Childhood

(1821-1833)

The German city and port of Hamburg lies under the misty veils of the River Alster, which gives it that quality of gentle melancholy characteristic of a place bordering on Scandinavia. In the 9th century St. Anscar, a Benedictine monk from the Abbey of Corbie, greatly devoted to Our Lady, was its first bishop and evangelised northern Germany and Scandinavia. He placed these countries under the protection of the Virgin Mary, queen of apostles. The ancient seal of the Archbishop of Hamburg represents Anscar, clothed in his episcopal vestments kneeling before the Virgin Mary who is holding the child Jesus in her arms.

Since the sixteenth century Hamburg has witnessed the growth of its economic and financial prosperity and the rise of a notable artistic, musical and intellectual culture. Even the Beatles began their rise to fame in Hamburg! It was a city of rich and powerful bankers largely made up of Jews from Spain and Portugal and it was the first place in Germany to have theatre. This helped to open it up to art and music for the whole of Europe. Hamburg thus became the crossroads for the diverse cultures of Europe.

This then was the milieu into which Hermann Cohen was born on November 10th. 1821. Such a contrast between its temporal and spiritual development would surely have influenced the child from Hamburg. He would later bring it renown as a musician, with his profound artistic response to beauty, but he also had an inclination for material prosperity.

Hermann's father, David Abraham Cohen was one of the rich bankers of the town. His mother, Rosalie Benjamin, 'very intelligent and elegant,' brought up her four children, Hermann, Henrietta, Albert and Louis, with an emotional rather than deep attachment to the Jewish religion. Hermann's parents were in fact quite influential in the Jewish environment of Hamburg. The name 'Cohen', Hermann explains in his "Confessions", means 'priest' in Hebrew. The name suggested descent from the High Priest Aaron, through the priestly tribe of Levi. In the synogogue the "Cohennim" exercise the office of priesthood. They lay their hands in blessing on the people from the steps of the sanctuary. Hermann remembered seeing his father and brothers blessing the people in this way.

The religious climate of the first years of his childhood left its mark on Hermann. Early seeds of spiritual life, lost for a while, would bear fruit when he discovered the new covenant. The family however were not deeply committed believers. The Cohens belonged to a liberal movement which was deeply committed the old traditions. The child instinctively felt ill at ease in this atmosphere and preferred the mystery which accompanied the more ancient ritual. He writes in his "Confessions":

"When I saw the Rabbi mount the steps of the sanctuary, draw the curtain and open the door,I waited expectantly."

The mystical soul of the Jewish child expected and sought behind the sacred door, a visible manifestation of the living God as formerly happened in the temple of Jerusalem.

"My expectation was not satisfied when I saw the Levites solemnly take out from a magnificent container a large roll of parchment studded with Hebrew letters and surmounted by a royal crown. The roll of parchment was then carried with great ceremony to a lectern. The cover and crown were removed and the Hebrew scriptures were read aloud. I was full of anxiety during the whole of this ceremony".

(From his Confessions)

(1). The first biography of Hermann Cohen by Canon Sylvain quotes from a document called the "Confessions", which Hermann wrote at the request of his superiors during his novitiate year. It is now lost. This book was translated in English under the title, "Life of Father Hermann", and was published by P.J. Kennedy and Sons, New York, 1925.

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The young boy had an attraction for prayer and he sometimes invited his little sister to pray with him. They liked singing German hymns as well as psalms and other prayers which fed their religious feelings.

Hermann and his eldest brother Albert were sent by their father to the best

college in town which was in fact non-Jewish .The two brothers on account of being Jews met with a hard time.It was a big shock to the pampered boy,but Hermann reacted with some courage and tried to prove himself in study.So even at the tender age of nine he made rapid progress.

Hermann writes:

"With regard to Latin, French and the other subjects that they taught us, it was the same with all of them, like another Jacob I stole the birthright from my brother and drew to myself all the rewards and praise and I knew so well how to dominate, that my poor brother must have suffered very much because of me." (Confessions)

In fact at nine years old, Hermann was capable of following the fourth form in High School.But the boy's constitution was weak and a doctor ordered him to rest.

Hermann's great intellectual gifts however were overshadowed by his musical talent. At the age of four and a half he wished to play the piano like his elder brother. He soon surpassed him and at six years of age he could play the tunes of all the operas then in vogue.!

Futhermore, he began to improvise, an astonishing inspiration in a child of such tender years and one which impressed the most advanced musicians. In view of Hermann's unusual musical talent, the family harpsicord was replaced by a grand piano. And so it was that Hermann, still a child, was launched on his long musical career, in which compositions were merged with faultless execution to produce brilliant concerts.

There was in Hermann's musical work two distinct periods. Before his conversion, his piano pieces were brilliant, worldly, and often of a great virtuosity. One of the best pieces was a long waltz entitled, "The Banks of the Elbe". Another piece, published by the "Messaggero Musicale" was called,

"A Shining Fantasie", and was reminiscent of Verdi's "Lombardi". Other more

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expressive pieces were tinged with a religious atmosphere, surprising in a worldly and superficial context: a nocturne entitled "Venetian Night" and "Lullaby" composed in 1841.

In spite of his gifts, in this first period Hermann did not make a name for himself in the musical world. As a pianist, he lacked the exacting and austere training given to Franz Liszt by his father, or to the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin, in our days. The adulation and indulgence of his mother would become the greatest obstacle for Hermann in his career as a pianist.

His very rare gift, so precocious in this child, would revive again on the day when, at twenty seven years of age,he would, in spite of himself, "Rediscover Christ in his soul" as he himself put it. Then began a second period of musical output.

For the moment, the year of enforced rest in his family which he had been ordered to take, and during which his family gave in to all his whims, would prove disastrous for Hermann. A course in bible history at college failed to

give him any serious religious principles. The religious aspirations, even mystical ones, of his early childhood left no trace.

He lived in a world where money was everything.

"Our house was like a nest of ants where people came and went. Merchandise was everywhere, people counting money all over the place, and the only distinction accorded to businessmen was that of the size of their fortune to which every honour was given ". (Confessions).

Inherited instincts would impart to Hermann an excessive love of money, stronger even than his artistic sensibility, strongly developed though that was.

In addition to this, his family confided the young pianist to a professor of music of great talent but loose morals. He was thought to be a genius, "and that", writes Hermann, "was sufficient to justify in the eyes of the ordinary man all his caprices, and his foolish and scandalous behaviour. As I saw him admired by everybody, I soon wanted to imitate him, and I began to ape his behaviour. He loved gambling, so I too took to it

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very early on. He loved horses and pleasure, and as he always found admirers ready to supply him with money for his exploits." I began to conceive the notion that there was no life happier than that of an artist. My master often said to my mother, 'Hermann is a genius'. That encouraged me still more" (Confessions)

Up till then his father had opposed the choice of a musical career for his second son. Madame Cohen, on her side, kept silent on the subject. But, besides the repeated affirmation of the professor that her son was a genius, it was due to an initiative on the part of the child himself which persuaded her to let him follow his ambition. In spite of the opposition and displeasure of his master, Hermann studied and performed a piece of music composed by his tutor, which required skill of an exceptionally high degree. The professor was won over and showed his satisfaction oy by taking his pupil with him to the cabaret and to his friends to show him off. (Sylvain)

His father who was deep in financial difficulties at this time, gave way too.

Hermann was delighted and the world was at his feet.

"Success, honours, celebrity - the pleasures in which artists spent a great part of their time, journeys, adventures. I saw everything through rosecoloured spectacles in my imagination which was highly developed for my age." (Confessions) At eleven years of age Hermann began to be highhanded and cheeky to his parents. The following incident illustrates this. His professor, leaving for Frankfurt on a musical tour, took him with him. Hermann, happy to be free, and impatient to be off remained quite unaffected by his mother's affectionate parting with her son.(Sylvain) After an absence of several weeks the young virtuoso returned to Hamburg full of dreams of artistic glory, and still more firmly set in his determination to become a great pianist. "Latin, Greek and Hebrew were forgotten but in exchange, at twelve years old, I learnt many things harmful to my soul".(Confessions)

The young pianist made such rapid progress that his tutor decided on his debut. A first concert in nearby Altona had an immediate success. Then he gave a

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second at Hamburg itself, before a more difficult and sophisticated audience. All whom the town considered distinguished turned out to hear the gifted youngster. The room was packed and and his success surpassed that of Altona. The next day, everyone talked about Hermann's talents.

In 1830 his father suffered the financial ruin which threatened him. Madame Cohen, with the two-fold intention of furthering still more Hermann's musical career, and of escaping from the place where the memory of the wealthy life she had led was a constant irritation, considered leaving Hamburg and living in Paris. With this in mind, she took her son to the court of the Grand Duke of Mechlembourg, who was so impressed by the talented youth that he gave him a letter of introduction to his ambassador in Paris. The Grand Duke of Scherwin, did likewise. Both men made much of him and loaded him with presents.

"We returned in triumph to Hamburg". (Confessions).

At this time an incident nearly jeopardised his career. Hermann, like all boys, was greedy and while helping himself to a pot of jam, he nearly compromised his musical future. The jar broke and cut his finger badly. He was more frightened than hurt but the wound quickly healed.

In the middle of the preparations for the departure to Paris, and in spite of his impatience to be off, Hermann wrote a cantata for his mother's birthday. Surprisingly enough - but this was a feature which repeated itself in his musical works - this cantata had a religious inspiration.

Unfortunately this intimate little work, was given a public airing in the newspapers of the region. What began as a child's work, fresh and spontaneous in thought, degenerated into an exercise in self-promotion. Hermann became haughty and over-confident and judged that in future, it would be superfluous for him to prepare any pieces he was going to play in public! His mother became anxious this time and reproached him gently but in vain. "I had already lost all respect, and disobeyed openly. I believed myself to be independent" (Confessions)

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The time of departure for Paris arrived and while Hermann's father remained at home with his eldest son, Albert. Madame Cohen took Hermann and his younger brother and sister with her and they left for Paris.

At the beginning of the 19th century Paris was indeed the centre of things. some peoplle might stay it still is! Famous musicians from every country met there and some took up residence. There was Cherubini who directed the Converatoire, Chopin, Zimmermann, Mendlesohn, Paganini, Richard Wagner a little later. Finally Franz Lizst arrived on the scene, then just twenty years old. The presence of such `stars` explained the irrisistible attraction the great city had for talented young men eager for fame.

The success which the young pianist gained for himself at the Courts of Hanover, Cassel and Frankfurt, where he was feted by famous musicians, served to increase Hermann's arrogance still more even towards his mother, whose wise observations and corrections he totally ignored.

During the last stage of their journey, the weather was very hot and the coach very uncomfortable but that did not matter to Hermann, he was so excited about reaching Paris. He was just thirteen years of age.