



Paul Lawrence Rose

Richard Wagner and anti-Semitism - in Neu Bayreuth - after 1945 and Hitler

Wagner was no ordinary anti-Semite, but someone who, like hardly anyone else, made anti-Semitism socially acceptable and placed it at the center of the program of Germany's national renewal. It has never been understood in non-German circles how Wagner, who was anything but a fanatical nationalist, could be a revolutionary who preached that the Jews were the epitome of inhumanity and the greatest obstacle to the liberation of mankind. More enduringly than anyone else, he established the Jew in the German national consciousness as a new, secularized symbol of absolute evil, intended to replace the old Christian idea of the Jew as the murderer of Christ. The modern Jew no longer crucified Christ. but mankind itself. Wagner regarded the Jew as the personification of lovelessness, greed, egoism and the desire to exercise that dominion over other people and nature that found its expression in Jewish capitalism and the Jewish world conspiracy.

It was precisely this mad idea that appealed to Hitler, whose world view was permeated by Wagner's revolutionary anti-Semitism. Hitler himself confessed that he accepted only one forerunner of the Nazi revolution: Wagner. The very name of the Nazi party - national and socialist - represented Wagner's dream of a revolutionary German politics that would overcome the divisive partisan strife of western democracies by abolishing all classes in one national community.

From 1923 onwards Hitler was in contact with the Wagner heirs in Bayreuth. During his annual visits there he was the guest of Wagner's daughter-in-law Winifred, and he described these visits as the happiest moments of his life. It was also Winifred Wagner who provided him with paper during his imprisonment in Landsberg in 1924, on which he then wrote *Mein Kampf*. ...

I have nothing against the Bayreuth rulers pursuing their Machiavellian plans to obtain a clearance from Israel and thus silence in Germany opposition to the ambitions of Bayreuth, the pre-eminent cultural center and sanctuary, which have been manifest since the days of Richard Wagner of the country, although there are many Germans who found it appalling. But one should take these power games for what they are and not veil them with a web of sanctimonious declarations that Bayreuth is honest about its past. When Wolfgang Wagner couldn't bring himself to use the word "Jew" in the two speeches I heard, and when the memorial erected recently at the Festspielhaus for two Jewish singers who performed in Bayreuth and were murdered in Auschwitz suppressed the fact that they were Jews and marked their dates of death with conventional crosses, then one wonders whether Bayreuth has recognized the scope of the problem, and one is inclined to give more credence to Gottfried Wagner's merciless reckoning in which he explains it, how what is still going on in Bayreuth is characterized by self-deception and opportunism, a state of affairs that this conference [August 1998 in Bayreuth] made all too clear.

[cf. Times Literary Supplement, 11th September 1998]