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Strauss Still Unabashed About Ties With Nazis

By Cpl. KLAUS MANN
Staff Correspondent

GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN (Bavaria). Mai 26, (Delayed) - This Alpine village was in prewar days one of Germany's most fashionable winter and summer resorts. Now there are no glamorous tourists, but picturesque Garmisch can still boast some illustrious residents. One of them is the world's most celebrated living composer, Richard Strauss.

I made the fairly long trip from Munich to see the grand old man of European music. As well as paying homage to his creative genius, I wanted to have a look at an old opportunist about whose behavior during the past 12 years there have been rather unsavory stories. It would be interesting, I thought, to hear what Strauss had to say himself about his experiences under the Nazi regime.

The composer and his family occupy a comfortable, roomy villa surrounded by a large, beautifully-kept garden. A companion and I introduced ourselves as "two American correspondents." I thought it wiser not to disclose my identity; our host might have been embarrassed or irritated. One of the first public gestures Richard Strauss made in 1933, after establishment of the Third Reich, was directed against my father. The composer was among those artists and intellectuals who signed a Nazi-inspired manifesto denouncing a Richard Wagner essay by Thomas Mann as "an insult to the German genius."

When later asked what he had found so "insulting" in this psychological eulogy, he shrugged the question off with the cynical remark: "I don't know, I haven't read the stuff."

Not realizing that he was receiving the son of a man he had once irresponsibly slandered, he was all smiles and gracious cordiality as he shook hands with us. His health was just fine, he assured us - and, in fact, he looked surprisingly well preserved for a man of 83. His face, with its pinkish complexion, beamed serenely under his silver hair. There was nothing senile about him.

NO MORE PLANS

Yet when we asked him about his artistic plans he shook his head with philosophical resignation: "No plans for me anymore! I've written 15 operas, not to mention my symphonic pieces and my many songs. That's enough for one lifetime. Don't you think I have deserved some rest?"

We agreed, then listened respectfully to his complaints about the way in which the defunct Nazi regime had been dealing with his recent opera "Die Liebe der Danae" (Danae's Love).

The master resented such lack of consideration on the part of a government with whom he had otherwise been on correct, if not friendly, terms.

"Of course", he said, "this was not the first disturbing incident. I have had two rather serious conflicts with the Nazi administration."

One of these "conflicts" developed only last year, when Herr Strauss was supposed to take a bombed-out German family into his spacious villa. Such a nuisance was too much for him to bear. He protested, appealed to Hitler. The Fuehrer remained adamant. Every citizen, he replied, had to make sacrifices in a time of national emergency; Herr Strauss could not be exempted.

HITLER WAS MEAN

This decision - the only sensible one, as far as I know, Hitler has ever made - seemed outrageous to the selfish old man. Remembering the scandalous incident, he got very annoyed again.

"A bunch of strangers in my house!" he cried. "Imagine! A family with children, if you please! I didn't know what to do. Really, I thought of leaving Germany. But how could I afford to lose my main market? We have about 80 opera houses in this country. That's where most of my royalties come from."

"You mean you had about 80 opera houses," I ventured to interrupt him. It took him some time to understand what I tried to say. Exclusively concerned with his own affairs, he seemed hardly aware of such trifling occurrences as the destruction of German cities.

The second, or rather the first, collision between the master's interests and Nazi policy took place more than ten years ago, during the initial phase of the Third Reich. At that time Strauss had based one of his operas, "The Silent Woman," on a libretto written by Stefan Zweig. Rehearsals at the Dresden Opera House - the institute which had the privilege of presenting most of the Strauss works for the first time - were already well underway when Goebbels interfered on account of Stefan Zweig's racial background. In this case, Hitler proved more diplomatic than his Minister for Propaganda and Enlightenment. He allowed "The Silent Woman" to be shown a few times in Dresden, whereupon it disappeared from the repertoire and remained buried for the rest of the "thousand years."

"The whole affair was indeed most tiresome," Strauss told us. "I hated to lose Stefan Zweig - the best librettist I've ever had since the death of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who, by the way, was also partly Jewish. Naturally, after this experience, my relations with the Government remained a little cool for some time. But in the course of years, both the gentlemen in Berlin and I forgot about the unpleasant affair. In general, I have been treated very decently ever since."

Anti-Semitism or any other manifestation of Nazi madness irritated him only when it affected his own interests. Richard Strauss has never said a word against the defamation of his Jewish colleagues.

CUT BY WALTER

On the contrary, when Bruno Walter was forbidden to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, back in 1933, it was Richard Strauss who replaced him - thus helping the Nazi authorities who would otherwise have been forced to cancel the concert or have it performed by a second-rate conductor.

My companion mentioned the Bruno Walter incident, but the master remained unruffled.

"Why shouldn't I take over the concert?" he asked with an almost disarming naivete.

"It wouldn't have helped my old friend Walter if I had refused to do so. Yet it seems I have hurt his feelings - I really don't understand why. When I saw him in Salzburg,

some time ago, he didn't even say hello to me. Cut me in the street! An old friend of mine! Isn't that too silly?"

It would have been senseless to explain to him why Bruno Walter resented his action, and why all decent people shared his indignation. He wouldn't have understood. Nor did he understand why my friend and I exchanged bewildered glances when he called Baldur von Schierach, former Nazi governor of Austria, "a very nice chap" because he had granted certain privileges to the Richard Strauss family.

Another Nazi boss of whom the master spoke with sincere warmth was Hans Frank, governor of Poland, who was responsible for atrocities of truly appalling dimensions. Strauss praised the governor's delicate artistic taste. The Fuehrer too, he added, was able to appreciate good music - for instance, music by Richard Strauss. In short, if it hadn't been for those two minor misunderstandings about Stefan Zweig and the Garmisch villa, the Nazis were more or less all right.

I had stopped participating in the conversation for the past hour or so. As we took our leave, my companion asked the master for an autograph. He was only too willing to let us have two autographed portraits - one for my friend, the other for me.

"Thanks ever so much," I said, "I am not a collector."

He glanced at me with casual surprise, then shrugged his shoulders. "An ignorant little newspaper-man who doesn't appreciate genius" is probably what he thought.

But if it hadn't been for his genius and my appreciation of it, I might have told him just why I didn't care for his autograph.

(Der Beitrag ist dreispaltig, mit einem Foto, das eine Viertelseite hoch und zwei Spalten breit ist. Darauf sieht man Strauss dirigieren, den rechten Arm erhoben, die Augen geschlossen, so daß sein Gesicht den Eindruck großer Konzentration erweckt. Darüber die Überschrift:

HIS HEART BEAT IN NAZI-TIME

Darunter:

RICHARD STRAUSS

... An old opportunist who heiled Hitler)

The Stars and Stripes, Tuesday, May 29, 1945, p.4.