

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-35900-9 - My Life
Richard Wagner
Excerpt
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PART ONE

1813-41



My birth – My father

Born* May 22nd 1813 in Leipzig, two flights up in a house on the Brühl known as “The Red and White Lion”, I was christened¹ two days later in St Thomas’ Church with the name Wilhelm Richard. My father² Friedrich Wagner, at the time of my birth the registrar of police in Leipzig with the expectation of becoming director of police, died in October of the same year, following the great exertions imposed by an overwhelming load of official duties during the wartime unrest and the battle of Leipzig, after catching typhoid fever in what had become an epidemic. As to his own father’s³ situation in life, I learned much later that he had distinguished himself among compeers in his humble municipal post of toll collector at the Ranstädter Gate by giving both his sons a higher education, having one of them, my father Friedrich, study law, and the younger one, Adolf,⁴ study theology. My uncle subsequently came to exert a not insignificant influence on my development; we will meet him again in a decisive phase of the story of my youth. About the father whom I lost so early I learned later that he was in general very much interested in poetry and literature, and particularly accorded an almost passionate devotion to the theater, at that time much patronized by the educated classes. My mother⁵ told me among other things that he took her to Lauchstädt to the first performance of *Die Braut von Messina* and pointed out Schiller and Goethe to her on the promenade, enthusiastically setting her straight as to her ignorance of these great men. He seems to have been not entirely free of a certain amorous interest in actresses. My mother used to complain jokingly that she frequently had to hold lunch for him while he was paying rapturous visits to a certain famous actress of the day;†⁶ whenever she scolded him, he asserted that official business had detained him, and to prove it pointed to supposedly ink-stained fingers, which upon enforced closer inspection always turned out to be completely clean. His fondness for the theater was also evidenced by his selection of the actor Ludwig Geyer⁷ as an intimate friend of the family. While his choice of such a friend was surely attributable mainly to this love of the theater, he thereby bestowed upon his family a most noble benefactor, inasmuch as this modest artist, through heartfelt concern with the destiny of the numerous offspring of his unexpectedly deceased friend Wagner, was moved to devote the rest of his life most strenuously to the support and upbringing of this family. Even while the police official was spending

* At the head of the page, in Cosima’s hand, the inscription “Munich, July 17th 1865” and the entwined initials R. C. W.

† Footnote in the original edition: “Mme Hartwig”.

Ludwig Geyer as stepfather

his evenings in the theater, this admirable actor generally filled his place in the bosom of his family, and it appears that he was often obliged to soothe my mother when she complained, rightly or wrongly, about the flightiness of her husband. How deep was the need of this homeless, hard-pressed, and buffeted artist to be at home within a sympathetic family environment was proved a year after his friend's death, when he married the widow and henceforth became a most solicitous father to the seven surviving children.¹ In this difficult undertaking he was favored by an unexpected improvement in his career. As a so-called character actor, he obtained an advantageous, honorable, and permanent position in the newly established Dresden Court Theater. His talent for painting, which at one time had helped him to get by in life when forced by the most extreme poverty to interrupt his university studies, again stood him in good stead in his position in Dresden. He complained, it was true, even more than his critics of having been deprived of systematic and academic training; nonetheless his extraordinary gifts, particularly for portraiture, brought him such important commissions that, alas, his two-fold exertions as painter and actor prematurely exhausted his strength. Once, when he was invited to Munich for a guest performance at the Court Theater, he obtained from the Bavarian court, through favorable references from the Saxon nobility, such important orders for portraits of the royal family that he considered it wise to interrupt his engagement and give it up entirely. But he also had poetic talent; after writing a number of occasional pieces, often in very finely wrought verse, he also penned several comedies, one of which, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, in rhymed Alexandrines, was often performed, appeared in print, and was praised by Goethe in a most friendly fashion. This excellent man, whom my family followed to Dresden in my second year, and by whom my mother had yet another daughter (Cäcilie),² also took my upbringing in hand with the greatest solicitude and love. He wished to adopt me entirely as his own son, and therefore, when I was first admitted to school, he gave me his name, so that until my fourteenth year I remained known to my boyhood companions in Dresden by the name Richard Geyer. Not until some years after the death of my stepfather, when my family returned to Leipzig, did I, once more in the home town of my blood relations, resume the name Wagner.

The earliest recollections of my childhood are fixed on this stepfather and pass from him to the theater. I remember well that my father would have been very happy to see a talent for painting develop in me; his studio, with the easels and paintings upon them, did not, to be sure, fail

1820 – Impressions of the theater – To Possendorf

to make an impression on me; I remember, in fact, that I tried to copy a portrait of King Friedrich August of Saxony, with a child's eagerness to imitate; but as soon as I was expected to go beyond this simple playing with paint to a serious study of drawing, I did not persevere, possibly scared off by the pedantic ways of my teacher (a boring cousin of mine). After one of the common ailments of infancy, which made me so sick that my mother, as she later told me, almost wished me dead owing to my seemingly hopeless condition, I seem to have surprised my parents by thriving. On this occasion as well, I was told, my admirable stepfather played a splendid part, never despairing despite the cares and complaints of such a large family, remaining patient, and never giving up the hope that I could be pulled through.

My imagination was now dominated by acquaintance with the theater, with which I was brought into contact not only as a juvenile spectator from the concealed loge with its entrance from the stage, and by visits to the wardrobe with its fantastic costumes and all the paraphernalia of illusion, but also by taking part in performances myself. After being terrified by *The Orphan and the Murderer* and *The Two Galley Slaves* and similar horrific works, in which I saw my father play the villains, I was obliged to appear in some comedies. In an occasional piece entitled *The Vineyard on the Elbe*, written to welcome the King of Saxony upon his return from captivity, with music by Kapellmeister Carl Maria von Weber, I recall figuring in a tableau vivant as an angel, entirely sewn up in tights and with wings on my back, in a graceful, though laboriously learned, pose. I also remember on this occasion being given a large sugar cake, which I was assured the King had intended for me personally. Lastly, I remember playing the part of a child and speaking a few words in Kotzebue's¹ *Misanthropy and Misery*, which furnished me with an excuse at school for not having done my homework, as I declared myself to have been overburdened by the obligation to learn by heart a vast role in *Mr and Mrs Antropy*.

To show how seriously my father regarded my education, on the other hand, he took me, when I had completed my sixth year, to a clergyman in the country of Possendorf near Dresden, where I was to receive an excellent, sober and healthy education in the company of other boys from good families. From the short period of my stay date many first recollections of impressions of the world; in the evening the pastor*² would tell us of Robinson Crusoe, accompanied by instructive discussion.

* Footnote in the original edition: "Wetzel".

1821 – Pastor Wetzel – At Geyer’s deathbed

His reading aloud of a biography of Mozart made a great impression on me, whereas the newspaper and magazine reports of the contemporary events of the Greek War of Independence excited me dreadfully. My love for Greece, which later fell with enthusiasm upon the mythology and history of Ancient Hellas, thus originated in intense and painful interest in the events of the present. In later years, the story of the struggle of the Greeks against the Persians always revived my impressions of this modern revolt against the Turks.

One day, after scarcely a year of this stay in the country had elapsed, a messenger arrived from the city, notifying the pastor that he should accompany me to Dresden, where my father lay dying. We made the three-hour return trip on foot; exhausted when I arrived, I scarcely comprehended the tearful behavior of my mother. The following day I was conducted to my father’s bedside; the extreme weakness with which he talked to me, together with all the preventive measures taken in the last desperate treatment of his acute emphysema, came over me only as visions in a dream; I believe my uneasy amazement was so great that I was unable to cry. My mother invited me into an adjoining room to demonstrate what I had learned on the piano in the hope that it would provide some distraction for my father: I played “Üb’ immer Treu’ und Redlichkeit”; then father asked mother: “Could it be that he has a talent for music?”

The next morning my mother came to our beds in the children’s large bedroom at break of day and informed us, sobbing, of father’s death, telling each of us, like a blessing, some things he had said; to me she said: “He wanted to make something of you.” Pastor Wetzel arrived that afternoon and took me back to the country. We again went by foot and reached Possendorf only at dusk; on the way I asked him a lot about the stars, concerning which he gave me my first reasonable information. A week later the deceased man’s brother appeared, having come from Eisleben to attend the burial ceremonies; he had agreed to try to help support the again destitute family and undertook to care for my future education. I took leave of my schoolmates and from the affable pastor, to whose own funeral I returned to Possendorf for the first time several years later; I paid the village only one more visit, many years later, on one of the rambles I often used to take in the countryside when I was conductor of the orchestra in Dresden; it moved me greatly that I could not find the old parsonage but found a more pretentious modern structure in its place, which so prejudiced me against the location that I never again directed any of my excursions into the area.

1822 – In Eisleben – Headmaster Weiss

This time, my uncle brought me back to Dresden by carriage; I found my mother and sisters in dress of deep mourning and remember being received for the first time with a tenderness unusual in our family and similarly treated at my leavetaking, when I was taken along to Eisleben by my uncle after a few days. This uncle, a younger brother of my stepfather, had settled there as a goldsmith; he had already taken one of my elder brothers (Julius) into apprenticeship; he was a bachelor and the old grandmother still lived with him. Her son's death had been concealed from the old lady, whose own decease was anticipated in the near future; I too was instructed to keep it to myself. The servant girl carefully removed the mourning crêpe from my clothing and explained that she would retain it to be used for the grandmother after she was dead, as was soon to be expected. I was obliged to talk often of father to his mother; I had no trouble concealing his death, as I myself had no clear idea of it. She lived at the rear of the house in a dark room looking out on a narrow courtyard, and loved to have robins fluttering freely around her, for which she always kept fresh green twigs strewn by the stove. I once succeeded in snaring her a few to replace some that had been killed by the cat: she was highly delighted by this and in return kept me clean and tidy. Her expected death came to pass shortly: the carefully preserved mourning crêpe was now worn openly in Eisleben; the little back room with the robins and green bushes saw me no more. I soon made myself at home in the family of a soap-boiler, to whom the house belonged, and became popular with them by telling entertaining stories. I was sent to a private school whose headmaster Weiss left upon me an impression of seriousness and dignity. I was touched to read a report in a music magazine in the late 1850s of a performance in Eisleben of selections from *Tannhäuser*, at which my former master, who had not forgotten his pupil, had been present.

The quaint little town with the house where Luther lived and the manifold memorials to the time he spent there has often recurred to me in dreams, even to the present day; I have always wanted to visit it again¹ to find the clarity of my recollections confirmed; but curiously enough I have never done so. We lived near the market-place, which frequently offered me strange spectacles, as, for example, the performances of a team of acrobats, in which they walked on a cord drawn taut from tower to tower across the square, a feat which awakened in me an enduring bent for similar feats of daring. Indeed, I got so far as to walk upon twisted cords stretched out across our courtyard and, aided by a balancing pole, did quite well at it; even today I still feel a desire to do justice to my

Der Freischütz – Return to Leipzig – Uncle Adolf

acrobatic inclinations. Most important of all for me was the band music of a regiment of Hussars garrisoned in Eisleben. One of the pieces played by this band awakened unheard-of attention as a curiosity: it was the Huntsmen's Chorus from *Der Freischütz*, which opera had just had its première in Berlin. Uncle and brother eagerly quizzed me about its composer, whom I surely must have seen in my parents' house in Dresden as Kapellmeister Weber. At the same time the Bridesmaids' Chorus was being zealously played and sung by daughters in a neighboring family. These two pieces now dispelled my liking for the Ypsilanti Waltz,¹ which I had considered until then as the most marvelous piece of music. I recall also having to withstand numerous battles with the autochthonous juvenile population, which I provoked to continuing mockery by wearing my square hat. Beyond that I also recollect a fondness for adventurous outings on the rocky cliffs on the banks of the Unstrut.

My uncle now married at last and established a new household, which seems to have caused a marked change in his relationship to my family. After a year, I was brought by him to Leipzig, where I was given over for a few days to the relatives of my father (Wagner). These were my uncle Adolf and his sister, my aunt Friederike Wagner. This very interesting man, who later had an even more stimulating influence upon me, makes his entrance in my recollections, with his strange entourage, at this point. Along with my aunt, he maintained a very close friendship with a strange old spinster, Jeannette Thomé, co-owner of a large house on the market square, in which, if I do not err, ever since the time of Augustus the Strong, the Saxon royal family had rented and furnished the first two floors for their use whenever in Leipzig. As far as I know, the third floor was owned by Jeannette Thomé, in which she kept for herself only a modest apartment overlooking the courtyard. As the King made use of the rented rooms at the most only a few days a year, Jeannette and her household usually occupied these splendid quarters, and it was in one of these stately rooms that a place to sleep was allocated to me. The furnishings of these rooms dated from the time of Augustus the Strong; they were magnificent with rich rococo furniture and heavy silk materials, by then all much worn and torn with age. I think I must have felt very grand in the vast fantastic rooms, from which one could look outward over the bustling Leipzig market-place, among whose denizens the students in alley-wide processions, in their old-German club attire, particularly fascinated me. Only one aspect of the decoration of these rooms caused me considerable anguish: this consisted of the

Adolf Wagner

various portraits, particularly those of aristocratic ladies in hooped petticoats, with youthful faces and white (powdered) hair. These struck me as completely ghostly creatures, who, whenever I was alone in the room, seemed to come to life and filled me with terror. To sleep alone in such a large and remote room, near one of these fearsome pictures, in a sumptuous old bed, was horrible for me: I tried, it is true, to conceal my fear from my aunt when she lighted the way for me to bed in the evening; but never a night passed without my being bathed in sweat at the fear caused by these frightful ghostly apparitions.

The characteristics of the three principal occupants of these quarters were admirably suited to turn the phantom impressions of this stay into something strange as a fairy-tale: Jeannette Thomé was very short and fat, wore a blond Titus wig,¹ and appeared to be comfortable in the consciousness of former elegance. Her faithful friend and attendant, my aunt, who had also become an old maid, was remarkable for her height and extreme leanness. The oddity of her otherwise very pleasant face was increased by an exceedingly pointed chin. My uncle Adolf had set up his study once and for all in a gloomy room on the courtyard. I saw him there for the first time amid a chaotic mass of books in dowdy indoor attire, the most striking feature of which was a high and pointed felt cap, such as I had seen worn by a clown belonging to the troupe of acrobats in Eisleben. A strong inclination to independence had driven him to this strange retreat. Originally destined for theology, he soon gave this up to devote himself solely to philosophical and philological studies. Profoundly disinclined to function as a professor or in any formal teaching capacity, he tried from early on to make a meager living from literary work. Gifted with social abilities and particularly with a fine tenor voice, imbued as well with interest for the theater, he seems in his youth to have been welcome as a literary figure among a fairly wide circle of acquaintances in Leipzig. On an excursion to Jena, during which he and a friend appear to have found their way into some musical and oratorical associations, he also visited Schiller; for this purpose he had armed himself with an errand for the management of the Leipzig Theater, which wanted to acquire rights to perform the recently completed *Wallenstein*. He later described to me the enchanting impression made upon him by Schiller, with his tall trim figure and irresistibly winning blue eyes. His only complaint was that, as a result of a well-intentioned trick played on him by a friend, he was caused great and humiliating embarrassment. This friend had actually managed to send Schiller in advance a volume of Adolf Wagner's poems; the stricken young poet

Family situation in Dresden – Grammar school

was thus obliged to accept friendly words of praise from Schiller, deeply convinced that he owed them solely to Schiller's humane generosity. In later years he concentrated more and more on philological studies. One of his best known works in this field is his publication, *Parnasso Italiano*,¹ which he dedicated to Goethe with an Italian poem, of which experts told me, as a matter of fact, that it was written in stilted and perfervid Italian, but which nonetheless procured for him from Goethe a nice letter of acknowledgement and a silver goblet from the poet's own pantry. The impression on me in my eighth year made by his appearance in the surroundings I have described was utterly puzzling and singular.

After a few days I was summarily removed from these influences and brought to my family in Dresden. In the meantime, under the guidance of my again widowed mother, my family had done its best to establish residence there. My eldest brother (Albert), originally destined to study medicine, had, on the advice of Weber, who admired his tenor voice, begun a theatrical career in Breslau. My second-eldest sister (Luise) soon followed him, dedicating herself to the theater as an actress. My eldest sister (Rosalie) had obtained an excellent engagement at the Dresden Court Theater itself, and she became from then on the focal point of the remaining younger part of the family, just as she remained the principal support of her careworn mother. I found them in the same large and pleasant quarters my father had previously provided for them; but now several superfluous rooms were always being let to strangers, including Spohr at one time. Thanks to my mother's great energy, and the help of some mitigating circumstances (among which should be mentioned the continuing kindness of the court in remembrance of my stepfather), my family managed to get along reasonably well, so that there was also no neglect of my education.

After yet a third sister (Klara), owing to her exceptionally beautiful voice, decided to go on the stage, my mother took pains to let me know that I was not to develop any such inclination for the theater as well. She never ceased reproaching herself for having consented to my eldest brother's stage career; inasmuch as my second brother showed no talents other than those that had fitted him to be a goldsmith, she was now very much concerned to see progress toward fulfillment of the hopes and wishes of my stepfather, who had "wanted to make something of me". After I had completed my eighth year, I was sent to the Kreuz Grammar School in Dresden; I was supposed to get a formal education. There I was placed at the bottom of the lowest class, and started my academic

My Mother – Johanna Geyer

training under the most modest auspices. My mother noted with great interest whatever signs I showed of mental liveliness and talent.

For all who knew her, this remarkable woman, utterly without a formal education, represented a characteristic combination of practical domestic efficiency and great spiritual sensitivity. None of her children ever heard her speak in any detail about her origins. She came from Weissenfels and admitted that her parents had been bakers there. Even in regard to her maiden name she expressed herself with a curious reserve, giving it out as “Perthes”, whereas, as we discovered no doubt by pestering her, it was really “Petz”.¹ Strangely enough, she had been placed in a select boarding school in Leipzig and enjoyed there the protection of one whom she called “a fatherly friend”, and to whom she afterwards referred as a Weimar prince² who had been very kind to the family in Weissenfels. Her education in that establishment seems to have been interrupted as a result of the death of this fatherly friend. She met my father at a very early age and married him, who had also matured early and already had a job, in the first bloom of maidenhood. Her dominant trait seems to have been a wry sense of humor and an amiable temperament, so that it should not be supposed that solely his sense of duty toward the family of his deceased friend, but rather a really sincere affection as well, impelled the admirable Ludwig Geyer to enter into matrimony with a woman no longer entirely youthful. A portrait of her painted by Geyer during her first marriage represents her appearance very advantageously. By the time my recollection of her is first distinct she was already compelled by a head ailment to wear a cap continually, so that I have no remembrance of her as a young and pretty mother. The anxious and trying relations with a large family (of which I was the seventh surviving member), the difficulties in providing the necessities of life, and the fulfillment of a certain desire to keep up appearances even with very limited means, were not conducive to a comforting tone of motherly solicitude in her; I hardly remember ever being caressed by her, just as outpourings of affection did not take place in our family at all; on the contrary, quite naturally a certain impetuous, even loud and boisterous manner characterized our behavior. In these circumstances I remember it as epoch-making one night being taken to bed and looking up at her with tearful eyes when she gazed back at me fondly and spoke of me to a visitor with a certain amount of tenderness. What particularly struck me about her was the strange zeal with which she spoke, in almost histrionic tones, of the great and beautiful in art. She would never let