

The Wagner Legacy

An autobiographyMPG BooksBodman 1998

Gottfried Wagner: *Wer nicht mit dem Wolf heult*

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Foreword by Ralph Giordano**

1.

He Who Does Not Howl With the Wolf is the alternative account to the official one promulgated by Bayreuth and its representatives, past and present, and to the conventional history of the family and the Festspiele. It is written by a Wagner of our own times, who is demanding something that has hitherto been absent on the Festspielhügel: frankness.

It is an account with something of the character of a feud, and biographical depth - and in a new dimension in comparison with other externalized inner conflicts.

Before me is a photo that anyone already familiar with the dramatic contents of this book can only contemplate with emotion: the 4-year-old Gottfried, great-grandson of Richard Wagner and son of present head of the Festspiele Wolfgang Wagner, taken in 1951 in the Wahnfried Park in Bayreuth, a smartly dressed little boy, leading Pupsi, a black Scotch terrier - a snapshot of a cute Wagner child, 'in the sheltered ivory tower of the family Grail', as the subject was later to term the idyll. It will not last, the first shadows are cast early and soon find a name - 'Bayreuth reasoning'. Gottfried is not allowed to play with the other Wagner children - the fathers, Wolfgang and Wieland, are at daggers drawn. And so he grows up hearing his father's scornful remarks against the brother, Gottfried's uncle. Discord lies in the air, and wreaks its work on a vulnerable psyche.

But at that time, soon after the end of the Second World War, control over family and Festspiele is exercised neither by Wieland nor Wolfgang, but by their mother Winifred Wagner, the wife of Richard Wagner's son Siegfried, who had died in 1930. That matriarch who surpassed anyone's wildest conception of a Valkyrie, and who had a bosom friend whom she tenderly called 'Wolf' - who, however, has become better known to the world at large under a different name - Adolf Hitler. We have arrived at the nub, the initial spark, as it were, for the conflict made flesh in this book, and who was referred to in the era of Winifred Wagner by a codeword that says much about the milieu: 'USA' - which in this context did not mean the United States of America, however, but 'Unser Seliger Adolf' - Our Blessed Adolf. The ardent allegiance to Hitler before 1945 assumes coded form afterwards, but remains the cornerstone for the mindset of the ruler of Bayreuth and fosters the perpetuation of a strictly maintained repression: the copiously documented history of the Wagner family and National Socialism is still kept under lock and key.

Of course Gottfried Wagner was not born with the knowledge of what was supposed to remain hidden. Rather he uncovered it layer by layer, and right from the outset steadfastly holding to an attribute that will determine his life: the search and demand for honesty. During its course, this has taken on something of the nature of a political thriller.

At an early age Gottfried Wagner is concerned by pictures from cinema newsreels, magazines, newspapers and school film screenings on the period of National Socialism - hysterical mass adulation for the `Führer`, mass rallies, warlike parades, the victories of the Wehrmacht far beyond German borders and - horror scenes of mountains of corpses in the concentration camp of Buchenwald.

The child's horrified reactions, who turns terrified to the father: what is it all about, these pictures and the familiar music by his great-grandfather, used as background score? To which Wolfgang Wagner initially answers: `You are still too young to understand all that.` Then, when the son refuses to be fobbed off by this, he is shouted it: He is to kindly go and play or, even better, `finally to do his homework`.

Intimidated, Gottfried Wagner draws back, but even then, in 1956, in the child of not yet 10 years a chord had been sounded and a vulnerable curiosity aroused, neither of which were to abate.

In the same year he gets hold of the key to what was known as the painting room in the Festspiele building and once inside discovers a wealth of photos of grandmother Winifred and Hitler, plus countless handwritten letters, dusty and dirty, but legible: documenting devotion, admiration and allegiance to the beloved friend `Wolf`.

In 1963, now 16 years old and his suspicions fully aroused, Gottfried secretly breaks into a woodshed, where he finds two cardboard boxes containing a number of film cans. Held up against the light, the celluloid reveals a lively tête-à-tête between grandmother Winifred and other members of the family, right arms stiffly raised and beaming with joy, and the `Führer`. He obviously felt completely at home on the Festspielhügel - unambiguous scenes of an intimate gathering.

Why had this never been talked about in the family?

Now the clearer outlines of a feud become visible, which later will lead one of the Bayreuth clan to leave and to set off irrevocably in an opposite direction - the author of this book.

Next step: Gottfried Wagner questions the cameraman - his own father. In order to find out his opinion without making him suspicious, the son, who has become distrustful after his initial experience, remains silent both on what he has found and on his surprise that there has been total silence concerning these gatherings: what is the truth behind the connection of the Wagner family with Hitler? Wolfgang Wagner's answers reveal the almost casual impressions of an insider: still-fascinated recollections of Hitler, 'Uncle Wolf', the 'Führer's' visit to his sickbed, cosy chats at the 'Führer's' fireside, calling one another by the familiar 'Du' form, words in praise of Hitler's 'great services for the German people'. Then to his son's question of what about the business with the Jews: that's a lot of gossip, anti-German agitation by left-wing intellectuals, but also Hitler's only mistake: 'If he had won over the Jews, then we would have won the war.'

That set the lines of demarcation between father and son, although at that time their differences did not yet lead to open conflict.

A deceptive interim stage.

For the repugnance against what he has seen and read sits deep in Gottfried Wagner.

Winifred Wagner's letters to Hitler have a particularly powerful effect. Especially as they were not written as the effusions of a flighty opportunist after the seizure of power on 30 January 1933, but at a time when the National Socialist Party was still a regional party based in Bavaria and no one could have believed that the muddleheaded author of an unread book with the title *Mein Kampf* would, ten years later, exercise total power over Germany.

For example, as early as 14 November 1923, i.e. a few days after Hitler's failed putsch attempt in front of the Munich Feldherrnhalle, in the *Oberfränkische Zeitung* Winifred Wagner ardently declares her allegiance to the supremo of the brown-shirted thugs as follows: 'Bayreuth knows that we have friendly relations with Adolf Hitler.' And at Christmas the same year Siegfried Wagner writes: 'We got to know the splendid man here in summer at the German rally. My wife is fighting like a lioness for Hitler - first-rate.'

And Winifred Wagner held to this throughout her life, with unabashed incorrigibility, and full of contempt for the second German democracy, the Federal Republic, which was as little hers as the first one, the Weimar Republic.

Even after 1945 Gottfried Wagner's grandmother remained faithful to the Nazi bigshots: she received Edda Goering, Ilse Hess, the NPD chairman Adolf von Thadden, the British Fascist leader Oswald Mosley and many other ultrareactionaries in Bayreuth and never made a secret of her unrepentant love for Hitler plus her unflagging antisemitism. Later she liked introducing her wayward grandson Gottfried as the 'friend of Bolsheviks and Jews', then, as he remembers with a shudder, 'she would give a loud and mannish laugh'.

Antisemitism and Bayreuth - that comes from deep down, from the cave of the 'Grail', comes from Richard Wagner, the Master himself.

And was continued by the anti-Jewish *ancien régime* of his wife Cosima, who died in 1930, having outlived her husband by 47 years, and by a labyrinthine clan, to which the Anglo-German racial ideologist Houston Stewart Chamberlain, husband of Richard Wagner's daughter Eva, belonged, and which was headed by Winifred Wagner.

'You still don't know the Jews,' Gottfried Wagner quotes his grandmother as saying, 'just wait. One day you'll understand me, and Hitler will be seen differently in world history.' And when questioned about the holocaust, she answers: 'That's just all lies and slanders by American Jews!' To which the grandson commented: 'That reminded me of Father's reactions when I asked him about Hitler.'

And it was Winifred Wagner too, more than all the others, who upheld the antisemitic family tradition from almost the beginning of our century, until it was approaching its end.

When she died on 5 March 1980 at the age of 82, there was no mention of all this at the funeral five days later. Neither the lifelong hatred of Jews of the deceased is mentioned, nor the name of her dear friend 'Wolf' - Adolf Hitler, Chancellor and 'Führer' of the greater German Reich which, although fallen, was still held in honour by Winifred Wagner to her dying day.

The farce was heightened even more by the fact that even Bayreuth's then Mayor Wild remained 'diplomatically' silent on the National Socialism of the deceased, which had been internalized and openly propagated in equal measure.

With the demise of the incorrigible Winifred, has the antisemitic era also ended on the Festspielhügel? It is left to the readers of this book to assess for themselves statements such as this

one from the mouth of Wolfgang Wagner: The Jews themselves have been the worst racists in history, and `Jews themselves contributed essential impulses to the Nuremberg race laws`. By which the head of the Bayreuth Festspiele is in fact saying that the Jews had contributed to their own disenfranchisement. I put that at the same level as the thesis that the Jews are the authors of antisemitism through their behaviour. Nothing is more infamous. The abyss between the autobiographical *Acts* by Wolfgang Wagner and this book cannot be bridged - there is not a word in it of what the son reproaches the father of.

` I wanted to find answers to the question of why he represses his own past and the past of his own family - as head of the Bayreuth Festspiele, as a Wagner and as my father,` the son writes bitterly. `But on reading *Acts* I became painfully aware of how he had yielded to the contemporary mood in repressing his own past.`

No wonder that for Gottfried Wagner it became difficult, ultimately impossible, to breathe in the stifling family air. When he is no longer satisfied with sporadic questioning and abandons tactics, when he digs further, turns out to be atypical of the family, even publicly announces it and refuses to be intimidated by his father`s at first distressed, then grim, finally hostile defence - then the expulsion occurs of the insubordinate son Gottfried by the Lord and master of Bayreuth.

What a Wagner dared here was sacrilege, blasphemy, the breaching of an unwritten Bayreuth Charta.

He who does not howl with the wolf.

And things have remained that way; that is the situation.

Gottfried Wagner is determined to reveal what a fossilized tradition still silences and conceals. How can there be a comprehensive and historically fair picture of the family and the Festspiele, he asks again and again, if the copious correspondence between the Wagners and Hitler is not made public and the film and photographic material from the Nazi era not made accessible to the public and to historians?

Believe it or not: in the exhibition `Wagner and the Jews` in 1984 there was just as little to be seen of this as there was to be read in the 1985 catalogue - not *one* line, not *one* picture! Or, to use the language of Lohengrin: the `Grail` is as unredeemed as ever.

From the family that wants to draw a line under the whole business, one has now broken ranks in a dangerous way and since then has been skirmishing against the offended cultural might of Bayreuth. What Gottfried Wagner is expressing here is his incapacity to come to terms with the status quo, his refusal to remain silent on the murky clan liaison with the prime perpetrator of the holocaust, Winifred's beloved 'Wolf', and a discipleship that extended far beyond the latter's cowardly end. But the Festspielhügel will not allow the attacking of its most treasured possession, the living lie of a Bayreuth cleansed of the swastika, to go unpunished. The outcast speaks of a 'Bayreuth connection' and gives some startling examples of its long arm, but does not let this get him down.

It is his incurable honesty that makes life difficult for Gottfried Wagner and which everyone senses who comes into contact with him, this 'Wagner after Auschwitz', who 'will never be prepared to remain silent for the sake of his career, in unswerving loyalty to a questionable family tradition'. And furthermore: 'I have known since my childhood that in this way I place myself outside the norms of "morals and tolerance" of a certain German establishment, that represses its own past in an act of self-alienation.'

It may be that much of what is recounted in this book might also be interpreted differently - why not? But even where Gottfried Wagner might have deluded himself - anyone who knows him would know that even there the urge for truth was guiding his pen.

I am the godfather of this book.

The idea for it came to me at our very first meeting, which took place in 1988 via a friend from Bonn, Bettina Fehr. She had given Gottfried Wagner my book, *The Second Guilt or On the Burden of being German*, and after reading it he immediately expressed the wish to meet the author. If he had not been announced to me as scion of the Wagners, if we had encountered one another by chance in the street somewhere - I would have still immediately guessed his identity. The similarity to his great-grandfather Richard Wagner is too striking, the unmistakeable family features too noticeable - the emphatic profile, the aquiline nose, the prominent skull.

Until that day, now over nine years ago, I had no idea of his history, but immediately sensed the enormous pressure the then 41-year-old was under, and listened. Gottfried Wagner spoke for hours, it literally poured out of him, while I understood more and more of what I was witnessing.

What must the strain have meant for a man like him, to have to continue to live with a collusion as artificial as it was energetically defended, with all its inevitable garbling of the truth? That physical chastisement also belonged to the paternal educational methods, as has now been revealed, does not really fit into that portrait of himself that the long-time Bayreuth master of ceremonies Wolfgang Wagner has promulgated in spoken and written word.

Of course I was curious regarding the relationship of the great-grandson to Richard Wagner - and was soon enlightened.

In the same way in which Gottfried Wagner demands the truth about Bayreuth, he also demands the truth about his great-grandfather, a full picture with nothing glossed over or concealed, that is purged of the falsifications and opportunism of a Wagner market still controlled by organized repression. The great-grandson wants the *whole* Richard Wagner, in all his contradictions. He wants the captivating charmer *and* the unspeakable antisemite of the essay 'The Jews in Music'; the universal genius Richard Wagner *and* the lamentable betrayer of friends, the everyday man fussing over trifles *and* the creator of new, previously unheard worlds of sound.

In the course of this process of clarification, the position of the great-grandson towards his great-grandfather has become radicalized. He had always answered the question of whether or not Richard Wagner contributed to the fatal development of antisemitism in Germany in the positive, always adding, however: 'But I maintain that the thesis that he is partly responsible for the Shoah, on the basis of his work and historical developments, is not justifiable.' Later he amended this to 'Richard Wagner himself has contributed his part to the inextricable link between Bayreuth, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz'.

This thesis is fought against a Bayreuth that has long paraded maestros such as Daniel Barenboim (Gottfried Wagner: 'alibi Jews') and at the same time has the nerve to leave antisemitism where it still exists: in the storeroom of an untidy family and Festspiele history.

Gottfried Wagner is not satisfied with half measures. He builds a bridge to Israel. He flies there, speaks publicly about the `Case of Richard Wagner`, as he had worked it out for himself, doggedly and exploring every detail, countering the error that a great artist must also have a great and noble nature. Anything else is an `alien image` of his great-grandfather, says the third-generation descendant. So he does not come as silent messenger or private individual, but as someone who wants to speak in plain terms: a Wagner talking to Jews about another Wagner, who wrought evil against Jews.

A new chapter has opened, with courage, a bold undertaking, begun in a land where for decades every note of Wagner`s works has been taboo and whose people are more sensitive to anything to do with Germany than to anything else in the world. But what the great-grandson experiences there, in Tel Aviv, in Beer Sheva, in Jerusalem, is openness and a willingness to listen.

Israel has long become a component of his biography.

Gottfried Wagner`s work is also welcomed by Jewish voices in America, however, for example, by Elie Wiesel and Leonard Bernstein, who informed him: `You have my full support for your work in Israel.` The finest encouragement reaches Gottfried Wagner from Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs from Huntsville, a wise man from Alabama: `You should not be held guilty for what occurred before your birth, nor for the actions of ancestors, whom you could not choose for yourself. It is much more your own sensitivity, your concern, your capacity for pity, which make you what you are.`

And so bonds developed which will endure. Gottfried Wagner is, with Rabbi Jacobs, Abraham Peck and the composer Michael Shapiro, founder in 1991 of the Post-Holocaust Dialogue Group, which in 1994 was entered in the Register of Associations and Organizations in New York and which states in sections 1 and 2 of its statutes:

`We, the children of the victims and the children of the victimizers, see the Shoah/Holocaust as a unique *rift* in Western and world civilization and the starting point of a new morality in terms of thoughts, feelings and actions.

`We stand opposed to the repressing and silencing of any and all discussion of the Shoah/Holocaust and the continuation of any and all prejudices and hatreds resulting from the activities of our parents and grandparents both now and in the future ...`

Of the family clan, only Aunt Friedelind, Wolfgang Wagner's sister, might have nodded in agreement. Of Gottfried Wagner's relations, she is the only one to have stood out with a similarly pugnacious anti-Nazi stance, an attitude the nephew respects, without however condoning Friedelind's unswervingly uncritical attitude towards Richard Wagner's antisemitism.

Other than from his mother, Ellen Drexel-Wagner (whom Wolfgang Wagner divorced in 1976 with extremely harmful attendant effects), Gottfried Wagner meets mainly with hostility, at best with indifference from the clan.

The following biography of the son is simpler than that of the father, it has nothing of the pomp of the latter, and it does not carry the aura of the socially recognized successful man. Rather, it offers us a life full of resistance, which is socially and financially insecure, full of pitfalls, obstacles, even ambushes, but - I think - of truly sublime consistency.

The 'cute little Wagner child' of the past could have had it easier, his existence could have taken quite a different course, if that child had not in fact been *this* Wagner.

I remember how deeply a phrase impressed me which, unforgettably, speaks of the 'casting down' of the human being on the earth, the organic crust of this lightless planet, only warmed by the sun. It affected me, that image, which I then further elaborated for myself: with the unasked-for birth of a man, for which he himself is not responsible, after all, into an uncertain destiny. No one, not even the most devout, are free from moments of desperate desolation in the search for meaning and a home here on earth.

From the first hour of my meeting with Gottfried Wagner I was reminded of that 'casting down', an impression subsequently heightened even more by a remark of his that moved me more than any other: 'I began painlessly to de-Germanize myself.'

That was said way back in the seventies, when he left home, to find his place, and came to the USA for the first time, with the desire of the disappointed man to become 'a liberal American', perhaps still meant ironically and not a serious resolve. And yet the word has taken on lasting significance, for two reasons.

One is (according to Margarete Mitscherlich) the result of an aversion 'to the German tendency not to respect others as others, but to despise them', and also as aversion 'to the German

way of either idealising or devaluing their fellow men and themselves`. For Gottfried Wagner both typical characteristics are two sides of the same coin: that of the repression of the past.

And secondly: The word `de-Germanize` has certainly taken on more reality in the meantime - for today Gottfried Wagner`s status is more that of an emigrant, and one who is, as is mostly the case, not a voluntary one. It must be difficult for this Ahasuerus from Bayreuth to trace his identity back to his country of birth.

From both aspects therefore, once again: `I began painlessly to de-Germanize myself.`

Really? De-Germanize, in the sense quoted - possible, certainly. But *painlessly*?

Somewhere I still want to see hope burning, even though the flame is weak - for a discussion with his father, in spite of everything; for a door that opens; for a sign that his course, so completely different from the one firmly taken by official Bayreuth, is nevertheless understood.

But even if nothing were to come of it - Gottfried Wagner would be prepared for that as well.

For the `cast down` has - unparalleled miracle - nevertheless found another home: *geographically* in the retreat of Cerro Maggiore, near Milan, and *emotionally* in the hearts of Teresina, Gottfried`s Italian wife, of Eugenio, the son from Romania, who would have been destined to an early death there, but now shows the most radiant smile I have ever encountered, and of Teresina`s mother, Mamma Antonietta, the pillar of the establishment - *tutta la famiglia*.

Each may read the relevant chapter towards the end of the book with his or her own feelings - it left me with a lump in my throat.

Gottfried Wagner once compared his battle against Bayreuth with that of David against Goliath - to illustrate the unequal forces confronting one another. But history teaches us by numerous examples that the might of the stronger side can be deceptive and present lustre can only too quickly fade. And even a contemporary not familiar with the Bible knows how the fight between David and Goliath ended - namely, with a hole in the forehead of the giant, who was lying on the ground, while the little man with the sling was still standing firmly on his feet.

It may be that only in the generation of Richard Wagner's great-great-grandchildren will the Bayreuth encrustation disappear, and that the insubordinate great-grandson of our days will be deprived of that satisfaction.

I at least cannot believe that the current imbalance of forces between the adversaries has a chance of surviving.

This prophecy is not uttered at random here, but is founded on my unswerving confidence in the power of truth which ultimately, however long in coming, even when it comes too late, is nevertheless always the victor.

For after all our many experiences with repression we know: it does not work, those who try to hush things up are fighting a lost cause, they do not achieve their goal, however powerful they might appear for the moment. They are only pushing the mass of what is being repressed from one place to another, keeping alive what they have not come to terms with from the past and constantly making it part of the present, without losing a single gramme, a single molecule of the past.

The tragedy of Bayreuth continues, as also the drama of the family, including the matters of inheritance and succession - which Gottfried Wagner will remain untouched by.

But by the effects of this book as well? Will they increase the isolation of the author or break it, intensify the inner unrest or appease it? Will light continue to come only from America and Israel and not from Germany? Or will, finally, perhaps even the old law 'He who does not cry with the wolf' be refuted?

With my incitement to write I have assumed a responsibility, out of concern for my friend, but with a clear conscience: independently of the results, the book is a blow for freedom.

For example, that incomparable biographical event, which is worth more to him than anything that could reach him from the Festspielhügel: Gottfried Wagner was invited by the Jewish community of Bayreuth to their New Year and to Atonement Festivals, Rosh ha Shanah and Yom Kippur.

My guiding principle is Auschwitz. Gottfried Wagner, who is not a Jew, says exactly the same of himself. I accept that.

What is to come now, we shall see.

[Text on page 27 of German edition]

Are the children responsible for the atrocities of their fathers? Yes, if they hold to the fatal way of their fathers. But do not all suffer from the atrocities of others? One stumbles by chance over the atrocities of others. Does that mean that all are made responsible for one another? Yes, there, where a man had the power in his hands to protest, and failed to do so.

Based on: *Sanhedrin, 27 b*