

Mass Murder: The Wagner Case

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DURING THE NIGHT of September 4, 1913, the citizens of Muehlhausen (a village of Württemberg, southwest Germany) were awakened by several large fires. As they ran into the street, they were met by a man, his face covered by a black veil, who was armed with two pistols. He shot with great accuracy and killed eight men and one girl immediately; 12 more were severely injured.

Then his two pistols ran out of ammunition, and he was overpowered and beaten down with such violence that he was left for dead; however, he was only unconscious. He had 198 more bullets in his possession. The innkeeper identified the murderer as his 39-year-old brother-in-law, who had been a schoolteacher in this village more than ten years earlier. The rage and terror of the population changed to horror when Wagner confessed that during the preceding night he had quietly killed his wife and four children. A phone call to the local police (in Degerloch, near Stuttgart) confirmed this.

He also confessed that he had come to Muehlhausen to take revenge on the male inhabitants for their scorn and disdain for him. However, even while lying severely wounded and exposed to the hatred of the attacked people, he noticed that no one employed the term of abuse that would refer to his sexual sins, which he felt had been the cause of all the persecution, ridicule, and condemnation.

There was a general outcry of horror about his deed, and public opinion demanded his execution. A violent newspaper debate raged because Wagner's life was spared when it was recognized, during the pretrial examination, that he was mentally ill. He was committed to an insane asylum, where he spent the rest of his life, 25 years.

Indignation was expressed against psychiatric opinion in general, and personal attacks were directed against the psychiatrists (Dr. Robert Gaupp of the University of Tübingen and Dr. R. Wollenberg of the University of Strassburg) who had examined the murderer and had given the expert opinion that he was not responsible in the legal sense (1, 7). When Professor Gaupp presented him before a psychiatric meeting in 1932, there were newspaper articles protesting that this might be a first step toward releasing Wagner from custody (6).

When the news of the mass murder in Austin, Texas, in August 1966 reached Germany, the horror about the Wagner case was immediately revived in newspaper and magazine references. Certain similarities can be recognized: seemingly well-functioning, intelligent, and ambitious men, leading exemplary middle-class lives, had quietly accumulated arsenals of weapons, practiced sharpshooting, and had made many other arrangements for carefully planned mass murders. There had been nothing in their behavior, up to the day of the dreadful deed, that might have warned their families, friends, or co-workers that a dangerous criminal was living among them. Both men had spent the preceding day in a quiet, relaxed way with their families and friends. (The Austin murderer was killed and left no letters or other writings that might have given a clue to his motives.)

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Wagner as Murderer

Wagner had spent the evening of September 3, 1913, with his landlady and her daughter, a young teacher, sitting in front of the house admiring the calm summer evening. During the preceding week he had written a series of letters which were not mailed until September 4, when he was on the way to Muehlhausen; among them was one which contained a complete confession of all his crimes. It was addressed to the largest newspaper in Stuttgart and was to be used as an editorial.

He killed his wife and four children before the morning dawn, as quietly and painlessly as possible. After he had cleaned himself, he rode by bicycle to the railway station in Stuttgart, from there by train (bicycle in the baggage car) to his home town, Eglosheim, near Ludwigsburg, to visit his brother. He told his sister-in-law that he was going by bicycle to Muehlhausen to bring his children back from vacation. In retrospect she remembered, as probably unusual, that he had carefully inspected the house.

Wagner had planned to return to his brother's house the following night with the intent of killing him and his family and of burning down his house as well as the house in which he had been born. As a final step he had planned to proceed to the royal castle in Ludwigsburg, overpower the guards, set fire to the castle, and die in the flames or jump off its walls, thereby terminating his own life.

Wagner shared the popular opinion that he should have been put to death, and he was vituperative in expressing his hatred against Professor Gaupp, in whom he had confided the motives for his deed and who had then expressed the opinion that he was mentally sick and therefore not responsible. As time progressed and after he had finally accepted as unalterable his fate of remaining in a mental hospital, a confidential, even friendly relationship developed between him and Professor Gaupp. He discussed openly and exhaustively every aspect of his life with one important exception. He also gave his literary works and biography to Professor Gaupp, who reported on them in several publications (2, 6).

However, in the beginning he passionately protested against the idea of his being mentally sick. He remarked sarcastically: "If I am insane, then a madman has been teaching all these years." This statement was not without foundation. He had an excellent record as a teacher; the village where he had taught for ten years before his last position considered him the best teacher it ever had.

During the pretrial examination many of his friends, former fellow students and teachers, and members of the various communities in which he had lived were interrogated in great detail; they described him as an admirable citizen, dignified, somewhat quiet, more soft-minded than rough. Only a few had noted a certain amount of stand-offishness and affectation. All commented on the fact that in a region in which a heavy dialect was spoken by educated and uneducated alike, he insisted on using high German, even in his private life.

His examiners, the judge as well as the psychiatrists, were simply overwhelmed by the contrast of the horrible, carefully planned mass murder and their personal impression of the murderer as a polite, intelligent, sensitive, grief-stricken man who was quiet and rational in all he said—except when he defended his deed as the inescapable outcome of the persecution he had suffered.

This fateful chain of events had its beginning, according to his self-accusation, with one or more sodomistic acts in the late summer of 1901, when he was 27 years old. At no time did he give exact information about this; he felt that putting it into words would be an insult to all humanity. His secretiveness was so strong and persistent, and stood in such contrast to the openness and clarity with which he discussed all other events of his life, that suspicion has been expressed that these experiences never took place but were delusional.

Gaupp, who knew him best, was convinced that something had taken place, probably under the influence of alcohol when Wagner returned from the tavern to his modest lodgings. Before this he had felt persistently and excessively guilty about masturbation, in which he had indulged since

the age of 18. At times he would consider this the onset of his miserable fate (6, 7).

Of decisive importance was the fact that his sexual urges and acts stood in irreconcilable contrast to his high moral standards and ethical concepts. His deep sense of guilt never diminished and was projected in a fateful way to the outside. Whatever his "crime," it remained completely unknown. However, he soon began to make certain "observations" and to "hear" certain slanderous remarks, which led to the unshakable conviction that his "crime" was known. He felt himself continuously observed, mocked, and ridiculed, and lived in constant dread of arrest. He was determined not to suffer this public shame and humiliation, and therefore he always carried a loaded pistol. When he took his final examination as a teacher in December 1902 and also on his wedding day in December 1903, he had two loaded pistols with him, so convinced was he that his arrest was imminent.

Possibly to defend himself against further sexual deviations, he began an affair with the innkeeper's daughter, which soon had consequences. It became known and led to his being transferred in December 1902 to a poor, isolated village, Radelstetten, where he remained for nearly ten years. Even before this punitive transfer he had felt that he had always been sent to inferior positions.

Wagner as Husband, Father, and Teacher

His future wife gave birth to a girl in the summer of 1903, and he married her (with many inner misgivings) in December 1903. He felt that he no longer loved her and that she was intellectually not his equal; he considered her more a servant than a wife. However, his friends and neighbors testified that he treated her kindly, though she gave him much provocation. She objected to his spending money and time on his literary interests.

There were five children; the last died at the age of two months. He was unhappy about the birth of each child and felt confined by the financial hardship of a large family subsisting on the meager income of a

village schoolteacher. However, there was every indication that he loved his children. He was described as unusually indulgent with them and extravagant in his gifts, something he explained later as due to his knowing that they had only a short time to live.

The first years in his new position were relatively free of tension as long as he did not believe that they "knew" about his sexual crime. But he never forgot what he had done. His pessimistic mood led to a recurrence of hypochondriacal complaints. In 1904 his whole existence became so intolerable that he decided to travel to Switzerland and to end his life. He wanted to drown himself in a lake, creating the impression that he had suffered a stroke. However, this plan miscarried: he was too cowardly to commit suicide. Then he planned to throw himself before an oncoming train; here, too, his courage failed him. About this episode he wrote in his autobiography: "I have played around with death, the way I always play around, until I become deadly serious."

Gradually he began also to make "observations" in Radelstetten and felt convinced that the people of Muehlhausen had communicated their "knowledge" to the people at his new location. He could notice it because of certain insinuations and the occasional arrogance which some allegedly showed against him. He felt caught in the old dilemma: there was never a direct statement, but he "heard" pointed remarks containing hints. He knew if he reacted he would be publicly humiliated.

The few times he tried to pin someone down, the intent was absolutely denied. So he felt helpless: he had to hide his rage and shame under a veneer of contentment, but he was inwardly filled with hatred and vengeance. What enraged him most was that people did not talk about him because they morally disapproved his deed; rather, they entertained themselves by talking in this obscene way and in smutty insinuations.

Gradually the conviction ripened that there was only one way out. He must kill himself and his children, *out of pity* to save them from a future of being the target of contempt and evil slander and *to take revenge* on the people of Muehlhausen who

had forced him to this horrible deed. Throughout his life he adhered to this distinction. Incredibly painful as it had been to kill his loved ones, he considered it an act of mercy. In his biography he spoke of himself as "the angel of pity" who would save them from malicious insinuations and a life of disgrace and torture. It was not his own sexual aberration and their also falling victim to it but the slander that drove him to his deed. At no time did he show the slightest remorse about their deaths: "They were best taken care of when they were dead" (6, 7).

But he decided they should not die without revenge. Since the men of Muehlhausen had started and spread the slander, they had to die. In a life that as a whole had been a series of depressing and frustrating disappointments, he was grateful that it had been given to him to avenge his terrible torture and suffering. He was disappointed to learn that he had killed only nine people. Even in 1938, when he knew that death from advanced tuberculosis was imminent, he still felt that he had been justified in his action—that even if he had killed all of them it would not have balanced the suffering that had been inflicted on him.

At times when he was confronted with irrefutable evidence that nobody had known anything about his aberration or had spoken evil of him, he might be temporarily shaken in his conviction, but it soon reappeared. Shortly before his death, when his physician asked him whether he recognized now that he had been acting under a delusion when he killed all these people, he admitted: "Yes, I know I was sick and that my reasoning was delusional." Yet a few days earlier he had said: "I could not live on the outside amongst people. It would be intolerable torture to hear them talk about me. Even here, in the institution, I heard them talk six months ago, that I was a sodomist [Tierficker]" (6).

Beginning in 1906 or at the latest in 1907, he developed a plan for destruction and murder which was put into action in September 1913. He collected and carefully hid weapons and all other objects needed for his plan, practiced sharpshooting in remote parts of the woods, and worked out

his strategy, much like a commander planning a military action. He kept detailed diaries on all his plans. But over and over again he shrank away from their execution. He could not bring himself to kill his children, although this was what he considered his inescapable duty. His wife had to be killed first because she would interfere with his killing the children.

In 1912 he was transferred to Degerloch, a suburb of Stuttgart, quite remote from his previous places of activity. He enjoyed the stimulation and cultural activities of the large city. But the need to commit the deed became more urgent because here too he could "observe" that people "knew" of his crime. There was no place where he could find refuge from their contempt; the people of Muehlhausen had made it impossible for him to lead a decent life of work and orderliness and to gain recognition as a literary figure and great dramatist. In a mystical way he interpreted an earthquake in the summer of 1913 as a warning to his wife and children that death was hanging over them.

Wagner as Dramatist

Since his student days literature had been his great love and avocation. He craved literary success, not only during the frugal days and the narrow life of a village schoolmaster, but even more after he was confined for life to a mental hospital. He read extensively, and study of his library cards revealed an educated literary taste. At first he wrote poetry, imitating Heinrich Heine, whom he also admired for his satirical social comments. It is noteworthy that this was the only part of his life about which he expressed regret later on, after anti-semitism had become an integral part of his delusional system (5, 6).

He turned to drama as more in keeping with his inner state of mind at about the same time that he became preoccupied with murder. He chose Biblical and historical themes. He attempted to express his own preoccupation by dramatizing the suffering of the Nazarene and Nero's burning of Rome. These violent dramas served also to prepare him for his horrible deed. He felt

that his native disposition was soft-hearted, not bloodthirsty at all; he could not even see blood without becoming sick. He should have carried out his plan much earlier, but he felt that he was "too weak." So he tried to retrain himself and wrote homicidal dramas with gory details, to a large extent with the intent of putting himself in the role of murderer and arsonist.

He spoke of these years of training as a continuous hard struggle, with his inner nature protesting against what he felt was his duty and ordained fate. Finally he had indoctrinated himself to such an extent that the execution went "like clockwork, quite mechanically." He acted as though under a compulsion, like "having been pushed into it," and described his mental state as "apathetic and excited at the same time"(7).

During these years he also strove for literary recognition. When he could not find a producer or publisher for his plays, he had them printed at his own expense, except those which even the printer refused as too blasphemous. During these years his friends and colleagues noted his peculiar behavior when under the influence of alcohol. After three or four glasses of beer, he seemed to change completely and became either moody or grandiose and loquacious. With great passion he would talk about his three favorite topics: God and religion (he declared himself an atheist and would have nothing to do with them); free love, which he advocated with insulting cynicism; and his great dramas, of which he spoke in the highest terms.

His profession of schoolteacher was not satisfactory to him. He considered himself in all seriousness as one of the greatest dramatists of his time and spoke with condescension of those whose works were performed. He compared himself to Shakespeare, Schiller, and Goethe. Occasionally he would comment that one day he would become a famous man and do deeds that would astound the world. Nothing was made of this bragging, since the next day he would perform his work in the accustomed quiet and conscientious way.

Though he never succeeded in having his work published, his productivity appears remarkable. He came from a small village,

the ninth of ten children (the youngest surviving) of an incompetent peasant who was given to excessive drinking and grandiose talking and who died when this child was two years old. Due to drinking debts the homestead had to be sold. His mother's second marriage ended in divorce, when he was seven years old, because she was promiscuous. He was known in the village as the "widow's boy" and suffered from depressions, suicidal thoughts, and nightmares. But it was recognized early that he was unusually intelligent and with the aid of a public stipend he studied to become a teacher. His passion for literature began during his school days.

During the first few years after his commitment to the asylum, he used all his energy to plead for a reopening of his case so that he would be condemned to death and executed. He did not accept his fate as unalterable until the director of the hospital permitted him to read the extensive report of the two psychiatrists(7) in which the gradual development of his delusionary system was documented point by point and the opinion was expressed that his continued hatred for the inhabitants of Muehlhausen made him dangerous, therefore in need of confinement for life. He was depressed about this, but then wrote to Professor Gaupp to apologize for his former abusive language.

When he finally acknowledged that no retrial was possible and that his wish to fight at the front (World War I) and to die for his country would not be fulfilled, he turned again to literature to find relief from his inner torment. He rewrote some of his old poetic works, developed a glowing patriotism, and wrote long documents for the High Command. He was deeply depressed about Germany's defeat and took an active interest in later political developments.

Then followed several years in which it seemed that the paranoid affect had diminished. He worked studiously on a new drama which he called "Wahn" ("Delusion"), based on the life of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. He was bitterly disappointed when this drama, which he considered his best work, was not accepted for stage production, and he felt deeply hurt that his work aroused only the interest of psychiatrists, as the

product of a sick mind, and not that of literary persons(3).

The beginning of a new delusional system can be traced to the fact that a drama by Franz Werfel, which also dealt with the influence of mental illness on human development, was produced in Stuttgart. He was convinced that Werfel had stolen it from his own drama, or that he had based it on his (Wagner's) life, or had had access to the court files, etc. His preoccupation that other successful writers had stolen from him became more elaborate and was also retrogressively active. He felt that the movie "Ben Hur," shown before he had become known through his murders, had been based on his "Pictures from Ancient Rome," and that publication dates in other works had been altered to hide the fact that they had been plagiarized from his life and works. He suspected, and then confirmed, that Werfel was Jewish(4, 5, 6).

Gradually he became convinced that there was a Jewish conspiracy to deprive him of the honest and deserved reward for his poetic activity. In a fateful way political events in Germany intermingled with his delusional reasoning. When he learned that the Jewish lawyer who had defended him was debarred after Hitler came to power, he interpreted this as one more proof that this Jew had handed over the documents about his case to Werfel for exploitation(5, 6).

He joined the Nazi party in 1929 and took great pride in having been the first inmate of his hospital to do so. He followed the racial decrees and persecution with much affect and self-justification. From a historical perspective there is probably no more chilling aspect to the lengthy reports on this case than a sentence written by Gaupp in 1938: "In his views of the psychic degeneration of family and folks he (Wagner) has succeeded in clearly perceiving and formulating many concepts which only today have found their just recognition, particularly in regard to racial hygienic measure"(6, p. 80). This was intended to illustrate that Wagner had remained lucid and logical in his thinking, except for his delusional systems, and had not become demented.

Even though many of his paranoid notions coincided with what had become the law of the land, Wagner died an embittered

man, not because he had committed murder and had been declared insane but because he had failed to find acclaim as a literary figure. He continued to write until he was weakened by progressive tuberculosis.

He died in 1938, 64 years of age. At autopsy his brain showed no gross pathology; it was sent for microscopic study to Professor Spatz and no abnormal findings were reported. Wagner had been highly respected in the institution where he had spent 25 years after having committed mass murder. The attendant who had been in closest touch with him summarized his impression: "He was a good man"(6).

This case is considered a classic in the German psychiatric literature. It has served to illustrate that paranoia needs to be considered separate from dementia praecox—that it is not the product of some pathological process but the outcome of complex psychological reactions(1, 2, 5, 6). Professor Gaupp, who spent a lifetime trying to understand the psychological forces of this man's background, character, and experiences, concluded his series of papers with the statement that in spite of all the efforts to follow his mental processes, there remains a part that is beyond human comprehension.

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* These references were made available by Erwin W. Straus, M.D., to the Committee of Psychiatric Factfinders appointed by Governor Connally of Texas to investigate the Whitman case in 1966.