

Wagner Intoxication: Listening to Gottfried Wagner

“The Truth Nobody Wants to Hear”



Figure 111 - From Left: Michael Shapiro, Gottfried Wagner, John Corigliano, William M. Hoffman, Lawrence D. Mass, 1995, at the home of Michael Shapiro, Chappaqua, New York, personal photograph collection of Lawrence D. Mass

For Gottfried Wagner, my work on Wagner, art and addiction struck an immediate chord of recognition. I was trying to describe what Gottfried has long referred to as “Wagner intoxication.” In fact, he thought this would make a good title for my book. The subtitle he suggested was taken from the title of his Foreword to my *Confessions of a Jewish Wagnerite*: “Redemption from Wagner the redeemer: some introductory thoughts on Wagner’s anti-semitism.” The meaning of this phrase, “redemption from the redeemer,” taken from Nietzsche, is discussed in the interview with Gottfried that follows these reflections.

Like me, Gottfried sees the world of Wagner appreciation as deeply affected by a cultish devotion that from its inception was cradling history’s most irrational and extremist mass-psychological movement. Like other intoxications, full-blown Wagnerism involves

levels of denial and rationalization that have few if any counterpart in the appreciations of other art and artists, and none at all in intensity, consequence and persistence. Just as there is no Mozartism, Verdiism and Brahmsism (notwithstanding personality cultism around Liszt, Mahler and others), no other art demands such denial of its content and import. To be sure, there is antisemitism, just as there is racism, sexism and homophobia, in the lives of other artists and artworks, but none comparable to that which marks the life and art of Richard Wagner.

My connection with Gottfried was immediate and strong. In the late 1980's, as I was completing my memoir, *Confessions of a Jewish Wagnerite*, for which he would write a Foreword, Gottfried was visiting New York. He was to meet with colleagues and speak publicly regarding the enthusiastic collusion of the Wagner family and Bayreuth with Hitler and Nazism, and how Wagner himself and his music dramas contributed significantly to the *perpetration* of the Holocaust.

I use that word *perpetration* purposely here without quotes. Gottfried had been working with Dr. Abraham Peck, Director of Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Studies at the University of Maine, on a post-*Shoah* dialogue series. Dr. Peck is the author/editor of fourteen scholarly volumes, including *The Holocaust and History* (1998) and *Our Zero Hour: Germans and Jews After 1945: Family History, Holocaust and New Beginnings*, published in German and co-authored with Gottfried Wagner (2006).

It has often been observed that Gottfried is “truly a Wagner,” not only physically but also in strength of personality and in his commitment to principles. It's a designation about which Gottfried is understandably wary but which he can also appreciate as salutary. As the sole indictor of the Wagner family as Holocaust perpetrators, he clearly is not a prevaricator. Unlike so many of us, he isn't stuck between that rock of Wagner's greatness and that hard place of the enormity of evil wrought in the wake of Wagner's antisemitism.

My own personal journey is instructive. Though I always knew of the extent of Wagner's antisemitism and its consequences, I was never able to get beyond what seemed his insurmountable greatness as a composer and incomparable influence on music, theater, art and culture. At the deepest level of personal experience I myself had fallen in love with Wagner's operas and my own powerful sense of his

preeminence in opera seemed viscerally as well as intellectually and culturally impossible to challenge. Gottfried was the first leading figure, and still the only one of my experience, to be able to transcend this dilemma and thereby articulate a clear and unequivocal judgement and indictment of Wagner and the Wagner family.

But how did Gottfried develop from the intoxication of growing up in Bayreuth to becoming an outspoken anti-Wagnerite? Both prior to and since my first encounters with Gottfried, even the most critical and articulate of observers who recognized and analyzed Wagner's antisemitism—like Robert Gutman, author of *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, his Music*, and Marc Weiner, author of *Wagner and The Anti-Semitic Imagination*—remained Wagnerites, and Jewish ones at that. Whatever the challenges, whatever the intellectual acrobatics, they remained self-confident in their ability to separate the man from his art. While I got to know both Gutman and Weiner as Wagnerites as well as critics, I felt less secure and more conflicted about the separation of Wagner from his art than they seemed to.

One critic of Gottfried Wagner has described him as “having a severe personality disorder” and being “a crybaby.” Critics have pilloried his memoir, *Twilight of the Wagners*, as “an embarrassing rant” and its author as “a whiner who blames everyone else (loudly and viciously) for his failures and who wrenches his arm patting himself on the back for his few, really rather undistinguished successes.” (These sabotaging quotes are from Amazon customer reviews.)

Such responses only endeared me to Gottfried and bolstered my admiration for his courage in the face of the isolation and hardship of his mission. In going so against the grain of common opinion and expressing himself in terms that alienated more than they attracted, Gottfried reminded me of another great and outspoken activist hero of our lives and times: Larry Kramer.

In fact, the only criticism that ever really challenged my appreciation of Gottfried Wagner was the insinuation that he had no discernible love for Wagner's work.

This brought me back to a singular memory of my opera-going experience, a dinner *a deux* with composer John Corigliano, who became a friend via his collaborations with my close friend William M. Hoffman, his co-creator of the opera *Ghosts of Versailles*, I understood that John did not count himself a Wagnerite. A master of

musical styles, John has a unique understanding of the art of music. Though he has been accused by some of being more of an imitator skilled at pastiche, it's difficult to imagine another figure of contemporary music with a greater sense of the varieties of musical experience.

I remember our conversation over that dinner at *Josephina*, opposite Lincoln Center. "I know you to be one of the great composers of our time and to have an incomparable knowledge of musical genres," I said. "Among composers, especially modernists, there have been plenty who have regarded themselves as being anti-Wagner. Even Arnold Schoenberg, the godfather of atonality, however, appreciated Wagner's greatness and contributions. You, on the other hand, seem unwilling to be counted as within these ranks. How can that be?" John's response was simple, honest and heartfelt. He said he'd always been aware of the ferocity of the composer's antisemitic agenda and that no appreciation of this or that skill or effect, achievement or popularity could surmount that reality for him.

How, then, would he and Bill Hoffman proceed with their next collaboration, an original opera about Wagner, Wagner appreciation, opera and history called *Liebestod*? With Gottfried Wagner designated as *dramaturg*, the satirical work was intended to skewer the opera world for its Wagnerism and parochialism and to seriously look at issues through the only lens that might work for a broad public – humor. It would be a kind of *Ghosts of Versailles* of Wagnerism, a tantalizing prospect for everybody. Whatever John's discomfort or misgivings about Wagner, his musical conception would have to be built on a basic appreciation of Wagner's music and with that its greatness, wouldn't it?

Although there were sketches and outlines, how this would all have turned out we will never know. A proposal to do the opera was pitched directly to SFO general director Pamela Rosenberg by John and Bill for a new American opera. What I understood from Bill is that Rosenberg swiftly and rather contemptuously rejected the proposal, giving the commission instead to John Adams for what became *Dr. Atomic*. To Rosenberg, apparently, the idea of a serious satire about Wagner seemed preposterous. It was as if they'd proposed a serious satire of the Catholic Church to the Catholic hierarchy to be staged at St Peter's.

It's John Corigliano's response to Wagner that seemed to me to most closely resemble Gottfried Wagner's. While Gottfried does not explicitly deny the mantle of greatness upon his great grandfather, neither will he indulge it. Over the years I've many times asked Gottfried if he ever had the same great love of Wagner that I did. Always his answers have been evasive. If you push John Corigliano on this, certainly he would agree that Wagner's achievements were estimable and his success impressive. Certainly, Gottfried would do the same. But both are very careful not to allow an acknowledgment of any such greatness to alter or supersede their understanding of the motivation, import and consequences of Wagner's art.

True to himself, his vision and his mission, Gottfried completed another book that has yet to be translated into English. Following the publication of his autobiographical *Twilight of the Wagners* in 1997, *Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me* takes on the fallout of Wagner and what we are calling Wagner intoxication. There, in the Introduction and as translated by Adam J. Sacks, Gottfried expresses himself with raw sensibility and no uncertain terms.

Anyone who examines the musical wizard Richard Wagner finds himself/herself first and foremost confronted with the emotional impact of his music. He submerges the listener in a veritable roller coaster of emotion and triggers thereby extreme admiration as well as extreme aversion. But what lies hidden behind this musical ravishment? In my opinion, Wagner's worldview that shaped his life, his writings and his opera, is irreconcilable with the foundations of any humanistic ethic. His views were defined by his racism, misogyny, nihilism and megalomania. These pillars of Wagner's outlook on the world are the subject matter of the book at hand. I have undertaken to strip back the layers of the hagiographic quagmire constructed first by the composer, thinker and politician Richard Wagner. His authoritarian, anti-democratic, racist and sexist legacy is anachronistic, inhuman and anti-European; it is a radioactive, poisonous cesspool from the past, which calls out for a responsible decontamination."



Figure 112 - Gottfried Wagner, Lpgeffen, 2013, Creative Commons

Unlike most others, Gottfried does not prevaricate around the challenge posed by Wagner. He hasn't allowed the intoxicating music and arts of Wagner to obscure its darker meanings and consequences. In his determination to stay the course, he has been like Parsifal, always mindful of the stakes involved in his mission. Gottfried has not allowed his viewpoint to be corrupted, neither by Wagner's art nor the family business of Bayreuth—"Wagner, Inc"—which he judges and indicts with clarity, perspective, surefootedness and passion. In thus positioning himself, he has been ostracized and vilified by his family and Wagnerites worldwide. As I came to see it over time, the price he has paid for this has been his life. Because of its tentacles in the wider world of opera, Wagner, Inc has done its passive-aggressive and pervasive best to marginalize Gottfried as opera's premiere *persona non grata*, a confirmation of his viewpoints Gottfried wears as a badge of pride.

There have been many writers in Gottfried's orbit. In my correspondence with him, some names were recurrent, including Theodore Adorno, Ralph Giordano, Hartmut Zelinsky, Paul Lawrence Rose and Harvey Sachs. At the time I met Gottfried he was working with Yehuda Nir, a Polish-Jewish concentration camp survivor and psychoanalyst living in New York. Nir had published a notably well-written and engaging memoir called *The Lost Childhood*, unique in its observations of daily camp life, its youth and explicit details of sexuality among the inmates. Meanwhile, Nir continued his

innovative therapeutic work treating the PTSD of concentration camp survivors, which included participation on some of the cross-cultural panels with Gottfried and Abraham Peck. It was from this setting of post-Holocaust dialogue and testimony that Gottfried commenced his partnership with Nir on the development of *The Lost Childhood* into an opera.

The opera by composer Janice Hamer and librettist Mary Azrael, with Gottfried listed as director, developed under the auspices of American Opera Projects, Inc. in 2007. In 2019, the opera was staged by Opera UCLA in Los Angeles. Gottfried couldn't be present for the event in person because of visa problems, but he was able to attend remotely via Skype sessions, including for post-performance discussions. Meanwhile, however, there was controversy in the background. While the opera was welcomed and successful, Gottfried felt discouraged by an earlier visit to L.A. during a time of protest surrounding the staging by the L.A. Opera of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. As he makes clear in my conversation with him here, his viewpoints of Wagner were almost universally reviled in L.A., including by prominent Jews.

Most notable among these was E. Randol Schoenberg, grandson of composer Arnold Schoenberg, who noted that despite his grandfather's opposition to Wagner and his flight from Nazism, he did not feel that his grandfather, who loved and appreciated Wagner's achievements as a composer, could ever have supported any kind of censorship of Wagner, whether in Israel, L.A. or anywhere else. Gottfried was accused of a kind of reverse fascism as a German, and a Wagner at that, trying to impose a new censorship on art in his support of the ban on Wagner in Israel and his support for the protestors in L.A.

Alas, this experience was all too typical for Gottfried. Like Larry Kramer, Gottfried Wagner is a prophet who was initially rejected in his own land by his own people in his own time for reasons that could seem compelling. All but lost in these L.A. controversies were Gottfried's trenchant positions on Wagner intoxication and toxicity, Richard Wagner's pivotal role in the advent of Hitler and Nazism, and the dangers of Wagnerism for the future.

Despite his ostracism from the Wagner mainstream and virtually all of the Wagner family, Gottfried Wagner has continued his independent work on multiple fronts. Over the years, he has visited

Israel and has paid repeated visits to concentration camps, including Auschwitz and Theresienstadt. He has developed a biographical archive of his mother, Ellen Drexel, who was married to his father, Wolfgang Wagner, and a more extensive archive of his documents for the Central Library of Zurich. Gottfried has continued to lecture widely. He is the author of several books and numerous publications, including his biographical and autobiographical Wagner family history, *Twilight of the Wagners: The Unraveling of a Family Legacy*, and *He Who Does Not Howl With the Wolf*, a study of Wagner and his legacy.

The following biographical information is adapted and expanded from Gottfried Wagner's homepage: <http://www.gottfriedhwagner.eu>.

Gottfried H. Wagner was born in Bayreuth in 1947. He studied musicology, philosophy and German Philology in Germany and Austria. Awarded by the University of Vienna, his PhD dissertation on Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht was later published as a book in Germany, Italy and Japan.

Dr. Wagner has written extensively on the German and European culture and politics of the 19th and 20th century in connection with Jewish culture and history. His studies and interviews have been published in 16 languages. He writes, lectures and works internationally in a range of artistic and cultural settings and utilizing multimedia venues. He has received awards for his cultural and academic activities as well as for his humanitarian involvements.

In 1992 he co-founded with Dr. Abraham Peck "The Post-Holocaust Dialogue Group." His autobiography, *Twilight of the Wagners: The Unraveling of a Family's Legacy* (USA: Picador, 1999) was first published in Germany in 1997. It created worldwide interest and has been translated into 6 languages.

He is co-author with Abraham Peck of the book (in German), *Our Zero Hour – Germans and Jews after 1945: Family History, the Holocaust and a New Beginning*, with an Introduction by Raph Giordano (2006). This book was later published in the U.S. as "Unwanted legacies – Sharing the burden of post-genocide generations" (2014), an edition Gottfried has taken issue with.

Since 1983 he has lived in Italy.

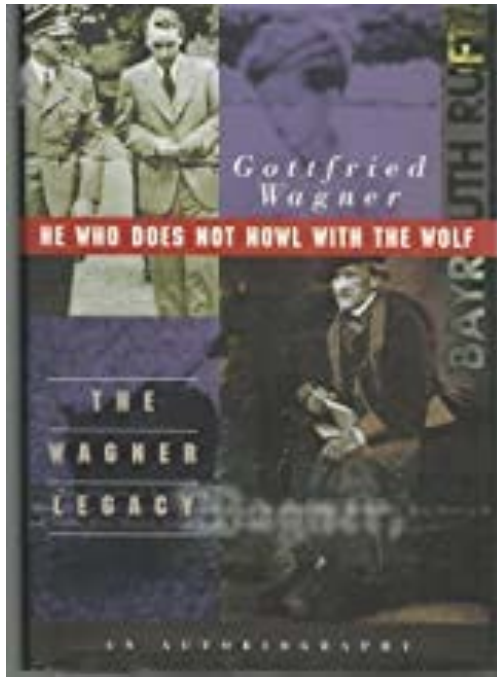


Figure 113 - *He Who Does Not Howl With The Wolf: The Wagner Legacy*
by Gottfried Wagner, Amazon.com

Interview with Gottfried Wagner

“Dear Larry, we have this in common. We have decided no longer to take the drug of Wagner, and when you do that, you get hated.” – Gottfried Wagner, May 9, 2019

Like Gottfried, I have experienced shunning by mainstream operagoers and Wagnerites. Like Gottfried and inspired by him, I often feel like, and often am, a lone wolf. I have had a voluminous exchange with Gottfried going back many years which will be given to my collected papers at the New York Public Library. As Gottfried’s English is more fluent than my German, most of this correspondence is in English.

What follows are the edited, annotated excerpts from Skype conversations, conducted in English, with Gottfried Wagner from his home in Cerro Maggiore, Italy, in early May, 2019, with some revisions in January 2021.

The interview was transcribed and edited by Dr. Adam J. Sacks, the esteemed colleague of Gottfried and myself who has assisted us both with the editing of articles and our current books. Dr. Sacks is a scholar of German and Jewish cultural history.



Figure 114 - Photograph courtesy of Gottfried H. Wagner, Wikimedia Commons

Gottfried Wagner with the archive materials of his mother, Ellen Drexel, the first wife of Wolfgang Wagner (1919-2010), whose centennial was celebrated at Bayreuth in 2019. Following their divorce, Drexel became an outspoken witness to the Hitler period of the Wagner clan and Bayreuth.

“In the Case of Winifred Wagner, what we’re now agreeing is that she believed what she was indoctrinated to believe, but which turns out to be what’s really there in Wagner’s meanings and intentions, in his writings and art.”

- Gottfried Wagner

Introductory comment by Larry Mass: It was my impression from Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s 5-hour documentary film interview with Winifred Wagner, who ran the Bayreuth Festival during the Nazi

period, that she was intelligent as well as articulate. After seeing this record of the history of Bayreuth's collaborations with Hitler and Nazism, it's difficult to subscribe to the pretense that the Wagner family and Hitler had an unsophisticated understanding of Wagner and his operas. A key defense of Wagner apologetics that also marks Alex Ross's *Wagnerism* is that Nazi appreciations of Wagner were ignorant, superficial, and insensitive to more nuanced and complex meanings. We can now appreciate with greater security and clarity that Winifred, the Wagner family, and many Germans and Wagnerites, did indeed understand the antisemitic foundation and meaning of much of the art of Richard Wagner.

Gottfried Wagner has been at pains to help us see and give proper weight to these antisemitic foundations. He does not feel, however, that Winifred revealed intelligence and awareness in her commitment to Wagner as much as her unquestioning subservience to antisemitism. This prejudice was virtually hard-wired from her upbringing in a milieu of leading antisemites such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and her fealty to Hitler. Notoriously, she had an intense and protracted intimacy with Hitler. As for the level of sophistication they shared about Wagner's art, Gottfried points out, one need only consider Hitler's sponsorship of the Nazi "Forbidden Art" purges and exhibitions.

Gottfried Wagner: I have a very clear opinion of what was going on in Hitler's work and his sense of Wagner and art. It's what Hannah Arendt talked about as the "*demaskation*" of pure mediocrity, of monstrous bystanders and the *Führer*. This is important when we come to mass manipulation, of what was *gleichgeschaltet*¹. What was to be "German art" was decreed, and with that came the proscription of "non-Germanic" and "non-patriotic" art — "*Entartete Kunst*," "*Entartete Musik*."² Hannah Arendt and her book "*Eichmann in Jerusalem*" were criticized by many, also in some Jewish circles, for her concept of "the banality of evil." All of which, however, is pertinent to Winifred. When you analyze what she said, it's

¹ Literally: to tune in equally; figuratively: to coordinate. Nazi terminology for the system of totalitarian control of all institutions and organizations in Germany.

² Literally: degenerate art and degenerate music. Nazi terminology for art and music labeled Bolshevik. Generally all art and music made by Jews, leftists and almost all modernists fell in this category. One major exhibition of each occurred in Nazi Germany and much of the work was destroyed.

enormously banal, as Hitler was and indeed as so much of Wagner really was and is. Her viewpoints were not from a refined sensibility, but doubtless did accurately reflect what Wagner and his operas really were all about.

Hitler dominated the taste of Bayreuth, the stage direction, and it was accepted. That's who Winifred was and that's as deep and as far as her thinking about Wagner ever got.

She was filled with Nazi ideas and biases. When she talks about exile, and all the hatred that is connected with that for her, she talked about *demokraten*—not democrats, but *demokroten*—as in *Das Rheingold* where Alberich is changing not into a frog...but to something bigger and more loathsome...

Larry Mass: ...a toad.

Gottfried: *demokroten* was the most derogatory term for democrats.

Larry: Meanwhile, most of the opera world has been acculturated to appreciate Wagner as the highest form of art. They don't really allow for Nazi viewpoints, which they dismiss as sentimentality and *kitsch*, not the *real* Wagner. But I think we're now in transition from seeing Wagner as the highest form of art to being something a lot closer to what Hitler and Winifred appreciated and what might now, and with a lot more credibility, be called Nazi art.

Gottfried: This idea of *Gesamtkunst*³, where he brings everything—painting, literature, music—together and offers it as the most important vision for the world today and the future is today totally unsupportable. As for Hitler's appreciation of art, one need only look at his paintings. We must not forget that he was not accepted at the Vienna Academy of Fine Art because of his dilettantism. Had he been accepted, world history might have gone in a different direction.

Larry: All of us—and this includes the likes of Toscanini⁴ and Friedelind Wagner⁵—thought of Wagner as the highest art and what happened with Hitler in the Nazi period as aberrant. [This viewpoint

³ Literally: total work of art. Master term in Wagner's cultural program of fusing all of the arts as a form superior and more profound than the opera of his day.

⁴ Italian conductor and most prominent Anti-Nazi in the musical world of the 20th Century.

⁵ Anti-Nazi, confidant of Toscanini, this Wagner granddaughter who fled Nazi Germany and lived in New York during the war.

is tweaked but likewise promulgated in Alex Ross's *Wagnerism*], We objected to Hitler and the Nazis but a lot less to Wagner himself, and always with qualifiers. It has been a difficult and tortuous journey, but now we can finally say we know better. I think the days are finally coming to an end of pretending that Wagner and his music dramas are innocent of any actual role in the advent, trajectory and taint of Hitler and Nazism.

Gottfried: I think Harvey⁶ Sachs went overboard in glorifying my aunt Friedelind Wagner. I said no, Harvey, there's a major difference between Friedelind and myself. Friedelind did not touch Wagner's profound antisemitism as a central point of his *Weltanschauung*⁷ and as expressed in the works themselves. In this I'm radically different from Friedelind. I did try to talk to her about this, which she was open to doing. "Oh, you know, Gottfried, I really do have to reconsider," she told me. She was planning another book which, tragically, never happened. So, yes, I think we now know better.

In my paper for the officials of Bonn for the project of a Museum of Exile, I indirectly attack the millions in financial subsidies for Bayreuth. Why is Bayreuth, a premiere citadel and shrine of Nazism, receiving such copious government endowment in the absence of greater accountability?

Larry: As I indicate elsewhere in *On The Future of Wagnerism*, Eva Rieger, author of the latest biography of Friedelind, indirectly verifies what we're saying here about Friedelind—that she (Friedelind) never really expressed herself or apparently ever thought much about Wagner's antisemitism. But neither, likewise apparently, did Friedelind's close friend Toscanini [a reality likewise verified by his evasiveness on this matter in my correspondence with Harvey Sachs].

In email exchanges with me, Rieger initially seemed helpful in my efforts to open up this subject of what Friedelind did and did not recognize about Wagner's antisemitism. Nowhere in her book is there any indication that Friedelind, however aware and rejecting of

⁶ Harvey Sachs, the author of many important music biographies, notably of Artur Rubinstein and Arturo Toscanini.

⁷ German philosophical term indicating literally "a way to look out onto the world," appropriated by the Nazis to indicate having the right ideological viewpoint.

Nazism, understood that her grandfather was deeply antisemitic or that this prejudice tainted his work.

As I say, Rieger was helpful in teasing out this information, or lack thereof. But she became very defensive when I asked if she thought that Friedelind, who never married and whose father Siegfried was preferentially homosexual, might herself have been lesbian.

Gottfried: Of course it's most likely Friedelind was lesbian!

Larry: Tell that to Rieger. Such huge omissions from observation or even consideration. It's like the legions of writers who wrote about Walt Whitman and Henry James, always managing to skirt questions of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Gottfried: There is still need and room for a new biography of Friedelind, one less influenced by Rieger's friend, Nike Wagner, Wieland's daughter and a "new" Bayreuth apologist.

Larry: Back to Bayreuth and the question you raise of its funding and subsidies, which your father Wolfgang, "the unrepentant old Nazi," as I've called him, is credited with having done more than anyone else to secure. As you know, Angela Merkel is an ardent Wagnerite who regularly attends the festival and has even done an interview about Wagner that does what we all did prior to the current period—separate the man from the art. What is your feeling about her Wagnerism?

Gottfried: More than anything else, she is an opportunist. Her advisors, the German state, first West Germany, then the united, reunified, Germany, pay out millions to support the cultism of Wagner. Her support of Bayreuth and Kapellmeister Christian Thielemann is certainly questionable, leaving her politics questionable as well.

Larry: Are you saying you don't think her Wagnerism is genuine?

Gottfried: I think she is what her advisors whisper in her ear that she should be. In that sense, she reminds of my grandmother Winifred. When she explained to me the character of Alberich, she repeated what other people had said rather than an opinion that could be called distinctively her own.

Larry: Most of us Wagnerites, and this apparently includes Merkel [and now also Alex Ross] accepted the high-art perspective that the Nazis had no real understanding of Wagner. We keep being told how Nazi soldiers were forced to endure performances at Bayreuth they couldn't have cared less about. Just as Winifred was

comfortable with Nazi perspectives of Wagner, so is Merkel comfortable with obfuscating postwar anti-Nazi perspectives. In neither case does notable intelligence or sensibility seem operant.

Gottfried: Clearly, I do not agree that most Nazis had no real appreciation of Wagner. Riefenstahl made her famous movie, *Triumph of the Will*, with Hitler flying into Nuremberg. In one scene we see the early morning awakening of the soldiers to the future Hitler harkens for Germany. The young Nazis are fourteen. In four years they will be ready to die for the *Führer*. In the background is music from *Die Meistersinger*. On the contrary, the Nazis and the German masses, including Winifred, knew very well what was behind Richard Wagner's *Weltanschauung*.

What we are saying is really the crux of the matter and must be the basis of any serious discussion of Wagnerism in the future. At the outset we must get rid of all these masks of ignorance of intentions and meanings.

Winifred knew all the antisemitic writings of Wagner and those of her in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Then we come to Adolf Hitler and the extremist poison she absorbed in this malignantly antisemitic environment. Cosima was a terrible antisemite, and Winifred's adopted Danish family was likewise virulently antisemitic. The first vocal score of the *Ring* was prepared by militant antisemites. Winifred was brought up with the milk of antisemitism from infancy. In that mode of profound indoctrination from earliest childhood she did her duty, repeating reflexively what she was always told.

Larry: Do you think Cosima was like Winifred in being more indoctrinated than independent in her thinking?

Gottfried: The diaries of Cosima Wagner convey the real ideological context, the brainwashing, of Wagner appreciation. There's much discussion of whether she and Richard both had Jewish blood or not, which raises questions of self-hatred, of a pathological internalization of antisemitism. This poisoned atmosphere initially found province in Bayreuth with people who could be manipulated.

The Wagners did not go to the big cities to settle, like "Jewish Paris," as Wagner referred to it. Paris is where the French Grand Opera of Meyerbeer had reached its apogee. Nor did they go to Berlin, where Meyerbeer became the first to be leading director of music and opera of both Paris and Berlin, and where he was likewise admired as a modern marvel of being an opera director as well as a composer.

From *Robert Le Diable* Wagner copied *Rienzi*. In Dresden, Wagner made his entry onto the world stage with two operas, *Rienzi* and *Flying Dutchman*, with critical support from Meyerbeer.

Larry: Have you ever seen a staged version of *Les Huguenots*?

Gottfried: It's so rarely performed now. I have seen it once, but a long time ago in Frankfurt.

Larry: It's an astounding work. Wrenchingly historical and dramatic, and gloriously grand, it details the building up and finally the explosion of malignant religious hatred and mass murder. Virtually every critic who has seen and written about it in the recent period, including Alex Ross, has been thunderstruck by its power and agrees that it deserves an honored and regular place back in the standard repertory.

Gottfried: It's a scandal that the Jewish world especially in New York does not push for a Meyerbeer cycle instead of Wagner all the time.

Larry: I know we're in agreement that the only reason *Les Huguenots* is not where it should be in the standard repertoire is because of the enduring toxicity of Wagner's antisemitism.

Gottfried: For his Met Opera 30th anniversary concert, James Levine chose the overture to *Rienzi*, knowing the Hitler burden it carries of Hitler seeing himself as the savior of Germany, inspired by the music of *Rienzi*. When I tried to discuss this with him, he immediately withdrew. "Oh, I have no time!" he said, then quickly disappeared.

Larry: Levine was, like Barenboim, a favorite at Bayreuth and a champion of Wagner. But unlike Barenboim, he never showed any real willingness to discuss Wagner, Jewishness, Hitler, etc. Nor for that matter did he ever show any willingness to discuss homosexuality. For him, the separation of art from everything else was as absolute as you will ever see. Of course, now we see this bigger, more complicated picture of his reticence around his homosexuality. He was in the closet with all of it—his Judaism as well as his homosexuality.

Gottfried: As I saw it, such a top position as musical-artistic direction of the Metropolitan Opera carried enormous responsibility regarding cultural controversies as well as just the art.

Larry: While our awareness of his being gay and Jewish could imply support of or sympathy with this or that minority concern or

initiative, his reticence was relentless. In this, the Metropolitan Opera has shown itself to be indistinguishable from most other arts institutions and artists. With rare but notable exceptions, as during World War 2, or with the opera *Klinghoffer*, they steer as clear of controversy as they can, even when they are conspicuous and troubled in doing so. The Metropolitan Opera and James Levine are like Richard Strauss. However simpatico we might surmise them to be, they remained aloof from most controversies to the extent of being passive collaborators.

Gottfried: A background story. As a scout for Levine, my sister Eva Wagner was sent all over the world with Levine's manager and private secretary, Sissy Strauss. They had a luxury apartment close to the Metropolitan Opera. I was invited to go to a party there when we presented *The Lost Childhood* (the opera by Janice Hamer, based on the book by Yehuda Nir). Knowing I wasn't really welcome, I said on entering, "Gottfried, the devil is here!" Sissy was embarrassed and tried to ease the ambient discomfort.

Larry: What comes to mind about the intransigence of Wagnerism is not so much the controversy around antisemitism as my experience in addiction. As you know, I'm interested in addiction in relation to Wagnerism.

Addiction is a term we often use casually in talking about our relationship to Wagner's music. If you go to a heroin addict and say we need to talk about drug addiction in your life, they may be willing to do that, but if you get to the point where you actually threaten to take away their drugs or access to them, then you are going to encounter very serious resistance. With the Wagner cult, when you threaten their drug of Wagner, you are getting into comparably dangerous territory. They don't want you messing with their drug. Like a prophet, so characteristically rejected and reviled in their own lands by their own people, you are the bearer of tidings they do not want to hear.

Gottfried: Dear Larry, we have this in common. We have decided no longer to take the drug of Wagner, and when you do that, you get hated.

Larry: Let's move on to the business of the denazification of artists in the aftermath of the war. Was it right that the Wagner family, especially Winifred and her two sons, Wieland and Wolfgang, managed to evade criminal prosecution?

Gottfried: No, of course not. What happened was a case of almost perfect manipulation and falsification by Winifred and her sons. Tietjen, the Mephisto of the German Opera world, did his part in the background. Winifred was first. We have the trial of July 2nd 1947, when she was in the second category of guilt. She talked very aggressively and without any humility: “I did my duty. I am not guilty.”

Larry: That’s what they all said, and still say, like Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau when interviewed in the documentary on Max Lorenz. As they saw and still see it, they were simply carrying out their duties as German citizens, soldiers and patriots.

Gottfried: Winifred’s guilt is often qualified by claims that she helped Jews, but this was not because she was conflicted in her antisemitism and commitment to Hitler and Nazism. By her own admission, it was more about the efficient operations of the Festival. The antisemitic mistreatment of Jews at Bayreuth traces way back to the case of a Jewish patron who had been present at the first *Ring* cycle of 1876. Wagner and Cosima made humiliating comments to her: “We will save you. You will be like Kundry. We will give you redemption even as a Jew.”

Larry: On this crucial subject of redemption that is the principal theme of *Parsifal*, what is your interpretation of what Wagner is saying?

Gottfried: With the financial fiasco of the first festival, Richard and Cosima had a mountain of debts. Cosima wrote in her diaries, “Now we need a very rich Jew to sweep away all our debts.” Of course, Wagner’s agent, Angelo Neumann, was Jewish. And indeed, Neumann helped to shape what became Wagner, Inc. The vicious and cynical antisemitic snipes in Cosima’s diaries are so disgusting! And Wagner writes as well in the diaries, with his own “corrections.” In the aftermath of the *Burgtheater* fire⁸, where 35 Jews died, Richard writes that many more Jews should have perished. Here, already, is the first vision and mission of Auschwitz. Hartmut Zelinsky has studied the details connecting Cosima’s diaries with those of Richard.⁹

⁸ A famous fire of June 14th, 1881 during a performance of *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* in Vienna, 625 are said to have died.

⁹ Contemporary German Wagner Researcher Hartmut Zelinsky and his text *Wagner: Ein Deutsches Thema*.

Larry: So you don't think Wagner is saying the Jews are redeemed the way Kundry *appears* to be "redeemed" at the conclusion of *Parsifal*?

Gottfried: No, not at all. First, consider the problem between Kundry and Parsifal. Why can't they have sex? Beyond issues of plot, and good and evil, the surpassing reason is because an Aryan hero cannot have sex with a Jewish woman.

Larry: Ok, but then what is it that happens to Kundry at the end? She dies, but is she not redeemed?

Gottfried: Because she is Jewish, she cannot be redeemed and has to die. She dies so the man club of Aryan Grail knights can heal and prevail. The curse of her Jewish blood and the endless recurrence of her sins and crimes as Jewish and womanly, is finally ended with her death. Metaphorically, her death is that of the Jews. She cannot be redeemed. The best that can be hoped for the Jews is that in death, like Kundry, they may be forgiven.

Larry: It solves the problem of redemption by having her die.

Gottfried: Exactly. It's so dark at the very end: *Erlösung dem Erlöser* (redemption to the redeemer),¹⁰ but the ending is clear. Parsifal is successful in resisting the temptation to have sex with the Jewish woman, in resisting her diabolically feminine and Jewish wiles. He remains pure but is no longer a fool. Rather than being wondrously ambiguous and spiritual, this is the worst and lowest of racist, antisemitic claptrap.

Larry: Of the many Wagnerites and others who have attended performances of *Parsifal*, how many of them do you think are aware that Kundry represents the Jews?

Gottfried: I think it's so clear, and from the moment she enters "wildly" enters on stage in Act 1, from "Arabia..."

Larry: Sophisticated, intoxicated Wagnerites play this coy game where they claim that because for example Beckmesser—like Kundry and Alberich— isn't explicitly stated by Wagner to be a Jew, imputations of antisemitism are therefore moot.

¹⁰ A take off by Wagner of the Nietzsche saying: "I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers look more redeemed." Instead Wagner via *Parsifal* intends to redeem Christ himself, by purging him, and solving the greatest problem of Christianity in the "Aryan" imagination, the Jewish blood of Jesus.

Here's another question, do you think that there is a more poisonously antisemitic representation in all of art than Kundry? She is the character that laughed at Christ's agony. It's like the *Oberammergau*¹¹ passion play, but worse in sporting the mantle of high art and with a success and a level of influence that no other artwork has ever had.

Gottfried: In this way Wagner also indirectly condemns Jerusalem and Rome. Wagner writes very clearly that Rome is disgusting and "Judaified;" i.e., the Jesuits go there together with the Jews. We need Bayreuth to be the new center of Aryan spirituality. I grew up in the shadow of the headquarters of this most extreme and disgusting racist and antisemitic hokum.

Larry: Here in America I was the typical Jewish Wagnerite. I loved and revered the art and with it as well the artist, even though I knew early on that he was antisemitic. People claim to easily separate the man from the art, but how feasible is that? It wasn't until the last few years that I finally paid closer attention to what was actually going on in *Parsifal* and what this virtual passion play was really all about. Obfuscated by Wagner's layers of ambiguity and carefully evaded by our music critics was the whole business of Kundry as the Wandering Jew who laughed at Christ's agony. I knew that scholars and historians inveighed against Wagner for *Parsifal*, but I never allowed myself to actually see and digest that *Parsifal* conveys the most serious antisemitic slander ever perpetrated in a major work of art. That's not something our leading music critics want to take note of or ever have. They never speak of it directly and write circles around it.

Gottfried: Beckmesser¹² is also presented as a very brutal...

Larry: Beckmesser and the Nibelungs are brutal, hideous, toxic stereotypes. But because it's high art, it gets likewise rationalized and evaded, and inevitably with the ace card of "ambiguity." Trust not what's there in front of you but what is gleanable between the lines. In the West a lot of opera people don't know German so they don't

¹¹ A Passion Play performed since 1634 by all the inhabitants of the homonymous village. Though significant changes have been wrought since the Nazi era, the play was interpreted as an encapsulation of the worst elements of Christian anti-Judaism, e.g. deicide, supcessionism, collective guilt, etc.

¹² The music critic character from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, widely seen as an anti-Semitic caricature of the influential Viennese Jewish critic Edward Hanslick.

have a sophisticated knowledge and awareness of the very unsophisticated business of prejudice that are the heart and soul of these works. But certainly the Germans and Nazis did.

Gottfried: Yes, they did, and Kaiser Wilhelm did as well. And with them the lower social classes. That the Kaiser was falling on his knees before Richard Wagner is as political as having the leading antisemitic theorist and Wagner son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain¹³ as the advisor of the imperial family.

Larry: Lets go back to King Ludwig now. He worshipped Wagner as an artist but he was not antisemitic. Was he like Toscanini and Friedelind in not seeing these issues with Wagner? He fought with Wagner about Levi¹⁴ and Ludwig prevailed in having him conduct the premiere of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth. There was a lot of back and forth between them about this. But did Ludwig not see the antisemitic stereotypes in the *Ring* cycle, *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*? Or was he intoxicated into passivity on this the way Wagnerites everywhere have been ever since?

Gottfried: Yes, that's it. He was so under the drug of the music, of Wagner, that any such inklings were likely suppressed.

At the time of *Parsifal*, Ludwig was already seriously confused as a result of some degree of mental illness. He was already a therapeutic case. To what extent their relationship had sexual overtones remains open to debate.

Larry: Let's move on to your uncle, Wieland Wagner, Wolfgang's brother. How did they manage so to obfuscate his tenure at Flossenbürg¹⁵? We knew he was there, but nobody knew the full extent of what transpired there, nor did anybody ask probing questions. It was never discussed. His mistress Anja Silia¹⁶ implies that he was very remorseful about what he had done. But did he ever himself address this publicly? Did he ever express any public remorse

¹³ Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927) British born racialist, pan-German philosopher. Married into the Wagner family, wrote "The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century" and is seen as Hitler's "John the Baptist."

¹⁴ Hermann Levi, noted German Jewish conductor. 1839-1900, most known for conducting the first performance of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth in 1882.

¹⁵ A Nazi concentration camp (1938-1945) in Bavaria with slave laborers, around 30,000 people perished there.

¹⁶ Anja Silia, German Soprano (1940-) had an affair with Wieland Wagner and later distanced herself from Bayreuth.

or regret about what happened or for that matter about Hitler and Nazism?

Gottfried: No, he never addressed this clearly, publicly. Behind the scenes, there was all kinds of skullduggery within the inner circle surrounding public discussion. Because of the delicate legal and reputational issues involved, there was an often tacit kind of blackmailing that went on among the Wagners and their circles. There was always the tacit threat of talking more explicitly about Flossenbürg.

Meanwhile, the strategy of the “new” Bayreuth after 1945 for dealing with its already widely-known enthusiastic collaborations with Hitler and Nazism had to be about more than silence. The answer? To be “friends” with Jewish musicians and Jewish Wagnerites, traditions of which go back to Wagner’s creation of his music dramas. The other cornerstone of Wieland’s remaking of Wagner was that instead of the symbolism of Nazism, he used Freudian and Jungian symbolism in the heyday of psychoanalysis, widely perceived to have been a phenomenon of Jewish science, spirituality and sensibility. Thus did Wieland mask himself and Wagner’s operas. It’s “philosemitic antisemitism,” as I have demasked it my website collage.

Larry: My sense of Jung was that he was, like Richard Strauss, a “soft” collaborator. I never got the sense that he was anything more than casually antisemitic. He didn’t seem personally invested in it, notwithstanding all his work exploring and thereby validating the powers of mythology.

Gottfried: Having a Jewish daughter-in-law, Richard Strauss was perforce a “soft” collaborator. When he later awoke to the consequences of Nazism, he felt deeply ashamed. This became clear in my discussion with leading Strauss scholar, Dr. Stephen Kohler.

As for Jung, I think antisemitism is there, in his article on Wotan and in the implications of his theories of the “collective unconscious.” Which brings us back to Wieland Wagner and his showcasing of Wagner with reference to Freud and Jung, shifting the dialogue from politics and history to psychology and psychoanalysis. The big German industrialist sponsors of Wagner and New Bayreuth, like Krupp, seemed to understand the need to back such abstraction in the immediate post-war period. It obscured not only the history and politics of Wagner and Bayreuth, but also the aesthetics: the

*Reichstagspartei*¹⁷ scenery Wieland learned initially, under the protection of the *Führer*, who told Wieland to take the architecture and art of Nürnberg as his model. Wieland escaped to the French occupation zone because the Americans would have put him in prison. As we know, there are numerous photos and newsreels showing Hitler with Wieland and Wolfgang and likewise with Albert Speer.

Larry: They really were all war criminals.

Gottfried: Yes, they were. I suggested that in my own stage direction of *Lohengrin* for Dessau. Not surprisingly, it was hated. I recreated the box where Hitler was sitting in the Dessau opera house, which was built by Hitler. I made this box empty. I had wanted to put in a puppet of Hitler there but they did not allow me to do that.

Larry: Tell us more about this production. As I recall, a central concept was the whole business of not being able to question Lohengrin about where he comes from and otherwise about his past. What resonance for the Wagners, Bayreuth and Nazism!

Gottfried: In the middle of my production was a metaphor of the ideological training of Gottfried, the murdered Prince of Brabant around whom the plot revolves. In the picture of the set design we see the pillars of a church with its roots pulled up. What's being demonstrated is that when you cut off the Jews, you eliminate the basis of Christianity. You cannot discuss Jesus without the rabbinic tradition. It gets so absurd. I also showed Ortrud as the evil Jewess who poisoned the Aryan Elsa. Heinrich Mann¹⁸ wrote on this, of her connection to Kundry.

Larry: Is there likewise any intimation of Jewishness for Venus?

Gottfried: Yes, when you consider the role of seductiveness and the falsity of that seductiveness, Venus bears striking similarities to Kundry. Sensual pleasure derailing sacred duties and journeys.

Larry: The world was marveling when Wieland did his *Tannhäuser* with Grace Bumbry as *Die Scharze Venus*." Everyone thought, oh, it's so liberal, so thoughtful, so opened up to have the first black singer at Bayreuth. But if you think about it from the racist

¹⁷ Nazi party rallies held in Nuremberg (the so-called "city of the movement") almost every year.

¹⁸ Gottfried may be confusing here Heinrich with his brother Thomas, as Heinrich was an avowed anti-Wagnerian, whilst Thomas engaged in a lifelong personal struggle with his own deep seated Wagnerism.

viewpoint, what the opera is really all about comes into sharper focus: As in *Parsifal*, the result of these forays into miscegenation is a dangerous mixing of the races. Visually, the appearance of very darkly black Grace Bumbry must have been a real red flag to legions of Germans and Wagnerites who really do understand the white supremacist foundations of Wagner's life and art.

Gottfried: Grace Bumbry did once touch on this in discussion in her later years, on the "liberality" that hides what's really there. Backstage at that time, you would hear these racist comments about her. So, yes, the issue of having a black singer break a barrier of racism for performers at Bayreuth obscured the bigger issue of what such racial casting implied in sync with the deeper meaning and import of the opera.

Larry: So if I were a Nazi I would at first be upset to have a black person on the stage, but then, if I got involved in the opera and considered the staging, I would say to myself: Tannhäuser is indulging in sensuality and at the same time flirting with miscegenation. Look at where this is taking him! And look where it's taking us, the German *volk*, this extreme mixing of the races, of Germans with other races—blacks, Jews!

Gottfried: It's all there.

Larry: Do you think Wieland actually knew, consciously and deliberately, that he was playing with this?

Gottfried: Yes, but he had to hide his own Flossenbürg past. I was hurt that my cousins (Wieland's children) were so supportive of and conspiring with this hiding, this secret of their holy father, Wieland, of his having been the darling of "Uncle Wolf" and hiding Wieland's obsession for power. Of going with Hitler's Mercedes from Berlin on the highway built by Hitler for military purposes, from Munich to Bayreuth to Berlin. The Mercedes took Wieland from Berlin to Bayreuth where slave workers did his preparations.

My father Wolfgang was also favored by Hitler. I have written about it in my autobiography, which caused his break with me. From the moment he became the sole director of the Wagner Festival following Wieland's death in 1966, this hidden obsession for power became more and more evident.

With their "*Ring* of peace," under the mantle of Jungian archetypes and symbols, Wieland and his conductor Karl Böhm covered themselves. Böhm replaced von Karajan, whose career

developed in the *Führer* times and who subsequently made his own empire in Salzburg with the old Austrian Nazis. Braunau am Inn, where Hitler was born, was half an hour by car from Salzburg. I was in Braunau and had occasion to speak in front of the Hitler house. They asked me, Gottfried, “What can be done with the Hitler house? My suggestion was that they have directional signs from the house to all the concentration camps, noting the six million Jews who were murdered there.” There was no response. Hungarian TV reported on my visit, documentation of which is on my website.

Larry: In the Max Lorenz documentary, Dietrich Fischer Dieskau at one point takes center stage to give the German viewpoint of the relationship between ordinary Germans to Hitler and Nazism. In essence, what he says is now familiar: We were honorable people, we were German citizens, we didn’t know everything that was happening, we didn’t necessarily approve of what was happening, and we obviously didn’t hate Jews. (The documentary features supportive commentary from a colleague of those years, Jewish Hilde Zadek.) We were not bad people. We were citizens and soldiers fulfilling our duty. Again, there was this situation of no expressed remorse or regret. Rather, there was denial and justification.

Gottfried: The deformation of the brain within the Third Reich went on after the *Shoah*. The need was very strong for people to find some way of preserving something good from their participation in what happened. I’ve quoted Bruno Bettelheim, and also Primo Levi. On one side is the great delusion and danger of denial. On the other, there might be hope for Europe, a hope that can only come from a radical opening up of this box of Pandora of the truth.

There has never been in Germany and Europe an honest denazification. That was a burden for the generations after.



Figure 115 - Gottfried Wagner, 2006, with permission

Larry: Let me jump from here to something else. Tangential to this discussion of coming to grips with the reality of fascism and national socialism and our passive collusions in these developments is our circumstance, in this country and globally, of dealing with our current presidency [Donald Trump], which has so stoked the flames of white nationalism and also antisemitism, even as the President has been pro-Israel and has Jewish grandchildren. This is very difficult for people like you and I who are very concerned about antisemitism, and about Israel, about the future of Jews and the ever-hovering possibility of renewed attempts at genocide. What can you say about Trump and what's going on in America and globally under his auspices?

Gottfried: It's very clear to me, actually. I have a close friend, David Friedman, who is the director of solar energy in Israel. His work is in the Negev desert. He comes from a Jewish English background, with a left liberal education. When it comes to these questions, when militant groups are constantly aiming to destroy and blow up Israel and kill you and your people, then of course, you have to think *a priori* about your survival.

Larry: I totally agree, but are you comfortable with Donald Trump as the vector for Israel's survival?

Gottfried: Virtually everything he does is inflammatory and under his influence hatred is spiraling out of control. As Spinoza observed, hatred will only increase hatred. Only love can overcome.

But not in the sense of what Daniel Barenboim is doing, going into the Gaza strip to perform the central European music of Beethoven and Wagner. What he really needs to do is find a way to include and integrate Arabic music in concerts. Inclusion, integration and love are not Trump strategies.

Larry: On the surface, it's good that Trump has stood up for Israel and that he's been confrontational with Iran and Islamic militants and about Islamic antisemitism, which is often explicitly genocidal. But all this hatred has been unleashed in the process. A lot of those rallying around Trump are otherwise extremely antisemitic. I don't see what's achieved in switching from Islamic antisemitism, which can be as bad as it gets, to neo-Nazi antisemitism, which can be indistinguishable in character and danger.

Gottfried: Trump is a violent capitalist. He has vailed in all essential aspects of his politics. He has strongly damaged the international image of the USA. Inevitably, what really counts in this kind of politics are markets. Israel and Jews are strategic, and extremely important as such. I mean, even though his family includes Jews, does he really care about Jews any more than he really cares about evangelical Christians? Nonsense! It's all business. It has nothing to do with moral and spiritual issues.

January 20, 2021 is not the end of Trump and his troupes. Biden began in a contrastingly very modest way in his role as the new President, but he immediately signed important contracts and reopened the door for America and its citizens to the rest of the world. How he will negotiate the delicate situation of Israel remains to be seen.

At one point I was doing some teaching in the Gaza Strip, in a multicultural religious group with a catholic priest who is Arabic. He was forbidden in his school to display any kind of symbol, no Star of David, no cross. I remember trying to say to these kids that we have to find a way to talk with each other. We have to learn from each other. If we don't do that, we will be at war. When I crossed the border from Israel, the Israeli soldier screening me asked, "what are you doing there with the Arabs? Are you cooperating with radical groups?" I became a suspect for my attitude and efforts.

Do you know the author, Arno Gruen? He wrote on these issues, on "the other in ourselves." He and Ralph Giordano are my favorite authors. I met him and we talked about these difficult issues. He had

escaped as a Jewish boy from Berlin. I also met the nephew of Einstein, Lou, who did not get any help from his famous uncle. He had endured pogroms. His rabbi was killed in front of him in Ulm. He would not talk one word of German until he met me. Then, after sixty years, he looked at me and spoke German with a *Schwäbisch* dialect. We sat together with his wife who was Jewish and who explained that he resolutely ceased speaking German after having been so brutalized growing up in Germany.

Communication can be sparked by ineffable connections of spirit that can be gleaned in the eyes, by one's countenance, but appearances can be deceiving. I'm often told I have the Wagner mien, that I resemble my great grandfather Richard Wagner. But I am so radically different from my forbearer. Yehuda Nir would always say something about my Wagner blood and I would many times counter that my blood is also that of my mother, whose makeup was far less German and far less Nazi. I do not like the whole "blood" discussion at all!

Yehuda died in 2014 in New York. I wanted to fly over for his funeral, but could not because I was still dealing with the fallout of my own father's (Wolfgang Wagner's) death in 2010. But it was not for reasons of mourning my father that I had to remain. I was never in denial of my having been the only son of Wolfgang Wagner. I needed to see how Thielemann, Katharina and Eva were dealing with his passing and legacy. As it turned out, I was informed by the newspapers rather than by the family of my father's death. The newspapers wanted to know what I had to say and I hadn't yet even heard that he died!

Larry: How do you feel about the current joint stewardship of Bayreuth under Eva and Katharina?

Gottfried: They struggled with each other for power, not so unlike the way their father Wolfgang and uncle Wieland fought with each other for power. It could seem like the two sets of brothers and other family feuds in the *Ring* cycle. Then of course there were all kinds of power alliances, some of them with Jewishness in the background, and sometimes in the foreground with figures like Daniel Barenboim and Georg Solti. Eva was always very close to Solti, who did not like my father at all.

Larry: Why is that?

Gottfried: Solti, a notoriously demanding Wagner specialist, came to Bayreuth to conduct a new production of the *Ring* cycle

directed by Peter Hall in 1983. In the face of his considerable demands, my father became very nasty. He did not say to him “Oh you Jew!” but antisemitism was in the atmosphere. I met Solti in Chicago during his tenure as conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He gave me an endorsement for my work on Weil and Brecht. “What can we do with Gottfried!” he joked. “He cannot be corrupted by anybody!” Sir Georg Solti has always been very generous with me.

Larry: Solti was another Jewish Wagnerite who evaded in-depth discussion of Wagner’s antisemitism. For decades into the postwar period, they all still did—e.g., Barenboim, Levine, Solti, even Bernstein. They all came to that same conclusion: great art, bad man, there’s no reconciling of the two and they don’t have to be reconciled. Case closed.

Have you maintained relations with Eva and Katharina?

Gottfried: Having been informed by the media rather than directly by them when our father died was unforgiveable. Half a year before, Eva sent me an SMS, “Father would like to see you.” As I had nothing to hide, I had no problem and was ready to get on the next plane. I planned to look him in the eye and say, “Father you made your choices for which side of the street to be on—with Uncle Wolf and Nazism. These are not choices I could ever have made or that I was ever asked to forgive. You were your mother’s darling, the unrepentant Nazi and apologist for Hitler. Likewise choices I could never endorse and was never asked to forgive. These decisions determined your life, and with them, our lives diverged irreconcilably.

On the eve of my departure for Frankfurt to see my father, who I hadn’t seen since my first trip to Israel and in light of his refusal to talk about topics deemed taboo for New Bayreuth, my father’s Doctor (Thierry) communicated to me—not directly but through my father’s office: “Your father is not in a condition to receive you tomorrow.” They prevented me from seeing my father when he was still alive. My father was not senile, but he did have some symptoms of dementia. I have all the emails my sister collected when she wrote me from the hospital. Among them were one quoting my father saying, “I’m sure Gottfried never ever wants to see me,” followed by a reply from me: “Of course I’m coming.”

Eva and Katharina didn’t want me to see my father while he was still alive, and not just to prevent stress and hurt. There was business

to be finalized between Thielemann and Katharina. They had already decided every detail of the funeral program. It was to include Mendelssohn! Shows what good philosemites they all were and are, right?

Then the urn with my father's ashes disappeared. He was cremated without my being informed. Legally, Katharina could bring the urn in her suitcase to her apartment in Berlin, put it on her pianoforte, and play music from *Tristan*. They alleged that that was my father's wish, which he had clearly expressed, that for his funeral at the family grave in Bayreuth, only Katharina, Eva, and that old Nazi Verena (their other sibling), should be present. The bad son Gottfried was not to be there. This was his wish. That's why I was not informed by the family when he died. When I asked my sister's lawyer, Brandner, in Bayreuth, about the fate of the urn with my father's ashes, I was blocked. "We will not answer your questions."

This kind of behavior coalesced with the commemoration of Wolfgang Wagner at Bayreuth in 2010. Here, slimy Christian Thielemann declared himself to be the musical son of Wolfgang Wagner. Thielemann was the darling of Wolfgang and Gudrun Wagner, always strongly under the influence of his career-pushing mother and his ghost writer Lemke-Matwey.

At this service my father's very servile doctor spoke at length. Wolfgang Wagner was presented as a brilliant man of vision. It was made clear that it was Wolfgang's intention that his daughters should run the festival and have jurisdiction over all the World War 2 documents between Winifred, the Wagner family and Hitler that have yet to be made public. Winifred was careful to conceal those documents from the American forces that occupied Bayreuth—from "those Jews," as she described them—who asked that they be handed over.

It's important to know that Richard Wagner left no last will and testament, in the wake of which there was chaos, and false documents, eventually including Cosima's last will. All legal procedures of the Bayreuth Festival from 1883, the year of Wagner's death, onwards, including the last will of Wagner's son Siegfried and the New Bayreuth Foundation in 1973, are based on legal fraud. This scandalous situation has been documented by Professor Heinz Holzhauser. I did not want to get mixed up in all this.

Larry: So let me ask you about the infamous *Meistersinger* production Katharina did in 2007 that was criticized as so over the top in being anti-antisemitic. Are you implying that it was not coming from her own genuine vision and concern—that it just a kind of political correctness display?

Gottfried: What was genuine is that she thought she was doing a kind of exorcism at the outset of her tenure as co-director. The logic here was that now that Gottfried had done so much around the question of antisemitism, made so much public disturbance about it, we have to take the reins on this issue forefront at Bayreuth, with our productions and with Jewish conductors and directors. We have to co-opt what Gottfried has done. The time was again right for another major exorcism of the deeply rooted antisemitism of the Bayreuth Festival, and for the international business of opera and Wagner, Inc.

Larry: But when you think of it, is not this exorcism always the underlying quest for post-Holocaust Wagnerites? They are like Tannhäuser seeking salvation and Parsifal seeking to heal the otherwise mortal wound to Germankind—pilgrimages to purge the evil and sin of Wagner’s antisemitism.

Gottfried: I was assistant to Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez for the Centennial *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth. Boulez is of course a very ambiguous figure in this issue of reconciling the past. Just as Wieland would not sanction any overt discussion of politics or history, Boulez would not talk about what happened in Paris during the Vichy period or any other aspect of the dark side of France’s collaborations with Nazism.

Initially, Father wanted to do this centennial *Ring* cycle with Peter Stein, the famous German stage director of the *Schaubühne* in Berlin, but Stein hated my father. When I took him from the Berlin airport to Bayreuth, I made a point of showing him all the places of the *Reichsparteitagsgelaende*. I wanted to gauge his reaction when I showed him the places where Hitler sat with the Wagner family as millions passed by. His reaction was palpable enragement about the Nazi history of Bayreuth. In this mood, Peter Stein and Wolfgang Wagner met and hated each other. Stein’s stage direction would undoubtedly have been more ideologically radical.

But I have to defend Chéreau. I was first assistant to him. I was present when he was working on scenes with Mime, and I asked him if he had read the essay “Attempts on Wagner” by Adorno. Wolfgang

was there and became very nervous. In short order, my father offered me a free-time salary in efforts to try to get rid of me. He wanted me out of Bayreuth altogether. And I said to him, "Father, you can offer me a million and I will not go." I was then demoted to working with the second cast of the *Ring* production; but the attacks became so intense and persistent that I just couldn't do it any longer.

I escaped to Ireland, passing through London, where I met with Charles Spencer, who was director of the new Philharmonic Chorus. He had lost his parents in Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was my first Jewish family. I remember pouring my heart out to him. Charles, "What I'm trying to do is impossible. I just cannot do this any longer." Somehow this opened his eyes.

I am always very proud when I can make out of Jewish Wagnerites realistic human beings. What I ask of Jewish Wagnerites is just to think about their circumstance. Don't get so far into self-alienation and self-abnegation that you deny where you come from and who you are. I have done this with different Jewish friends. "Oh, but the music is so wonderful" is always the rejoinder.

I spoke in Hempstead at the synagogue and was invited to speak by the Wagner Society of England. Following my presentation, the Society's President, Mr. Adler, himself of German-Jewish background, took over and said, in front of everybody, "Shame on you! It's good that people like you no longer hold sway in Germany!" He then ran out of the hall, banging the door behind him. It was an unforgettable and shocking moment, but also a telling one about the depth of disturbance of this issue for Jews. I somehow had the presence to salvage the moment with a quip: "Oh my goodness," I said. "Here's what can happen when you are Jewish and a Wagnerite!" The room then erupted in laughter.

Larry: One of the problems you and I encounter with Jewish Wagnerites is the accusation that in supporting Israel's largely symbolic ban on Wagner we are calling for and endorsing censorship. How can we get past this impasse of seeming contradiction around the special circumstances of Israel?

Gottfried: We do not want a second Holocaust in Israel. Let's start with that. There's an enormous responsibility for all Europeans for the state of Israel. They are all responsible for its security. They cannot keep doing the dirty, double-dealing business of selling armaments to forces that are openly committed to Israel's destruction

and then sell anti-missiles to Israel. What kind of support is that? When I speak like this, of course, I'm at my most unpopular.

Larry: So Israel is an exceptional case. But beyond respecting the wishes of those few remaining Holocaust survivors in Israel who initially called for the ban on Wagner, when it comes to Wagner, what are we saying we want to the world to do or not do?

Gottfried: Wagner can teach us a lot about antisemitism and racism and this should be always documented. And it should always be forefront. This is central to my discussions and lectures in Israel, as documented in my archives and on my website.

6 million dead bodies must always be remembered. If the work of remembering is not done, the consequences will be a Europe that falls back into nationalism and antisemitism, and America that follows suit.

Larry: I find myself in both places. While I do not want to censor or ban Wagner in principle, I affirm and support Jewish protest of antisemitism on those all too rare occasions when it happens, whether it be regarding the words of a politician or the creations of an artist. I remember how heartened I was to hear of the protests around staging Wagner's *Ring* cycle in Los Angeles, and later for *Klinghoffer*. These were all too rare occasions of Jewish protest.

Gottfried: I think it was significant that at that gathering at the Hempstead synagogue, the one person who did stand in protest of the LA Opera *Ring* cycle was reviled and booed. I stood up to defend him, but we were alone in what we were doing and trying to communicate.

I was invited to speak by a liberal Jewish congregation that was otherwise celebrating the LA Opera *Ring* with parties. There I spoke bluntly about the seriousness of Wagner's antisemitism in a manner that was otherwise absent from discussions in the media and events. Alas, I was the only one doing this thankless work, which was ignored. I was silenced. What I had to say was not accepted, not engaged, not liked, not welcome. That was made repeatedly clear.

I also spoke at the American Jewish University in L.A. on Wagner's antisemitism. The Jewish community with close connections with the Schoenbergs did not talk to me at all. I did not exist for them. My friend David Klein who was very committed to open dialogue was quite shocked at how disrespectfully I was being treated. [L. Randol Schoenberg, grandson of composer Arnold Schoenberg, is probably best known as the real-life attorney who assisted Maria Altmann, played by Helen Mirren, in retrieving looted

artwork from the Nazis in the film *Woman in Gold*. Despite his sterling credentials as outspokenly anti-Nazi, Schoenberg was supportive of the LA Opera *Ring* initiative and took public issue with Gottfried for the latter's endorsement of Israel's ban on Wagner.]

Gottfried: So here we are, you and I, two outsiders of Wagner discourses. We have some differences of knowledge and experience in some areas, but in our contra-Wagnerism, we are remarkably similar.

Larry: Indeed, there have been many Jews who have been outspoken around Wagner's antisemitism, but I don't know of even one other Jewish Wagnerite like myself who came to see how deeply troubled his Wagnerism was and who has moved away from his earlier self-designation and indeed away from Wagner and Wagnerism altogether. Similarly, there are many scholars who have noted the seriousness of Wagner's antisemitism, and its influence on Hitler and Nazism, but I know of no other, like yourself, who has gone so far as to designate Wagner and the Wagner family as Holocaust perpetrators.

So where has this brought us? In your case, you've gone from defacing Arno Breker's bust of Wagner outside Wahnfried [there are 5 Breker busts of Wagner in the City of Bayreuth] when you were a child to giving testimony to the Wagner family having been Holocaust perpetrators.

In my own case, well, I've come to understand and respect the deeply troubled psychology of Jewish Wagnerism and to honor my need for healing. Needless to add, there are no longer any pictures of Wagner on my living room walls!

Gottfried: Yours is a story that should be told on film, as I suggested to Petrus Vonderleft, who made a feature on me and my *Twilight of the Wagners*. Hallelujah, Larry, for your coming of age and wisdom on Wagner. I am always so gratified when I help a Jewish friend to have greater self-awareness and perspective. We feel so much better when we don't have to live with so much poison.