

The Story of Hermann Cohen. (From Franz Liszt to John of the Cross)

Introduction.

An international artist with rare musical gifts. A person who developed a habit for gambling away his concert earnings. A young man who suddenly became a Christian and then a fervent Carmelite. Finally a `saint` who died ministering to soldiers in Spandau from whom he contracted smallpox.

The story of Hermann Cohen provides us with the setting for one of the most gripping and eventful chapters in the nineteenth century.

Here we find high life, high drama, great artists – some still household names – and most of all we find an individual's quest for the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ. The drama inherent in the latter far outstrips the games human play, absorbing though these may be.

Hermann Cohen introduces us to the glitzy Paris scene of over a century ago. We find him in the company of the legendary Franz Liszt and his associates. It was the era of great writers, great musicians, great sculptors, great painters and great saints. Hermann Cohen's life spans the half century between 1821 and 1871.

Hermann's message is mostly contained in the impact made on us by his life and death. But we can hardly fail to be moved also by the sacred music that flowed from his hand and the sermons he preached, as well as the many considerate and `involved` letters that he wrote to his friends.

I hope you will find in the pages of this book more than sufficient material to convince you of the significance of this figure who deserves to be better known. It may convince you also how opportune it is to revive his memory at the present time. He can filter down to us the light on top of Mount Carmel and remind us again of the contemporary need to recover St. Teresa's ideal of prayer and to hear as well the `silent music` of St. John of the Cross in his leafy solitude.

My main resource material for this book was a biography of Hermann Cohen written in French. The author of this biography which is called `Fleche de Feu` was Dom Jean-Marie Beaurin. Dom Jean was a member of the Benedictine Abbey of Fontgombaut in France. He is descended from Hermann's nephew George. George was his grandfather, the story of whose conversion is also included in this book. Dom Jean possessed 100 letters from Hermann to this well-loved nephew. Appropriately enough, Dom Jean was himself an organist in Paris for many years.

The Carmelites themselves possess up to 100 letters from Hermann also, some of them preserved at the Carmelite Priory in Kensington, London which Hermann founded.

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