

Opera Singer Heinrich Sontheim

1820-1912

Biographical extract with focus on Sontheim's three marriages and operas „Norma“ and „La Juive“

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referring to Leo Adler's "*Heinrich Sontheim – ein Künstlerleben*" (1916), Daniel Jütte's "*Der jüdische Tenor Heinrich Sontheim*" (2006) and Sieghart Döring's article on Eleazar's role in the opera „*La Juive*“ published 2008 in „*Judenrollen*“ by Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer and Jens Malte Fischer with assistance of Frank Halbach.

During the 1860s Heinrich Sontheim's career was at its peak. If then it would have been technically feasible to do sound recordings, he would even today be regarded by the collective memory as standing in row with other legendary tenors such as Caruso or Pavarotti. So, however, his memory has faded, still lesser known are important details of his personal life. After all he was married three times, at best only casually noted in the above mentioned biographies, if at all. To pay attention to so far little known details of Heinrich Sontheim's life story however is worthwhile.

Heinrich Sontheim (born as Honas Bär Sontheimer)

Already at young age Heinrich Sontheim was regarded as a very gifted singer, assisting the cantor at the synagogue of his native village Jebenhausen (halfway between Stuttgart and Ulm). After his singing education in Stuttgart he was under contract as opera singer (tenor) at the theater in Karlsruhe from 1839 to 1850. For his first marriage he converted to Christianity, but following the soon death of his wife he returned to Judaism. From 1851 until 1872 his career as Royal chamber singer at the opera in Stuttgart continued, but he also was confronted with anti-Semitic intrigues.

Beside his engagements in Karlsruhe and Stuttgart Heinrich Sontheim as one of the great tenors of his time also had a huge number of guest appearances at all major German theaters with particular great success in Vienna where he was celebrated as *Eleazar* in Jacques Fromental Halévy's opera "La Juive", which later also became one of the famed roles of Enrico Caruso (1873-1921).

Since 1872 he lived in the rural idyll of his Villa Wieseneck on the outskirts of Jebenhausen, joined in 1879 by his third wife Nanette. In 1887 both returned to Stuttgart where until Sontheim's death in 1912 they lived at Urban Strasse 66, not far from the royal court theater.

Heinrich Sontheim was born on Thursday, February 3 in 1820 in Jebenhausen as son of Moses Löb Sontheimer and his wife Rachel nee Rosenheim. Sontheim died in Stuttgart on Friday August 2 in 1912. He was buried at the Jewish section of Prag cemetery in Stuttgart.

Heinrich Sontheim married his first wife Emilie Hippius on July 21 in 1844 in Singen, east of Baden-Durlach (details from www.familysearch.org). The church wedding probably took place in the Protestant St. Wendelin chapel, which later changed its name to "Kreuzkirche".

Emilie Hippius (Protestant) (A)

born January 24 in 1822 in Krakow (Poland), died March 22 in 1848 in Karlsruhe.

Her parents were John Hippius and wife Juliane Karoline nee Müller

After Emilie's death Heinrich Sontheim on August 10 in 1851 married in Ludwigsburg

Rudolphine Jordan (Jewish)

born December 29 in 1825 in Ludwigsburg, died November 12 in 1866 in Stuttgart.

Her parents were Loeb Jordan and wife Julie nee Ettlinger

Loeb Jordan had lived in Stuttgart since 1860, his wife since 1839 had been placed at the Winnenthal sanatorium near Stuttgart.

Heinrich and Rudolphine Sontheim already in the years 1852 – 1857 had serious marital problems (details show files E 212 Bü 33 at Ludwigsburg State Archive), which caused bitter disputes at the marriage court of the Royal Upper Tribunal in Stuttgart. The couple separated and reunited a number of times, but actually endured until the tragic suicide of spouse Rudolphine. Her grave marker however just notes her as “Rudolphine nee Jordan”. Conceivably this was arranged by Sontheim who likely considered the suicide of his wife at least as damage to his reputation as tenor at the time of his great popular success. Thus their common family name was omitted at her tomb stone. But also Rudolphine’s father, who had no sympathy for the musician, had a motif to induce the omission. The death register of the Jewish community however notes Rudolphine as “spouse of the court singer”.

On August 20 in 1879 Heinrich Sontheim in Göppingen married

Emilie Christina Nanette Herrmann – called Nanni (Protestant)

born on July 15 in 1839 in Hamburg, died on January 12 (or February 20) in 1923 in Stuttgart.

Her parents were Bernhard Anton Herrmann, theater director in Hamburg (B) and his wife Marie Henriette nee Gangenelli.

In 1923 Nanette Sontheim for the last time was recorded in Stuttgart under her address Reinsburg Strasse 147. She was buried at the Christian section of Pragfriedhof cemetery in Stuttgart. Since all three marriages of Heinrich Sontheim remained childless, there were no relatives left to mourn Nanette and thus the local papers brought no obituary notes.

Remarks (A+B)

(A) For further information on Heinrich Sontheim’s spouses see volume 49 of the family sheets (Familienblätter) as part of the holdings of Stadtarchiv Stuttgart (City Archive).

(B) Hamburg playwright and theater director Anton Bernhard Herrmann (1806 - 1876) converted from Judaism to Protestantism in 1821.

Sontheim's major roles as Opera singer with regard to his personal fate

The operas "Norma" and "La Juive"

From the amazing wealth of Heinrich Sontheim's repertoire two roles are especially prominent, which in some respect also allude to the tragedy of his personal life. His first notable success he already had at the early age of 19 as "Pollione" in the opera "Norma" by Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835). The opera is set in the first century before Christ at the Roman Province Gallia and focuses on the tragic relationship of Norma (daughter of the Druid priest) and the Roman Proconsul Pollione. Heinrich Sontheim's brilliant performance in Karlsruhe resulted in a sensational 10-years-contract.

At that time Sontheim fell in love with his future wife Emilie Hippius. Her relatives however regarded the relationship with a Jewish singer as a social scandal. Thus Heinrich Sontheim heavy-heartedly decided to convert to the Protestant faith, what permitted the marriages with Emilie Hippius. Tragically she died just four years later at times when the Grand Duchy of Baden suffered from great revolutionary turmoil. Sontheim returned back to Stuttgart, where, because of his outstanding reputation as Royal Chamber Singer (Hofkammersänger), he was immediately taken under contract. About the same time he returned to Judaism. It is conceivable that he regarded the early death of his wife as a kind of punishment for his apostasy. In the following two decades Sontheim achieved his impressive successes as opera singer. The opera "La Juive" (The Jewess), created in Paris by the Jewish composer Jacques Fromental Halévy, at that time was one of the most important works of the French "Grand Opera" with enormous stage scenography and a length of some five hours. It was a monumental and overwhelming epos. The best known aria of the opera is Eleazar's "*Rachel, quand du Seigneur*", requiring a most dramatic tenor with vocal power. Heinrich Sontheim met those requirements completely and celebrated as "Eleazar" his great artistic success especially in Vienna.

"La Juive" focuses on a Christian-Jewish conflict at the time of the Council of Constance in 1414. Rachel, the daughter of the Jewish goldsmith Eleazar had an affair with Prince Leopold who was a Christian, a behaviour that would have resulted in death penalty for both. In order to save her lover, Rachel denounced herself and was convicted along with her father. Just before his martyrdom - and thus too late - Eleazar revealed that Rachel actually was a Christian foundling which he had rescued from a burning house and fostered her as his own daughter. During the 19th century this opera was a widely acclaimed success of the French Grand Opera, but disappeared gradually from the repertoire in the course of time, finally then of course after 1933 in Nazi-Germany. It was only after 1990 with the rediscovery of this bombastic opera that the work again had some attention. In 2008 for instance were performances in Zürich and in Stuttgart, however without remembering Heinrich Sontheim who had presented the role of Eleazar so brilliantly 140 years before. A more recent presentation of "La Juive" was performed from May until September 2013 at the Semper Opera in Dresden.