

In Memoriam: Verena Kossodo



Verena Kossodo (November 12, 1921–April 3, 2016) was a charter and honorary member of the Wagner Society of New York. Our dedicated Bayreuth Coordinator for 24 years, she was a friend to everyone in the Bayreuth administration, beginning with Wolfgang Wagner, whom she assisted as translator on many occasions. She also served for many years on the Society’s Singers Committee: she was dedicated to helping promising young singers and contributed generously to the Singers Fund. At the invitation of Wagner Notes editor Harry L. Wagner, Verena wrote this reminiscence of her early life, meeting and marrying her husband Gunter, and their first Bayreuth trip. It was published in the April 2013 issue of Wagner Notes.

That Bayreuth Season

My family spent the 1939 summer vacation in a hotel of the Bernese Mountains where we had been several times before, and I had become friendly with the owner’s daughter. On the last day of our stay, she announced the arrival of new guests and insisted that I should meet them: “that guy is so funny and he likes music a lot.” And so it happened: within ten minutes we had begun a discussion about Wagner and especially about *Walküre*, about the Berlin singers and all the recordings he had, naturally on 78 rpm. I was still in high school; I was impressed.

My father was very pessimistic about the political situation and insisted that I become familiar with the office workings of his factory. So before and after graduating in 1940, I spent long hours becoming a top secretary, instead of the planned stay in England for polishing my school knowledge of that language. On the side, I practiced the piano and took voice lessons and accompanied dancers who went many places to entertain the troops. At one point I was driven on an icy evening in an open jeep up a mountain; yes, the mountain troops were thankful for some entertainment (a dancer, a clown, a memory marvel, and a snake man), but I caught pneumonia and that was the end of my patriotic activities. To recuperate, I was sent to that nice hotel (it was winter 1940/41) and who happened to be there? That funny guy’s older brother, less musical but very polite, and he handed me his card with the assurance that his mother would be glad to receive me. Meanwhile we had found employees who had no army obligations, but it was still necessary to stay close by, so I decided to study at the Conservatory in Geneva, which is an excellent school.

I had been warmly received by the Kossodo family and spent carefree student years, found good friendships, enjoyed much music with my student card, had first engagements, mostly at Radio Swiss Romande, small parts in difficult modern music, but conducted by Ansermet—a happy life.

Then suddenly came the American visa for the Kossodo family, and it was quite a shock. Of course, they had applied in the mid-30s, but to no avail. Came the war, the father’s health problems, and all borders were closed. After the father had died and the war was over, the family started again to look for possibilities for the four brothers who had never been able to get working permits in Switzerland (too many refugees, not enough jobs). So here was now a possibility to emigrate to the U.S.A. The guy with the records and I had become close friends and we had to make a fast decision: either say goodbye or get married...

We arrived in New York in October 1950 and Günter got a passport. Five years later, we wrote to a cousin in Munich who worked for the Bayerische Rundfunk to get busy and obtain two tickets for us for the Bayreuth Ring. Her boss was Herr Dr. Wirz who was also working with Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, and our good cousin probably told him the story of the Kossodo family, the Jewish father, the lost fortune, the “boys” without a position, and friend Wirz snapped his fingers and handed us two tickets. He probably had expected old and bitter emigrants and was happy to welcome a smiling young

couple. We also had an advantage: we had rented a car and offered a ride to Dr. Wirz who depended on the city bus. So he in turn gave us a parking permit (at where now stands the post office) and we invited him for dinner. These Kossodos were quite inquisitive and got lots of information out of this friendly gentleman. More magic tricks: he handed us two Künstlerkarten which entitled us to eat a three-course lunch daily for DM2.00 at Steigenberger, together with whoever else was there; no, Hans Hotter never came, but Gustav Neidlinger loved to talk. David Gerhard Stolze too was good company. The people from the Bayerische Rundfunk ate there regularly (the Ring was recorded and sent live) and they asked us for an interview during the intermission (we were a rare species) and they also asked Wieland and Wolfgang to talk—we did not mind meeting them—and then appeared a crew of French radio people who had heard that we also spoke French, and we were happy to oblige. Of course, a backstage tour was part of the fun, too. Dr. Wirz had keys for all doors. We even went up to where the radio people had their equipment. We were happy even before the music had started.

Came the evening of *Rheingold*. We sat far back in the auditorium and waited in the dark. Then, very mysteriously, there was that famous low E flat. It came from nowhere and gave us the shivers. Never after that, in the many *Rheingolds* I have heard, have I had that same sensation. We looked at each other and were happy! The curtain opened on an almost bare stage. Who was standing there? The program said Hans Hotter, but this was Wotan personally, a commanding six foot plus figure with a voice to match. The rest of the cast was equally impressive. There was Neidlinger as Alberich with whom we had lunch the day before, without knowing how mean he was. There was Fafner with Josef Greindel's deep voice, and the ladies: Georgine von Milinkovic (Fricka), Maria von Ilosvay (Erda), Elisabeth Grümmer (Freia), all of them under the baton of Hans Knappertsbusch, the first and last time I heard him. For *Walküre*, the cast was the best there is: Hotter, Greindel (as Hunding), Ludwig Suthaus (as Siegmund), young Birgit Nilsson (as Sieglinde) and Astrid Varnay (as Brünnhilde). For *Siegfried*: Wolfgang Windgassen (as Siegfried, Paul Kuen (as Mime), of course Hotter as the Wanderer, and Neidlinger as Alberich. Fafner: Arnold van Mill, Erda: von Hosvay, and Varnay as Brünnhilde.

Something very special when Brünnhilde woke up, she really was hailing the blinding sun. It was a slightly domed floor and a strong light blue sky and nothing else in Wieland's staging. I will never forget that feeling of being on a high mountain of at least 12,000 feet where the air is pure. *Götterdämmerung*: again Windgassen as Siegfried, Hermann Uhde as Gunther, Greindel as Hagen, Neidlinger as Alberich, Varnay as Brünnhilde, Grümmer as Gutrune, and von Ilosvay as Waltraute. And then there were the three Norns; the third was a young singer: Birgit Nilsson. Talk about luxury casting!

We had asked for Ring tickets and did not see the three other operas of that season. But we stayed in Bayreuth for a few more days, and then Dr. Wirz said that he "had to go" to Salzburg. I was fast enough to offer him a ride and he pulled one of his tricks and got us two tickets for a performance of *Falstaff* with von Karajan conducting and Tito Gobbi, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and Giulietta Simionato in the cast. No complaints. Before we reached Salzburg, we had stopped at the Rundfunk and saw the workings there. We also were introduced to the little white sausages at 11:00 a.m., we heard *Harmonie der Welt* by Hindemith on tape at the Rundfunk. Then we saw Salzburg in the rain. Our Annus Mirabilis was complete. It was a time of incredible impressions of all kinds, including interesting and kind people. I was in Bayreuth close to 30 times again, but the magic of this first time was never duplicated.

Verena Kossodo

Photo: Danila Mendoza, Bayreuth 2000