

Chapter Two.

(1833)

The young Pianist in Paris.

In later life Hermann Cohen was himself to relate how, in his impatience to reach Paris, he kept asking his travelling companions, "Can you see Paris yet"? Finally on July 5th.1834 when the conductor shouted 'Paris', Hermann couldn't contain his joy.

At the time when this new young pianist arrived in Paris from Hamburg, the city was at a high, politically, philosophically and artistically, and Romanticism was in full flood. Getting ensconced in Paris was not easy in spite of the letters of recommendation in Madame Cohen's possession. Moreover no one could decide on a tutor for the boy. One friend said such a boy should not be entrusted to the 'moody Chopin', others suggested the 'classical Zimmermann' or the 'fiery Liszt'. Hermann said he preferred the last-named, and managed to get introduced to him. Liszt who was busy man, at first felt like refusing, but when Hermann's mentor insisted, he agreed to hear him play. This first audition was enough to make Liszt change his mind. Hermann soon became the favourite pupil of Liszt and accompanied his master to the distinguished salons of the capital where he met several contemporary celebrities.

Liszt really recognised an image of his own early life in his pupil. From then on he liked to have Hermann accompany him like a shadow. There is an extant portrait of the adolescent Hermann. (See plate 'Hermann as a young man') His appearance is typically Semitic, the bridge of the nose straight and pointed, the mouth clear-cut and very Jewish. In this profile, sketched on a medallion, he looks out with an intense expression. He holds his head straight and proud. His high forehead is intelligent and his hair is brushed back. Hermann was only thirteen but his small stature made him look even younger. In this face however, as we see in another drawing, willpower was dominant, touched by an expression of basic goodness.

Hermann's fame spread rapidly, the newspapers took notice of him and

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invitations to give recitals poured in. He was out late at night and began to disregard his mother's anxiety. He tells us that he became the 'tyrant of the family.' Everything was geared around Hermann; his brother and sister were at his beck and call.

Writing later on to Fr. Marie-Alphonse Ratisbonne, Hermann admits,

"I was spoilt in the salons with its secular society. Soon they were determined to make me the scape-goat of all their reprehensible ideas - atheism, pantheism, Fourierism, (1), Saint-Simonism, (2) socialism, anarchy, terrorism, abolition of marriage, communism and hedonism. There was soon room for all this in the head of a fourteen year old...I then became a zealous propagandist of these groups and consequently the Benjamin of more than one of the modern prophets of so-called civilization." (Confessions)

Meanwhile Liszt and his pupil were inseparable. Liszt was indeed extremely popular. He has been described as the first 'pop star', people hunting for souvenirs as they do with his modern counterparts. He had been quite religious in his youth but became lax later on. He threw in his lot with radicals like Lamartine, Lamennais, Victor Hugo, Saint-Beuve and their friends. Liszt was too a noted philanderer. This must have had some influence on Hermann, and certainly he seems to have been caught up in the whirlwind. Liszt in his youth had been given the nickname, "Putzig" by his tutor, Czerny. The name means 'funny', or 'cute'. Liszt proceeded to bestow this nickname on his pupil, changing it to the less Germanic form 'Puzzi'. The novelist and celebrity Georges Sand, found

this nickname charming and amusing, and she gave it wide currency in her writings. Later, writing to Sand, Liszt remarked:

"It is our old friend, young Hermann Cohen from Hamburg, painted by you at the age of 15, who accompanied Prince Belgiojoso, under the name of 'Puzzi', his pale sad face, dark hair, and frail figure contrasting with the fair hair and open features of the prince. The dear child has again given proof of his precocious mind and his deep artistic feeling which makes me forecast for him a brilliant and eventful future." (3)

These last lines are evidence of the wholehearted attachment of master for pupil and indeed of Liszt's unselfish nature.

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Through association with Liszt Hermann met many famous people. There was Felicite Lamennais, mentioned above, 'the fallen eagle', whose ideas eventually brought him into conflict with the Church, and who was famous throughout France and beyond.

Concerning Lamennais Hermann writes:

"He took me on his lap and placed his hands on my head. He took a book from the drawer in his table and inscribed it;

'A souvenir offered to my dear little Puzzi, from F. Lamennais.'

It was a book of poems called, 'Paroles d'un Croyant' or 'Words of a Believer.'" (Confessions.)

This was Lamennais's reaction to the rejection of his ideas by Rome. Hermann read the book eagerly. 'I dreamt of nothing else than of battles, prisons, liberty and equality'. The ideas of Lamennais fell on receptive soil in Hermann, who held this new prophet in high esteem.

"Do you remember Puzzi, seated at the feet of the saint of Brittany who said such marvellous things to him with the directness of an apostle." (George Sand in a letter to Liszt.) Ibid.

Hermann could only be spoiled by friends like these who kept putting him on a pedestal.

Then there was George Sand herself who enjoyed literary notoriety. The first time Hermann met her he was attracted to her. He tells us:

"I did not know exactly in what her fame consisted, though I heard people refer to her as the greatest genius of the time. It enhanced my own reputation that I was known to be a friend of the author of 'Lelia'. It even provoked jealousy that I had access to such a person. I was constantly quizzed about her and the contents of her house which were quaint and unusual. People suggested I looked like her with my fine long hair and pale complexion. My name was constantly linked with hers, imagination supplying the answer as to what took place in her attic. But I can say this. She was extremely good to me. She sometimes entertained me for days on end and as she wrote I used prepare cigarettes for her which stimulated her literary efforts. Occasionally she would ask me to play the piano, and as I played she continued to write. I had not in fact read any of her books, but I was certainly impressed from what I heard about them. They were eagerly awaited by the publishers and devoured by the public. I wish now I had never read them and remained satisfied with her acquaintance - otherwise I might have retained the few principles I had." (Confessions)

The young man's devotion must have meant a lot to George Sand. She certainly publicised 'Puzzi' in various articles and letters she wrote. In a letter to Liszt she wrote:

"I should not like to forget the charming 'Puzzi' your star pupil. Raphael and his friend Tebaldo could not have appeared more graceful before gods and men as you two appeared to me recently in the orchestra when all were hushed listening to you and the youngster standing behind you pale and intense, not moving a muscle...." (3)

(When George Sand encountered Hermann in later life after a mutual friend arranged a meeting, she just looked at Hermann in his brown habit and said, 'So you have become a Franciscan', she then turned on her heel and walked away.!)

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It was thanks to George Sand that Hermann gained access to all the salons not only in France but indeed of Europe. Such was the atmosphere in which Hermann moved. Like Liszt in his childhood, he was idolised by many young women in Paris. But unlike Liszt in his youth there was no father in Hermann's case who would insist on work and discipline. Hermann neglected practice and usually had one of George Sand's latest novels open on the piano stool beside him.

Footnotes:

(1) The socialism of Charles Fourier.

(2) Another form of the same founded by Count Saint-Simon.

(3) George Sand: *Lettres d'un Voyageur*. English translation by Sacha Rabinivitch and Patricia Thomson, Penguin Classics 1987.

She was an extraordinary figure. Born Amantine-Aurore-Lucie Dupin in 1804, she came to Paris, having left her husband, and began to write novels which were very successful under the pseudonym George Sand. She smoked cigars and dressed as a man. Hermann Cohen mentions her novel "Lelia". Among her love affairs was one with Alfred de Musset. Later she lived with Frederic Chopin. Her published letters run to many volumes and she mentions Hermann Cohen several times. There is a well-known portrait of George Sand by Auguste Charpentier in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris.

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