My Life — Volume 1

Richard Wagner

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My Life

by Richard Wagner

IN TWO VOLUMES Volume 1

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION FROM THE GERMAN

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PREFACE

The contents of these volumes have been written down directly from my dictation, over a period of several years, by my friend and wife, who wished me to tell her the story of my life. It was the desire of both of us that these details of my life should be accessible to our family and to our sincere and trusted friends; and we decided therefore, in order to provide against a possible destruction of the one manuscript, to have a small number of copies printed at our own expense. As the value of this autobiography consists in its unadorned veracity, which, under the circumstances, is its only justification, therefore my statements had to be accompanied by precise names and dates; hence there could be no question of their publication until some

time after my death, should interest in them still survive in our descendants, and on that point I intend leaving directions in my will.

If, on the other hand, we do not refuse certain intimate friends a sight of these papers now, it is that, relying on their genuine interest in the contents, we are confident that they will not pass on their knowledge to any who do not share their feelings in the matter.

Richard Wagner

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Illustration: Richard Wagner in 1842, from the Portrait by E. Kietz.

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Richard Wagner about 1872 by Lenbach.

Original in the possession of Frau Cosima Wagner These frontispieces are used by the courtesy of Mr. F. Bruckmann.

MY LIFE

PART I 1813-1842

I was born at Leipzig on the 22nd of May 1813, in a room on the second floor of the ‘Red and White Lion,’ and two days later was baptized at St. Thomas’s Church, and christened Wilhelm Richard.

My father, Friedrich Wagner, was at the time of my birth a clerk in the police service at Leipzig, and hoped to get the post of Chief Constable in that town, but he died in the October of that same year. His death was partly due to the great exertions imposed upon him by the stress of police work during the war troubles and the battle of Leipzig, and partly to the fact that he fell a victim to the nervous fever which was raging at that time. As regards his father’s position in life, I learnt later that he had held a small civil appointment as toll collector at the Ranstädt Gate, but had distinguished himself from those in the same station by giving his two sons a superior education, my father, Friedrich, studying law, and the younger son, Adolph, theology.

My uncle subsequently exercised no small influence on my development; we shall meet him again at a critical turning-point in the story of my youth.

My father, whom I had lost so early, was, as I discovered afterwards, a great lover of poetry and literature in general, and possessed in particular an almost passionate affection for the drama, which was at that time much in vogue among the educated classes. My mother told me, among other things, that he took her to Lauchstadt for the first performance of the _Braut von Messina_, and that on the promenade he pointed out Schiller and Goethe to her, and reproved her warmly for never having heard of these great men. He is said to have been not altogether free from a gallant interest in actresses. My mother used to complain jokingly that she often had to keep lunch waiting for him while he was paying court to a certain famous actress of the day.[1] When she scolded him, he vowed that he had been delayed by papers that had to be attended to, and as a proof of his assertion pointed to his fingers, which were supposed to be stained with ink, but on closer inspection were found to be quite clean. His great fondness for the theatre was further shown by his choice of the actor, Ludwig Geyer, as one of his intimate friends. Although his choice of this friend was no doubt mainly due to his love for the theatre, he at the same time introduced into his family the noblest of benefactors; for this modest artist, prompted by a warm interest in the lot of his friend’s large family, so unexpectedly left destitute, devoted the remainder of his life to making strenuous efforts to maintain and educate the orphans. Even when the police official was spending his evenings at the theatre, the worthy actor generally filled his place in the family circle, and it seems had frequently to appease my mother, who, rightly or

wrongly, complained of the frivolity of her husband.

[1] Madame Hartwig.

How deeply the homeless artist, hard pressed by life and tossed to and fro, longed to feel himself at home in a sympathetic family circle, was proved by the fact that a year after his friend's death he married his widow, and from that time forward became a most loving father to the seven children that had been left behind.

In this onerous undertaking he was favoured by an unexpected improvement in his position, for he obtained a remunerative, respectable, and permanent engagement, as a character actor, at the newly established Court Theatre in Dresden. His talent for painting, which had already helped him to earn a livelihood when forced by extreme poverty to break off his university studies, again stood him in good stead in his position at Dresden. True, he complained even more than his critics that he had been kept from a regular and systematic study of this art, yet his extraordinary aptitude, for portrait painting in particular, secured him such important commissions that he unfortunately exhausted his strength prematurely by his twofold exertions as painter and actor. Once, when he was invited to Munich to fulfil a temporary engagement at the Court Theatre, he received, through the distinguished recommendation of the Saxon Court, such pressing commissions from the Bavarian Court for portraits of the royal family that he thought it wise to cancel his contract altogether. He also had a turn for poetry. Besides fragments—often in very dainty verse—he wrote several comedies, one of which, _Der Bethlehemitische Kindermord_, in rhymed Alexandrines, was often performed; it was published and received the warmest praise from

Goethe.

This excellent man, under whose care our family moved to Dresden when I was two years old, and by whom my mother had another daughter, Cecilia, now also took my education in hand with the greatest care and affection. He wished to adopt me altogether, and accordingly, when I was sent to my first school, he gave me his own name, so that till the age of fourteen I was known to my Dresden schoolfellows as Richard Geyer; and it was not until some years after my stepfather's death, and on my family's return to Leipzig, the home of my own kith and kin, that I resumed the name of Wagner.

The earliest recollections of my childhood are associated with my stepfather, and passed from him to the theatre. I well remember that he would have liked to see me develop a talent for painting; and his studio, with the easel and the pictures upon it, did not fail to impress me. I remember in particular that I tried, with a childish love of imitation, to copy a portrait of King Frederick Augustus of Saxony; but when this simple daubing had to give place to a serious study of drawing, I could not stand it, possibly because I was discouraged by the pedantic technique of my teacher, a cousin of mine, who was rather a bore. At one time during my early boyhood I became so weak after some childish ailment that my mother told me later she used almost to wish me dead, for it seemed as though I should never get well. However, my subsequent good health apparently astonished my parents. I afterwards learnt the noble part played by my excellent stepfather on this occasion also; he never gave way to despair, in spite of the cares and troubles of so large a family, but remained patient throughout, and never lost the hope of pulling me through safely.

My imagination at this time was deeply impressed by my acquaintance with the theatre, with which I was brought into contact, not only as a childish spectator from the mysterious stagebox, with its access to the stage, and by visits to the wardrobe with its fantastic costumes, wigs and other disguises, but also by taking a part in the performances myself. After I had been filled with fear by seeing my father play the villain's part in such tragedies as _Die Waise und der Mörder, Die beiden Galeerensklaven_, I occasionally took part in comedy. I remember that I appeared in _Der Weinberg an der Elbe_, a piece specially written to welcome the King of Saxony on his return from captivity, with music by the conductor, C. M. von Weber. In this I figured in a _tableau vivant_ as an angel, sewn up in tights with wings on my back, in a graceful pose which I had laboriously practised. I also remember on this occasion being given a big iced cake, which I was assured the King had intended for me personally. Lastly, I can recall taking a child's part in which I had a few words to speak in Kotzebue's _Menschenhass und Reue_[2], which furnished me with an excuse at school for not having learnt my lessons. I said I had too much to do, as I had to learn by heart an important part in _Den Menschen ausser der Reihe_.[3]

[2] 'Misanthropy and Remorse.'

[3] 'The Man out of the Rank or Row.' In the German this is a simple phonetic corruption of Kotzebue's title, which might easily occur to a child who had only heard, and not read, that title.—EDITOR.

On the other hand, to show how seriously my father regarded my education, when I was six years old he took me to a clergyman in the country at Possendorf, near Dresden, where I was to be given a sound

and healthy training with other boys of my own class. In the evening, the vicar, whose name was Wetzel, used to tell us the story of Robinson Crusoe, and discuss it with us in a highly instructive manner. I was, moreover, much impressed by a biography of Mozart which was read aloud; and the newspaper accounts and monthly reports of the events of the Greek War of Independence stirred my imagination deeply. My love for Greece, which afterwards made me turn with enthusiasm to the mythology and history of ancient Hellas, was thus the natural outcome of the intense and painful interest I took in the events of this period. In after years the story of the struggle of the Greeks against the Persians always revived my impressions of this modern revolt of Greece against the Turks.

One day, when I had been in this country home scarcely a year, a messenger came from town to ask the vicar to take me to my parents' house in Dresden, as my father was dying.

We did the three hours' journey on foot; and as I was very exhausted when I arrived, I scarcely understood why my mother was crying. The next day I was taken to my father's bedside; the extreme weakness with which he spoke to me, combined with all the precautions taken in the last desperate treatment of his complaint—acute hydrothorax—made the whole scene appear like a dream to me, and I think I was too frightened and surprised to cry.

In the next room my mother asked me to show her what I could play on the piano, wisely hoping to divert my father's thoughts by the sound. I played Ueb' immer Treu und Redlichkeit, and my father said to her, 'Is it possible he has musical talent?'

In the early hours of the next morning my mother came into the great

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