

HE WHO DOES NOT HOWL WITH THE WOLF

THE WAGNER LEGACY

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The antisemitism of the Wagner family

(1850-1945)

The starting point for discussion on Richard Wagner's antisemitism is the pamphlet published in 1859, 'Judaism in music'. It is predominantly ideological and is based on Wagner's pathological idea of the Jews as the enemy. This is for him the negative counterpole to his future political and artistic concept, that lies at the basis of the idea of the Festspiele and its realization in Bayreuth. In order to defame the imaginary Jewish enemy and develop his counter-concept, Wagner resorts in 'Judaism in music' to disgusting abuse: 'The Jew is repulsive [...], he rules and will continue to rule as long as money remains the power before which all deeds and actions must needs pale into insignificance [...]. In ordinary life the Jew, who, as we know, has a God unto himself, strikes us first and foremost by his *outward appearance* which, no matter which European nationality he belong to, has something about it which is foreign to that nationality and which we find insuperably unpleasant [...]. The Jew, incapable in himself of communicating artistically with us by means of his outward appearance or language, and least of all through his singing, has none the less come to dominate public taste in the most widely disseminated of modern artistic genres, *music*. [...] The Jew has never had an art of his own, and therefore never led a life that was capable of sustaining art. [...] we are bound to describe the period of Judaism in modern music as one of *total uncreativity and degenerate anti-progressiveness*.¹

Wagner concludes his diatribe, after a denigration of Felix Mendelssohn, with an appeal that sounds as like a heralding of what was to begin scarcely ninety years later: 'Join unreservedly in this self-destructive and bloody battle, and we shall all be united and indivisible! But bear in mind that one thing alone can redeem you from the curse that weighs upon you, *the redemption of Ahasuerus: Destruction!*

Wagner's outbursts against his 'enemies' Felix Mendelssohn and Giacomo Meyerbeer, without whose work Wagner's stage works are unthinkable, is of a disgraceful aggressivity. He owed to his one-time supporter Meyerbeer essential elements of the musical dramaturgy of his early works and to Mendelssohn a decisive influence on melody and instrumentation. In 'Judaism in music' Wagner wilfully blurs essential foreign influences on his artistic development. Herein lies a central motive for his pathological antisemitism, which runs like a red thread through all Wagner's writings up to 1882.

'Judaism in music' is by no means the end, as was later asserted in Bayreuth, but the beginning of Wagner's antisemitism in the sense of a politico-cultural concept. He repeats the ideas of his first antisemitic pamphlet, scarcely altered, in his key work on the theory of art of 1851, 'Opera and drama'. Later Wagner relativized his revolutionary art theory in order not to distance himself too much from the taste of the bourgeoisie. But his antisemitism remained and was expressed in particular in the writings 'On State and Religion' (1864), 'What is German?' (1865/78), 'German Art and Politics' (1867), right up to the regeneration writings (1879-81). Under the influence of the racist philosopher Arthur Gobineau, Wagner's antisemitism increased to the fateful biological racism of the late Bayreuth period, as it also continued to develop after Wagner's death (1883) until 1945. At the end of the regeneration essay 'Know yourself' of 1881 Wagner formulated ideas that today read like a horrifying anticipation of Hitler's 'final solution'. He invoked a Germany free of Jews as the 'great solution': 'For us Germans, precisely because of/at the instigation of the present movement only conceivable among us, this great solution could be made possible sooner than of any other nation, as soon as we carried through fearlessly, to the very marrow of our being, the "Know yourself". That we, if we only urge deeply enough, after the overcoming of all false shame, would not have to shrink from the final knowledge, should the presentient be indicated by the foregoing.'ⁱⁱ

Wagner's attitude towards the Jews kept changing, for transparent reasons. He even claimed to be philosemitic if he considered it useful for carrying through his ideological-political and artistic goals. But: from 1850 on, every enemy of his art, irrespective of birth, was 'an artistic Jew'.

Wagner's essay on 'Jews in music' provoked strong protests which also influenced many later reviewers of Wagner's operas and writings. Wagner's antisemitic writings read like a constant exchange of attack and counter-attack between him and the music critics of his time. Here Wagner loses sight of the development of European Jewry in the second half of the nineteenth century and therefore increasingly too his sense of reality and humanity. So Wagner's art, in spite of all the brilliant innovations, as manifested in his first works staged in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the *Ring* and *Parsifal*, also became anti-Jewish, or anti-art, and the Festspielhaus an anti-Jewish anti-culture establishment, completely in tune with the 'Report on the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth' of 1873. In it Wagner opposes his German-'new European theatre, taste and morals [...] to a Parisian whore or a successful stock market speculator' - an allusion to Meyerbeer's operas. So he tacitly refers back to his essay 'What is German?' and the second edition of 'Judaism in music' which appeared in 1869. At the latest the circle closes here that Wagner had already begun to forge in 1850: the idea of the Festspiele was realized as the 'Bayreuth Festspiele', which very soon started to have a propaganda effect all over Germany. Added to this were the Wagner Societies springing up everywhere, that appeared in the German-nationalistic *Bayreuther Blätter*. From the beginning of the Festspiele, then, antisemitism and racism belonged to the ingredients of the Bayreuth opera undertaking, whether implicit or explicit. Wagner's antisemitism was closely connected to this.

In particular Wagner's writings, 'Modern' of 1878, 'Public and popularity' of 1879 and the reprint of 'What is German?' of 1878 encouraged other antisemitic, chauvinist authors in their efforts to align German culture according to the standards of the Bayreuth shrine. How much the thinking of the bourgeois Richard Wagner had its effects on his art is shown in the stage works he realized in his Bayreuth Festspiele from 1876 to 1882 as director and theatre impresario. Who is meant with Alberich and Mime, the dwarfish exploiters, and Hagen in the *Ring*, Beckmesser in the *Meistersinger* and Klingsor and Kundry, the female Ahasuerus figure in *Parsifal*? If we look at Kundry's baptism in Act 3 of *Parsifal* in connection with the regeneration writings, we understand how serious Wagner was with the conversion of the Jews to Christianity already demanded in 'Judaism in music'. The above-mentioned 'great solution' of 1881 on the other hand is realized on

stage in the dramaturgically superfluous and therefore ideologically eloquent death of Kundry at the end of *Parsifal*. Just as Wagner in his works of art admits different interpretations, he seduces his followers in his regeneration writings to `his` new Christianity. This is a confused mix of antisemitism, antifeminism and Buddhist ideas, mingled with elements of Schopenhauer`s philosophy of renunciation. In other words: [Nietzsche quote p.95].ⁱⁱⁱ

So perceptively writes Nietzsche in his *Human, All Too Human* of 1878 to the background of his experiences with Wagner and his work.

Cosima, Liszt`s daughter, Richard Wagner`s second wife and director of the Festspiele until 1907, was no less antisemitic than her husband. Evidence of this is offered inter alia by an entry in her diary of 18 December 1881, in which she records a conversation she had with Richard: `Then he [p.96].^{iv}

The attitude of Richard and Cosima Wagner that emerges in these remarks was to have its effect far beyond their death. This quotation from Cosima`s diaries sums up in a few sentences what was to form the Bayreuth tradition until 1945. This is shown, for example, in the writings of Cosima`s son-in-law, the English racial theoretician Houston Stewart Chamberlain, one of the spiritual fathers of Adolf Hitler. A quotation from Chamberlain`s 1895 biography of Richard Wagner substantiates the enduring effect of Wagner`s antisemitism: [p.96]^v

A direct line runs from Chamberlain to Hitler, whom he revered from the very beginning. On 7 October 1923 Chamberlain writes to the future `Führer`: `Dear Herr Hitler, [...] You are not at all, as you have been described to me, a fanatic, rather I would like to describe you as the direct opposite of a fanatic. The fanatic heats heads, you warm hearts. The fanatic wants to persuade, you want to convince, only convince, - and that is why you are successful; yes, I would likewise define you as the opposite of a politician [...], for the axis of all politics is membership of a party, whereas in your case all parties disappear, consumed in the fire of love for the fatherland.[...] You have tasks requiring tremendous force before you, but in spite of your strength of will I do not consider you a man of force. You know Goethe`s distinction between force and force! There is a force that

originates from chaos and leads to chaos, and there is a force whose essence it is to form the

cosmos, and of the latter he said: "Ruling, if takes on any shape - and even in the great it is not force." I mean it in this cosmos-building sense when I say I want you to be listed among the ranks of the uplifting, not the forceful men.[...] My belief in Germanness has not wavered for a moment, but my hopes - I admit it - had reached a low ebb. At a stroke you have transformed the state of my soul. That Germany in the hour of its deepest need has borne a Hitler, that attests to its vitality; likewise the effects emanating from him; for these two things - personality and its effect - belong together. That the great Ludendorff openly allies himself with you and joins the movement emanating from you: what a splendid confirmation! I could calmly fall asleep and would not even need to wake up again. May God protect you!'^{vi}

In 1915 Richard Wagner's son Siegfried, my grandfather, married Winifred Williams. She held Hitler in just as high esteem as her brother-in-law Chamberlain. This is documented, for example, in her 'Open Letter' of 14 November 1923 in the Bayreuth *Oberfränkische Zeitung*, that is, only a few days after Hitler's attempted putsch in Munich: 'The whole of Bayreuth knows that we have a friendly relationship with Adolf Hitler. We happened to be in Munich in those momentous days and were the first ones to come back from there. Understandably, Hitler's followers turned to us for information from eye witnesses.[...] For years we have been following with the greatest inner sympathy and approval the uplifting work of Adolf Hitler, this German man who, filled with ardent love for his fatherland, is sacrificing his life for his idea of a purified, united, national greater Germany, who has set himself the hazardous task of opening the eyes of the working class to the enemy within and to Marxism and its consequences, who as no other has managed to bring people together in brotherly reconciliation, has been able to do away with the almost insuperable class hatred, who has restored to thousands upon thousands of despairing people the joyous hope of a reviving, dignified fatherland and a firm belief in it. His personality has made on us too, as on anyone who comes into contact with him, a deep, moving impression, and we have understood how such a simple, physically delicate man is capable of exercising such power. This power is founded on the moral strength and purity of this man, who without ceasing stands up for an idea he has seen to be right, which he is trying with the fervour and humility of divine vocation to realize. Such a man, who is standing up so directly for good, must inspire, electrify people, animate them with selfless love and devotion for his person. I freely admit that we too are under the spell of this

personality, that we too, who stood by him in happy days, will remain faithful to him now too in his hour of need.^{vii}

From 1907 to 1930 Siegfried Wagner ran the Bayreuth Festspiele. He too corresponded with Hitler. But Siegfried Wagner's antisemitism was not as extreme as his wife Winifred's, or Cosima's. On 6 June 1921, for example, still quite uninfluenced by the later pro-Hitler atmosphere in Bayreuth, he wrote to an antisemitic editor of the *Deutsche Zeitung* in Berlin: 'Among the Jews we have very many faithful, honest and selfless supporters who have given us countless proofs of their friendship. You want us to close our doors to all these people, to rebuff them for the sole reason that they are Jews. Is that humane? Is that Christian? Is that German? No! [...] On our Festspielhügel we want to produce positive, not negative work. Whether a person is Chinese, Negro, American, Indian or Jew is totally immaterial to us. But we could learn from the Jews how to stick together and help one another.'^{viii}

This letter was used after the Nazi period as pseudo-liberal alibi for the Bayreuth Festspiele in order to be able to present the period from 1907 to 1930 in the light of the pure art of Richard Wagner. The (still) extant documents from the period from 1925 to Siegfried Wagner's death show, however, that even in the 1920s Richard Wagner's work was serving politico-cultural ends on the Festspielhügel. In his letter of Christmas 1923, that is, only a few weeks after Hitler's failed November putsch in Munich, Siegfried Wagner wrote to Rosa Eidam:

We met that splendid man [Hitler] here in the summer during the German Conference and remain true to him even if it should mean our going to prison. We were never timeservers here in Wahnfried. [Alluding to the political unrests in the 1920s in Bavaria.] The situation in Bavaria is appalling. The times of the Spanish Inquisition have returned. Perjury and betrayal are sanctified, and Jew and Jesuit are working hand in glove to exterminate Germanness!

But perhaps Satan has miscalculated this time. Should the German cause really succumb, then I'll believe in Jehova, the god of revenge and hatred. My wife is fighting like a lioness for Hitler. Splendid!^{ix}

After reading this letter, Hitler's letter to Siegfried Wagner of 5 May 1924 becomes clear too. Here Hitler is writing to Siegfried Wagner in memory of his official visit to Bayreuth on the

occasion of the *Deutsche Tage* [German Rally] on 30 September 1923 aimed at a future electoral victory; regarding the Wagner family's open support of him, among other things, Hitler writes: 'I was filled with proud joy when I saw the people's victory in the very city in which, first through the Master [Richard Wagner] and then through Chamberlain, the spiritual sword was forged with which we are fighting today.'^x A comparison of Richard Wagner's and Chamberlain's antisemitic inflammatory writings with Hitler's racist political-cultural ravings in *Mein Kampf* allows no doubt of the historical connection.

The fact that Siegfried Wagner, his wife and sisters took over the honorary presidency of the national Bavarian Federation of German Youth (BBdJ) on 1 August 1923, makes the historical continuities clear. The BBdJ set itself as future tasks and targets, 'to convey the ideas of Bayreuth, the artistic works and politico-cultural ideals of Richard Wagner, to the whole of the German people; to reveal the profound sense of the direct bond between the great German memoir [= *Mein Kampf*] of Adolf Hitler and his cultural will and the work of Bayreuth.'^{xi}

Closely connected with the national stock of ideas and the Bayreuth Festspiele were the 'Deutsche Festspiele' in Weimar from July 1926, in which operas by Siegfried Wagner were performed and national poetry published, among others by Hans von Wolzogen, the editor of the antisemitic and chauvinist *Bayreuther Blätter* from 1878 to 1938. The Weimar Festspiele were, like the Bayreuth Festspiele, an aggressive politico-cultural counter-concept to the avant garde art of the Weimar Republic. With the foundation of the 'National Socialist Society for German Culture' in 1927 and the 'Militant League for German Culture' [Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur] in 1928 by Alfred Rosenberg, the semi-official National Socialist philosopher and author of the propaganda work *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, the Nazi bigwigs Hans Frank, Baldur von Schirach, Wilhelm Frick, Hans Severus Ziegler, Hans Schemm and Adolf Bartels among others were won over to the Bayreuth cause. As son of the Master and cultural example for Hitler as well as through the party membership of his wife Winifred since 1926, very probably already in 1923, Siegfried Wagner could play outwardly the role of the non-partisan artist, but enjoy all the advantages of the national, pre-National Socialist movement.

With the Bayreuth engagement, constantly paraded after 1945 as exonerative proof, of Arturo Toscanini, a man who throughout his life had doggedly only seen the artist in Wagner,

Siegfried Wagner seemed shortly before his death in June 1930 to want to open himself up to other cultural trends. How Siegfried Wagner would have behaved in the Third Reich is pure speculation today. Hitler and his later propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels found him decadent because of his homosexuality.

After Siegfried Wagner my grandmother Winifred ran the Festspiele until 1944. That she believed firmly in Hitler's `final victory` emerges from a contribution by her to the *Meistersinger* programme of the wartime Festspiele of 1943: `If during the wartime Festspiele in 1943 the *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* are chosen, then that has a deep and symbolic meaning. For this work shows us in the most impressive way the creative German man in his nationally conditioned will to create, which the Master gave immortal form to in the figure of the Nuremberg shoemaker and national poet Hans Sachs and which in the present struggle of the western cultural world against the destructive spirit of the plutocratic-bolshevist world conspiracy gives our soldiers invincible fighting strength and a fanatical belief in the victory of our arms.
