950, when he appeared on the “Bell Telephone Hour” radio program. Kreisler died in New York City on January 29, 1962, a few days before his eighty-seventh birthday.

A Child Prodigy

Fritz Kreisler was born in Vienna, Austria, on February 2, 1875, the second of five children born to Salomon Severin Kreisler, a Polish-born physician and amateur violinist, and his wife, Anna. Like many other middle-class households in Vienna during that period, the Kreislers were educated and cosmopolitan (interested in culture and new ideas), and music played an important role in their family life. The young psychoanalyst (a person who treats psychic disorders) Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was among the friends who played violin at the informal musical parties that the Kreislers hosted. As a boy, Kreisler thrived in this musical environment. Taught by his father, he started playing on a toy violin when he was four years old and quickly proved himself a prodigy. At age seven, Kreisler became the youngest pupil ever admitted to the Vienna Conservatory, a prominent music school. His principal teacher was Joseph Hellmesberger Jr., but Kreisler also studied composition with the noted composer Anton Bruckner (1824–1896) and also played informal duets with Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) after becoming acquainted with him at a local musicians’ club. Despite his musical genius, Kreisler hated practicing. Still, he progressed rapidly, and by age ten he won a gold medal for his violin playing. In 1885, he left Vienna to enroll in the Paris Conservatory of Music, where he competed against adult students to win the conservatory’s highest prize.

In 1888, the twelve-year-old Kreisler made his U.S. debut in a fifty-concert tour with pianist Moriz Rosenthal (1862–1946), playing first in Boston, then in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, and other major cities. One New York critic described Kreisler’s playing as “charming, if not astonishing.” Returning to Vienna the following year, Kreisler decided to quit the violin and finish his formal education at the Piaritsen Gym-
nasium (a German high school). He then decided to follow his father’s profession and entered medical school at the University of Vienna. However, Kreisler fantasized about living a life that included being a surgeon in the morning, a chess player in the afternoon, a violinist in the evening, and a victorious soldier at midnight. He quit medical school after two years and enlisted as a soldier in the Austrian imperial army; he served as the violin accompanist to Archduke Eugene, the grandnephew of Emperor Franz Josef (1830–1916). It was during this period of military service that Kreisler decided to devote his life’s energies to the violin. In 1896, a civilian once more, he took up the instrument again, and by the turn of the century he had made his debuts with the Vienna and the Berlin Philharmonics. He also began composing arrangements for violin, some of which were later published. However, he later confessed that some of the compositions he had claimed to be his own were actually written by other famous composers.

While sailing back to Europe after an American tour in 1901, Kreisler met Harriet Lies, a New York-born divorcée who was the daughter of a German American tobacco merchant. They fell in love immediately and were married a year later, though they repeated the ceremony three more times because of legal technicalities.

In 1910, the Victor Phonograph Company signed Kreisler to an exclusive contract, making him one of the first musicians to have his performances captured in the new medium of sound recordings. He was the first classical violinist to have his performances widely disseminated via recordings, and as a result, his talents became widely known to audiences who were unable to attend live performances.

Victim of Wartime Hysteria

When World War I broke out in the summer of 1914, Kreisler was drafted into the Austrian army, and just four weeks later he was wounded in combat against Russian troops. Honorable discharged from the service, he quickly recovered from his wounds and soon left for the United States, where he performed at New York’s Carnegie Hall in November. At the time, the United States was not involved in the war, and Kreisler was hailed by the public as a wounded war hero who had returned to the violin in spite of his injuries. The following year,
Kreisler’s memoir titled, *Four Weeks in the Trenches: The War Story of a Violinist*, which told the story of his short-lived experiences on the Eastern Front, was published. In the book Kreisler explains that his musical background was of great help to him and his regiment because his highly trained ear enabled him to determine the exact locations from which the enemy’s shells were being fired. Kreisler also wrote that “War may bring unspeakable horrors, but it does not fail to unfold the finest flowerings of humanity.” He then explained: “I have seen acts of the most tender sympathy and kindness, and real heroism,” adding that “In the mass we hated our enemy, but as soon as we were confronted with him in person, all was kindness to the individual. I have seen emaciated [thin and starving] Austrian soldiers . . . hand a crust of bread to a Russian prisoner.” Kreisler expressed the hope that after the war, artists like himself would help carry the message of peace around the world: “Surely art and religion will be the first forces that will set about the great reconstruction of world sympathy.”
When Austria’s emperor Franz Josef died in November 1916, Kreisler wrote a tribute to him in the *New York Times Magazine*. This article and Kreisler’s record of military service in 1914 were used as weapons against him in 1917 when the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies. On November 8, Kreisler was forbidden to perform in a concert in Pittsburgh after protests by patriotic organizations persuaded local officials to declare that the violinist’s appearance there would be a threat to public safety. Kreisler was escorted by the local police onto a train for New York. Officials in several other U.S. cities also banned Kreisler’s appearances, and he was forced to abandon his concert tour. During the Pittsburgh controversy, he issued a statement freely acknowledging his service in the Austrian army but declared that he had made monetary gifts to Austrian friends and charities purely out of humanitarian motives. Kreisler’s statement continued: “During every minute of my three years’ stay in this country I have been conscious of my duty to it in return for the hospitality. I have obeyed its laws in letter and spirit and I have not done anything that might be construed in the least as being detrimental to it. Not a penny of my earnings has ever nor will it ever, contribute to the purchase of rifles and ammunition, no matter where and in whatsoever cause.”

**Postwar Redemption**

After World War I ended in 1918, Kreisler waited a year before resuming his public appearances in the United States. On October 7, 1919, his operetta *Apple Blossoms* opened to critical acclaim in New York City. Three weeks later he appeared at New York’s Carnegie Hall in a benefit performance for the Vienna Children’s Milk Relief. He was met with resounding ovations, though the American Legion tried to prevent his appearances in other American cities, or at least to prevent him from playing music by German composers. Gradually, the wartime animosities were forgotten, and Kreisler reclaimed his status as a beloved violinist. In 1921, he turned down an offer to become conductor of the St. Louis Symphony. That year, in his essay “Music and Life,” Kreisler wrote glowingly of music as a unifying force: “Music belongs to no nation. The spell of music is the same [in all countries]. Music, like art and literature, is universal, it transcends all national boundaries.”
The Red Scare and Fears of Leftist Radicalism

When World War I ended, America shifted from anti-German sentiment to public fear of a new enemy—radical leftist politics. The rise of leftist organizations was symbolized by the new government in Russia: Led by Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviki—or Reds—a revolutionary group, had toppled the Russian czar in 1917. The Reds believed that common people—not the czar or other conservative leaders—should have power. Labor and racial unrest in the United States, combined with the growing membership of the Communist Party, worried some American government officials and led them to warn against a leftist takeover—the “Red menace.” The most prominent of these voices was A. Mitchell Palmer, President Woodrow Wilson’s new attorney general. Palmer asked Special Assistant J. Edgar Hoover to organize a new intelligence division for the Justice Department to investigate radical activities in the United States. This new division was the forerunner of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

During 1919, fear turned to panic. In many cities across the country, police raided the offices of radical groups that they considered to be anti-government. In May, a mob in New York City attacked the editorial offices of the socialist newspaper, The New York Call. In November, federal agents arrested two hundred members of the Union of Russian Workers at the newspaper’s headquarters on charges of sending traitorous materials through the mail. The U.S. House of Representatives refused to seat a socialist member, Victor Berger of Wisconsin, and the New York state legislature expelled five members who had been elected on the socialist ticket.

The Red Scare reached its peak with the so-called Palmer Raids of January 2, 1920, when Palmer ordered the arrest of ten thousand people in thirty-three cities for alleged subversive activities. Palmer’s order violated constitutional protections against unreasonable search and seizure. Many people were sent to jail without hearings, and six hundred foreigners were deported (returned to their countries of citizenship). Even though the panic subsided soon after the Palmer Raids, the Red Scare had a chilling effect on people who held political beliefs that were outside the mainstream. In the end, the Red Scare dealt a crippling blow to socialist and other left-wing movements in the United States.

1923, after a successful concert tour of Japan, Korea, and China, Kreisler and his wife settled into their first permanent home, in Berlin. (This home was later destroyed in an Allied air raid during World War II.)
During the next fifteen years, Kreisler performed in hundreds of concerts all over the world. In 1932, his second comic opera, Sissy, premiered in Vienna. When the Nazis, a German political movement led by Adolf Hitler that promoted racism and the expansion of state power, annexed Austria in 1938, Kreisler was again drafted into military service; but he became a French citizen and, with his wife, escaped to the United States as a refugee just weeks after World War II began in September 1939. (Kreisler became a U.S. citizen in 1943.) In 1941, Kreisler was seriously injured when he was hit by an egg-delivery truck on a Manhattan street, but he recovered and continued to perform until his retirement in 1950. Kreisler and his wife were together for sixty years. Kreisler died on January 29, 1962. His wife, Harriet, survived him by only sixteen months.

With the advent of recording equipment, Kreisler was able to reach people like no other performing had done previously. In summarizing Kreisler’s career biographer Amy Biancolli writes, “Was Kreisler the most revered violinist of his generation? Yes. Of any generation? Possibly. By almost any reckoning, Kreisler’s popularity was of a scope and depth that the world had not seen before and possibly will not again.”

For More Information

Books


Web sites


Friedrich "Fritz" Kreisler (February 2, 1875 – January 29, 1962) was an Austrian-born violinist and composer. One of the most noted violin masters of his day, and regarded as one of the greatest violinists of all time, he was known for his sweet tone and expressive phrasing. Like many great violinists of his generation, he produced a characteristic sound which was immediately recognizable as his own. Although it derived in many respects from the Franco-Belgian school, his style is nonetheless Explore releases and tracks from Fritz Kreisler at Discogs. Shop for Vinyl, CDs and more from Fritz Kreisler at the Discogs Marketplace. Fritz Kreisler. Profilo: Austria-born American violinist and composer, born 2 February 1875, died 29 January 1962.