

PART I

Formation

CHAPTER I

*Family Life**Stephen McClatchie*

The well-known peroration of Theodor Adorno's magisterial *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* calls attention to Mahler's family life and its influence on his subsequent development as a human being and as an artist: "Mahler's music holds fast to Utopia in the memory traces from childhood, which appear as if it were only for their sake that it would be worth living. But no less authentic for him is the consciousness that this happiness is lost, and only in being lost becomes the happiness it itself never was" (*Adorno*, 145). Adorno's gnomic comment resonates with Mahler's 1886 remark to Friedrich Löhr that his "whole life is one great homesickness" (*SLGM*, 101/*GMB2*, 78). Mahler was indelibly marked by the circumstances of his childhood: the physical, social, and psychological conditions in which he was raised. Adorno's observation, initially poignant but trending toward hope, and Mahler's own, with its sense of loss and longing, encapsulate the effect of these things on the composer's life. The first two conditions are primarily external and comprise such matters as his physical surroundings, the economic circumstances of the family, and their social position and religious engagement as part of the first generation of emancipated Jews in the Habsburg empire. From these circumstances emerge the emotional and psychological conditions unique to Mahler's family: ill-matched parents and frequent conflict, the illness and death of half of his siblings, and the outsized presence of Mahler's raw talent within these family dynamics.

Three months after Mahler's birth in Kalischt, the family moved to the Moravian town of Iglau (population ca. 17,000). They were among the first Jews to settle in the town after the removal of legal impediments to living there and purchasing property; by the end of the decade, there were 1,090, comprising 5.4 percent of the population. A school was established in 1860, the *Gemeinde* (congregation) in 1862, and a synagogue and cemetery consecrated in 1863 and 1869, respectively. The physical world of Mahler's childhood Iglau included military barracks, a theater, a hall

owned by the men's *Gesangsverein*, a post office, a Catholic church, and a railway station, which from 1871 offered a direct connection to Vienna.

Bernard Mahler (1827–89) originally had a four-year residency permit, subsequently renewed, and the family lived until 1872 in a rented dwelling on the Pirnitzergasse (now Zmojemská Ulice 6). That year, Bernard purchased the three-story house next door from the widowed mother of Gustav's music teacher and in 1873 renovated the property to make the ground floor into a shop where he distilled and sold spirits (initially, he had rented a small pub and distillery nearby); the top floor was rented out. Thus established, Bernard became a citizen of Iglau in 1873.

While most biographers have emphasized the Mahlers' participation in a wider trend of Jewish assimilation and secularization, Michael Haber has recently shown just how connected they remained to their Jewish faith.¹ Bernard was a close friend of the cantor in the synagogue, who served as Justine Mahler's godfather in 1868. In 1878, Bernard was elected to the education committee of the *Gemeinde*, a sign of growing status in the community. His social and political involvement likely extended into local religious life, and, indeed, one unpublished portion of Natalie Bauer-Lechner's *Erinnerungen* records a visit to the synagogue when Gustav was three – surely not a one-off visit.² To some extent, then, Mahler was brought up and educated as a Jew, underwent the rituals of Judaism (circumcision and bar mitzvah), and attended synagogue at least on holy days. He also studied religion privately with the rabbi, J. J. Unger, and received an attestation to that effect at the time of his *Abitur* (gymnasium exit examination). Evidence from the family letters and elsewhere supports Haber's contention that the composer's mother, Marie (1837–89), may have been the most observant member of the family.³ These links to the Jewish faith bear emphasizing, although the Mahler family was certainly well along on the continuum of Jewish assimilation; Bernard was ambitious to get ahead in socioeconomic terms, and to better himself and his family by embracing the German (and hence Christian) notion of *Bildung*, that is, character formation. Thus, the Mahler family celebrated Christmas (at least to the extent of exchanging gifts): an external acceptance of a tradition, reflecting an internal desire to belong to Christian society.⁴

¹ Michael Haber, *Das jüdische bei Gustav Mahler* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009).

² The excerpt was first published by Norman Lebrecht in *Mahler Remembered* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 10.

³ See Haber, *Das jüdische bei Gustav Mahler*, 23–34, and Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: The Early Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 270–73.

⁴ Haber, *Das jüdische bei Gustav Mahler*, 53–54.

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There is no surviving evidence that anti-Semitic prejudice or discrimination affected Mahler's childhood, although he cannot have escaped the myriad microaggressions directed at children who are different in some way. In his memoirs, Guido Adler celebrated tolerance as the "highest principle of the humanistic education" that he received in Iglau at the hands of Catholic priests and the rabbi.⁵ Mahler was rather an indifferent student, yet under his father's influence he developed a love of reading that he maintained all his life.

Accounts vary with respect to the family's economic circumstances. Alma Mahler wrote that Gustav did "not come of a poor home, merely from one of soul-destroying narrowness" (*ML*, 63). Richard Specht noted that Mahler's parents "never had to let their children go hungry" and Paul Stefan even called them "well-to-do."⁶ While his relatives were certainly affected by anti-Jewish legislation (both parents were born of illegal Jewish marriages and thus deemed illegitimate until their parents could be civilly married), his paternal great-grandfather Abraham Bondy was a prosperous merchant in Kalischt, and his maternal grandfather, Abraham Hermann, was a wealthy soap manufacturer. Bernard and Marie, therefore, both came from families of some means.

Additional evidence of the family's relative prosperity comes from the fact that Mahler had music lessons from a young age and was even sent to Prague for a year of school (presumably, for its better musical possibilities). However, he did apply for (and receive) financial aid from the Vienna Conservatory about 1876 because his father was not in a position to support him. On balance, Donald Mitchell's conjecture rings true that the family "at best, never achieved more than a pinched, lower middle-class status," given that much of their resources would have been tied up in the business. Mahler's parents' estate was valued at 28,000 fl. at a time when an annual salary of 750–800 fl. would have been significant.⁷

While the physical, social, and economic conditions of Mahler's childhood certainly shaped his character, the emotional and psychological circumstances of his family life undoubtedly were decisive. In Stuart Feder's assessment, the family letters – the most significant source of biographical information before the mid-1890s – show a devoted family,

⁵ Guido Adler, *Wollen und Wirken: Aus dem Leben eines Musikhistorikers* (Vienna: Universal 1935), 3; in *Mahler: His Life, Work, and World*, compiled and ed. Kurt Blaukopf and Herta Blaukopf with contributions by Zoltan Roman (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 20.

⁶ Mitchell, *The Early Years*, 17–18, 274.

⁷ Ibid., 18; see Tomáš Cvrček, "Wages, Prices, and Living Standards in the Habsburg Empire, 1827–1910," *Journal of Economic History* 73 (2013): 1–37.

one reflecting “traditional values of caring and mutual responsibility despite internal conflicts and, at least amongst Marie, Gustav, and Justine, a tendency towards guilt and self-punishment.”⁸

Understanding these dynamics begins with Mahler’s own description of his parents to Natalie Bauer-Lechner:

My father (whose mother had previously supported the family as a pedlar of drapery) had the most diverse phases of making a livelihood behind him and, with his usual energy, had more and more worked himself up [the social scale]. At first he had been a waggoner, and, while he was driving his horse and cart, had studied and read all sorts of books – he had even learnt a bit of French, which earned him the nickname of a “waggon scholar” [*Kutschbockgelehrter*, “car-seat scholar”]. Later he was employed in various factories [i.e., distilleries], and subsequently he became a private coach [*Hauslehrer*]. On the strength of the little estate in Kalischt, he eventually married my mother – the daughter of a soap manufacturer from Leddetsch – who did not love him, hardly knew him prior to the wedding, and would have preferred to marry another man of whom she was fond. But her parents and my father knew how to bend her will and to assert his. They were as ill-matched as fire and water. He was obstinacy itself, she all gentleness. (*NBLE*, 69)

Alma, too, records Bernard’s ambition to better himself personally, socially, and culturally. His ambition extended to his family and particularly to his talented son, whom he sent off alone to Vienna at the age of fifteen. Surviving letters demonstrate that Mahler’s father was temperamentally difficult, domineering, and occasionally ruthless and that this often led to conflict with others.

Mahler’s mother was ten years younger than her husband and, according to Alma, “lame from birth” (*ML*, 6). The match was in all likelihood an arranged one, Marie bringing a dowry of 3,500 gulden as well as material goods from her prosperous parents. In any case, Gustav was deeply attached to her. Löhr characterized her as “a woman richly endowed with the virtues of her sex, one whose tenderness and gentleness, kindness and warm receptiveness, are an abiding memory of any of those who knew her” (note to an undated letter from Mahler to Löhr of September 1889; *SLGM*, 403/*GMB2*, 438). Alma rather maliciously records that she was sometimes called the “duchess” because of her “superior refinement.” Alma’s unflattering portrayal of Mahler’s family – Marie’s “unending

⁸ Stuart Feder, *Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 20. For a concise overview of Mahler’s family history and the significance of these letters, see Stephen McClatchie, ed., *The Mahler Family Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3–16.

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tortures,” the “brutality of her husband, who ran after every servant, domineered over his delicate wife and flogged the children” (*ML*, 7) – nevertheless found confirmation in Mahler’s 1910 conversation with Freud, who told Marie Bonaparte that Mahler’s “father, [was] apparently a brutal person, treated his wife very badly.”⁹

While some of the details may be controverted, Mahler clearly did not grow up in a stable family unit; as Feder notes, an early life overshadowed by conflict and death and where his nuclear family was not a shelter from the outside world surely had an impact on him. Mahler rarely spoke of his father; Bernard, in turn, may have been ambivalent about a potential rival for the family’s love and admiration. Gustav’s close identification with and attachment to his mother could not have helped, since she clearly favored him even over her husband. Freud himself diagnosed a “Holy Mary complex” and “mother fixation” (*Marienkomples – Mutterbindung*), and Mitchell suggests that Mahler’s famous “jerking” foot may be an unconscious echo of his mother’s lameness, part of a broader youthful identification with her tendency toward martyrdom. Over twenty-one years, Marie Mahler bore fourteen children, eight of whom died of childhood diseases, including her first-born, Isidore (1858–59). “Born in the shadow of death,” he was particularly close to his younger brother, Ernst (1862–75), whose passing from a congenital heart condition brought his “first sorrow” and in Feder’s view colored all of his adult relationships with women.¹⁰

Amid these tensions and likely contributing to them was the omnipresence of Mahler’s talent, which made him the “admired idol of the family.”¹¹ Stories of his family listening secretly to his piano playing and promoting him in the wider community confirm that he was admired and adored by them and that, in some sense, he acquired a special status rivalling his dominating father; such dynamics certainly colored his subsequent relationship with his less-talented musical brother, Otto (1873–95). A natural dreamer, Mahler could withdraw from his

⁹ Mitchell, *The Early Years*, 7.

¹⁰ Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 9–29, 24; in addition to Alma Mahler’s account (*ML*, 175), information about Mahler’s session with Freud comes from notes made by Marie Bonaparte in 1925 and from Freud’s account to Theodor Reik in 1935, as detailed in Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 206–42; Mitchell, *The Early Years*, 13; Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 15, 23.

¹¹ Letter of February 1917 from Natalie Bauer-Lechner to Hans Riehl; see Morten Solvik and Stephen E. Hefling, “Natalie Bauer-Lechner on Mahler and Women: A Newly Discovered Document,” *Musical Quarterly* 97 (2014): 12–65; here 40.

surroundings at will, and his extraordinary power of concentration was noted by many.

Minor conflicts within the family increased over the years as Mahler's parents' illnesses and debilities worsened. By the mid-1880s, both were ailing: Bernard from congestive heart failure and diabetes (which doubtless contributed to his irritability) and Marie from asthma and a weak heart (not to mention the rigors of almost ceaseless childbearing). Mahler's eldest sister remaining at home, Justine (1868–1938), compromised her own physical and mental health in nursing their parents.

These stressors weighed on Mahler, the “golden boy” and eldest child, whose letters describe frequent visits to doctors and consultations with professors. Increasingly, he took on a quasi-parental role, sending money home, insisting that it be used for their pleasure, and arranging deliveries of treats like sardines, preserves, graham bread, and cakes. He wrote frequently to Justine, to encourage her to be tolerant of their sick father and to alleviate their mother's suffering,¹² and he often unburdened himself to Löhr. Depressed after a visit home in July 1883, he wrote how “wretched and gloomy” it was: “I myself, so hard and cruel to them – and yet I can't help it, and torment them to distraction” (*SLGM*, 73–74/*GMB2*, 47). Feelings of frustration and helplessness mounted as he “watch[ed] the clouds gather over them without being able to do a thing,” even as he remained committed to help his family in any way possible (*SLGM*, 101/*GMB2*, 78). A palpable need to control emerges in these letters as he tried to manage the situation from afar.

At his father's death in February 1889, Mahler became the male head of the family at the age of twenty-nine and took this responsibility seriously. His eldest sister, Leopoldine (1863–89), was married and living in Vienna; brother Alois (1867–1931) was in the military; and Otto was at the Conservatory in Vienna. Only his ailing mother, along with Justine and his youngest sibling, Emma (1875–1933), remained at home. By fall, things were grim. Leopoldine was ill (and died only a few weeks before their mother), Marie was terminal, and Justine was almost prostrate with exhaustion and worry. Despite its inevitability, Mahler's mother's death was extremely painful and disorienting for him, breaking as it did this last tie to his youth.

In the years to come, Mahler remained devoted to his family, and his letters – admittedly often demanding, critical, and even biting in tone – are also full of genuine concern and practical advice, especially regarding the

¹² McClatchie, ed., *The Mahler Family Letters*, 48, 49, 30.

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impractical and costly household that Justine established for them in Vienna, and the misadventures of his wayward brothers. Alois was finally allowed to go his own way in 1893 and disappears from their lives. Otto, tragically, committed suicide in 1895.

While Alma's characterization of the siblings can shade into caricature, elements are corroborated by a recently published letter of Bauer-Lechner. On the basis of Mahler's clear love and concern for his sister Justine, the recipient of most of the family letters, I was led in earlier works almost to dismiss Alma's portrayal of her as something of a drama queen, untrustworthy and manipulative. A recently discovered letter from Natalie indicates that I was mistaken: she recounts Justine's jealousy and manipulative nature, which revealed itself in lies and intrigues; her "ill-bred and unrestrained nature," which could also be happy and friendly, accommodating and sincere; and her great influence on Gustav. Natalie calls her the "most important source of happiness and also of misfortune in his existence" and draws attention to the quasi-incestuous aspects of its intensity: "had she not been his sister, she would certainly have been one of his greatest passions."¹³ This dynamic, which I had regarded as latent at best, colors a comment that Justine made to her friend Ernestine Löhr in the wake of Mahler's affair with Anna von Mildenburg: "I have come to terms with the fact that I am no longer the nearest to Gustav's heart."¹⁴

When the young Gustav Mahler moved to Vienna in 1875 to study at the Conservatory, it was a severing with his past. Nevertheless, he continued to bear the imprint of the physical, social, emotional, and psychological circumstances of his upbringing in Iglau, both positive and negative. These experiences would surface in the themes of banishment, death, mourning, and brotherly love/hate that were to occupy Mahler's creative life and output. And yet Mahler emerged from the crucible of a difficult childhood and young adulthood capable of writing a remarkable letter to his sister that demonstrates a well-adjusted insight into human nature derived from the formative experiences of his family life:

Always remember that every *human being* is a world to himself; one knows a large part of it – namely insofar as it is contained in oneself – but the rest of it remains a life-long secret to someone [else]. – If one establishes new rules, they are always suited for the piece of the world that one knows – (namely, because it is one's own) – . –

¹³ Solvik and Hefling, "Bauer-Lechner on Mahler and Women," 38–40.

¹⁴ Letter of November 5, 1896. McClatchie, ed., *The Mahler Family Letters*, 12.

But this leads too far afield! Just don't fight – don't be *suspicious* of each other – be content with what you have in common, don't criticize what you don't understand, and – *don't make any rules* for “the human race.” – To the Lord *God* you are certainly all the same! – But seeing with human eyes, everyone is and remains an *unknown* world, yet with some small measure of sameness which makes *understanding* possible.

You are all bound together by this measure of sameness. Do not destroy the *connection* thoughtlessly.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., 137–38.

CHAPTER 2

A Childhood in Bohemia
Early Teachers and Friends

Reinhold Kubik

Translated by Juliane Schicker

Childhood in a city like Iglau around 1860 meant exposure to a degree of pluralism: Jews *and* Christians, Czechs *and* Germans, sentenced, as it were, to live together or alongside each other. But aversion and distrust notwithstanding, acceptance or at least tolerance were possible, and certainly better opportunities for mutual understanding than in a one-dimensional society. The Other was not exclusively villainized nor romanticized, but simply accepted, because it was inevitable. Every gradation of attitude existed, from hostility to toleration to an appreciation of potential gains. And a remarkable number of open-minded, unprejudiced, wise individuals emerged from this environment, enriching the palette of identities in the distinctive intellectual climate of Vienna around 1900: besides Mahler were Victor Adler, Sigmund Freud, Karl Kraus, Josef Hoffmann, Anton Hanak, Guido Adler, Heinz Friedjung, and Julius Tandler.

Aside from the familiar circumstances of Mahler's childhood, three factors formed his character: his musical upbringing, his formal education, and the influence of religion(s). This essay identifies in particular the people who embodied these factors in Mahler's childhood. I will only allude to other important stimuli and influences that critically affected Mahler's musical life, such as folk music, military music, and the sounds of nature; regarding these phenomena, we know general information about the people involved, apart from a few names associated with military music.¹

The fact that Mahler's parents actively fostered his inclination toward music was a godsend not to be taken for granted in the house of a liquor manufacturer and distributor, even one eager for education. They allowed Gustav the installation of a piano from his grandparents' house and paid

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to my longtime colleague Helmut Brenner and also to Mr. Petr Dvořák, who graciously provided the information from Iglau (see note 6), and without whose tireless and friendly efforts this account would not have been possible.