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ll families have secrets. Some are innocent enough. Some seep like poison through the veins of successive generations. Few can be as devastating as discovering that your grandmother had an affair with Adolf Hitler.

Yet for Gottfried Wagner, the great-grandson of the composer Richard Wagner, the proof was irrefutable. As a teenager, Gottfried rummaged through a garden shed and prised open the sidecar of his father's old BMW motorbike to discover a cardboard box crammed with home movies. Holding the reels up to the light, he was astonished to see images of his British-born grandmother, Winifred, in intimate scenes with the Führer.

Some of the films showed his widowed grandmother laughing coquettishly and relaxing on the lawns of the family estate with a dandified and attentive Hitler. Others showed the Führer in full military regalia sweeping past crowds of saluting supporters to snatch a few tender moments with her. Gottfried was later to discover that Hitler once asked her to become his wife.

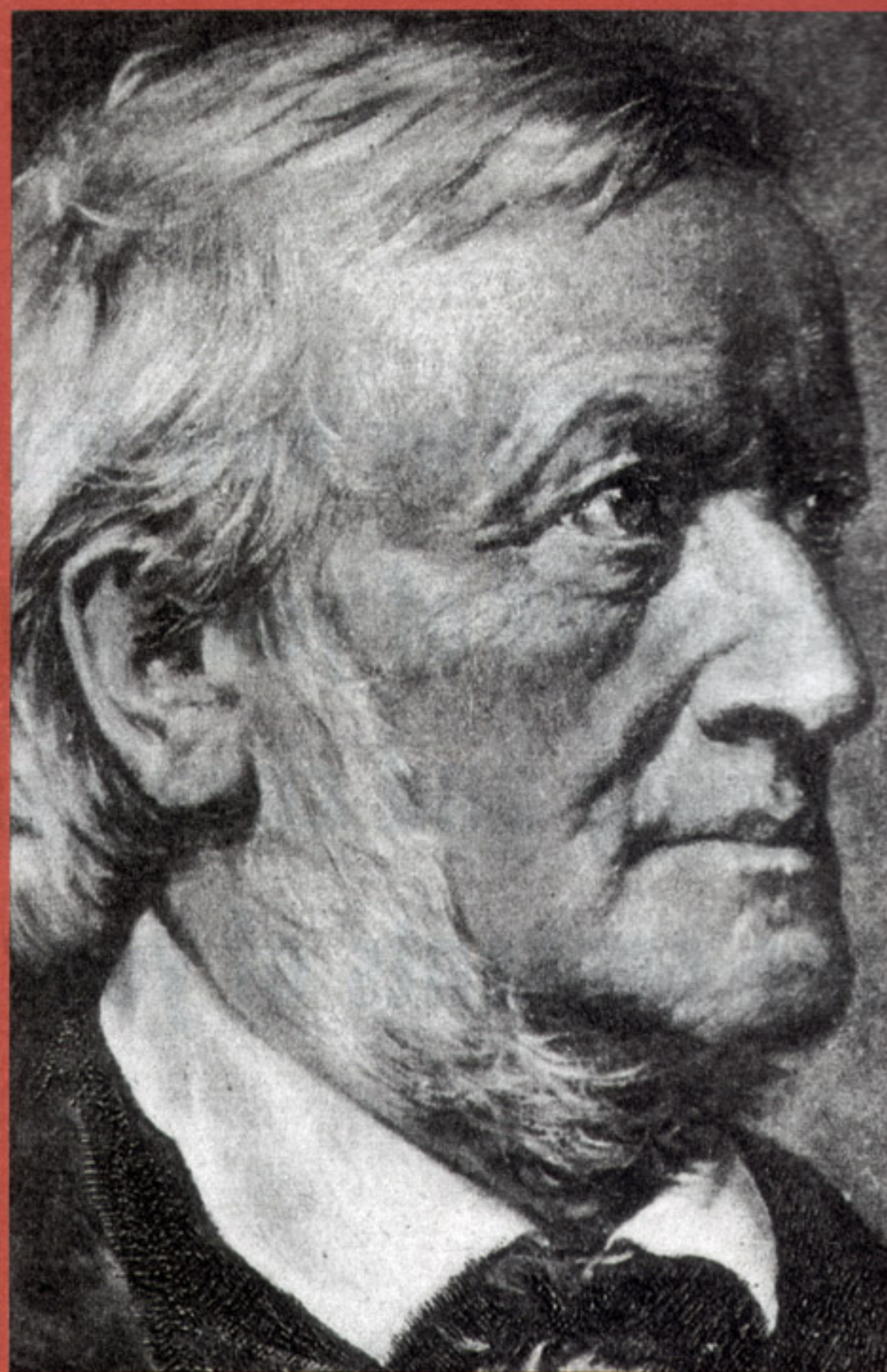
Certain that the discovery would incite the fury of his father, who refused to talk about the family's wartime past, the teenager filled the film cartons with dirt, resealed the box and stuffed the home movies under a pile of old socks at the top of his wardrobe, to study them more carefully later. For a while the family's skeleton was locked safely back in its closet.

But the images of his grandmother flirting with the man responsible for the deaths of millions of people gnawed at Gottfried's conscience from that moment on. While many Germans of his generation chose to cold-shoulder enquiries about what their parents and grandparents had done during the war, he started scraping away at his family's "poisoned roots". Like the heroes of many of Wagner's operas — music he came to despise — he went in search of redemption.

The ghosts he has stirred in the course of this search, not only in his own family's past but also his countrymen's, have shaken Germany to the core.

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The name Wagner is not easy to bear. Richard Wagner was famed for his musical genius and notorious for his anti-semitism. His work is the focus of one of the world's greatest annual music festivals, at Bayreuth in Bavaria. At 50, Gottfried bears an uncanny resemblance to the late composer — something that enrages the many millions of Germans who revere his ancestor as a national cultural icon, ranking him alongside Bach or Beethoven. "It makes many people even more aggressive towards me when they hear what I have to say and then look at me and consider my heritage," he says. ➤➤➤



**When he was a boy, Gottfried Wagner, great-grandson of the composer, stumbled upon a terrible family secret: Adolf Hitler once had an affair with his grandmother, and proposed to her. Gottfried was appalled. But Germany is just as outraged that he is finally exposing the Wagner skeletons to the world. Christine Toomey reports**

# KISSING







Above: Hitler in 1937, with Winifred Wagner and her sons, Wolfgang (second from left) and Wieland (far right), at one of the Wagner family homes in Bayreuth, Bavaria. Far left: her father-in-law, the composer Richard Wagner

# HITLER

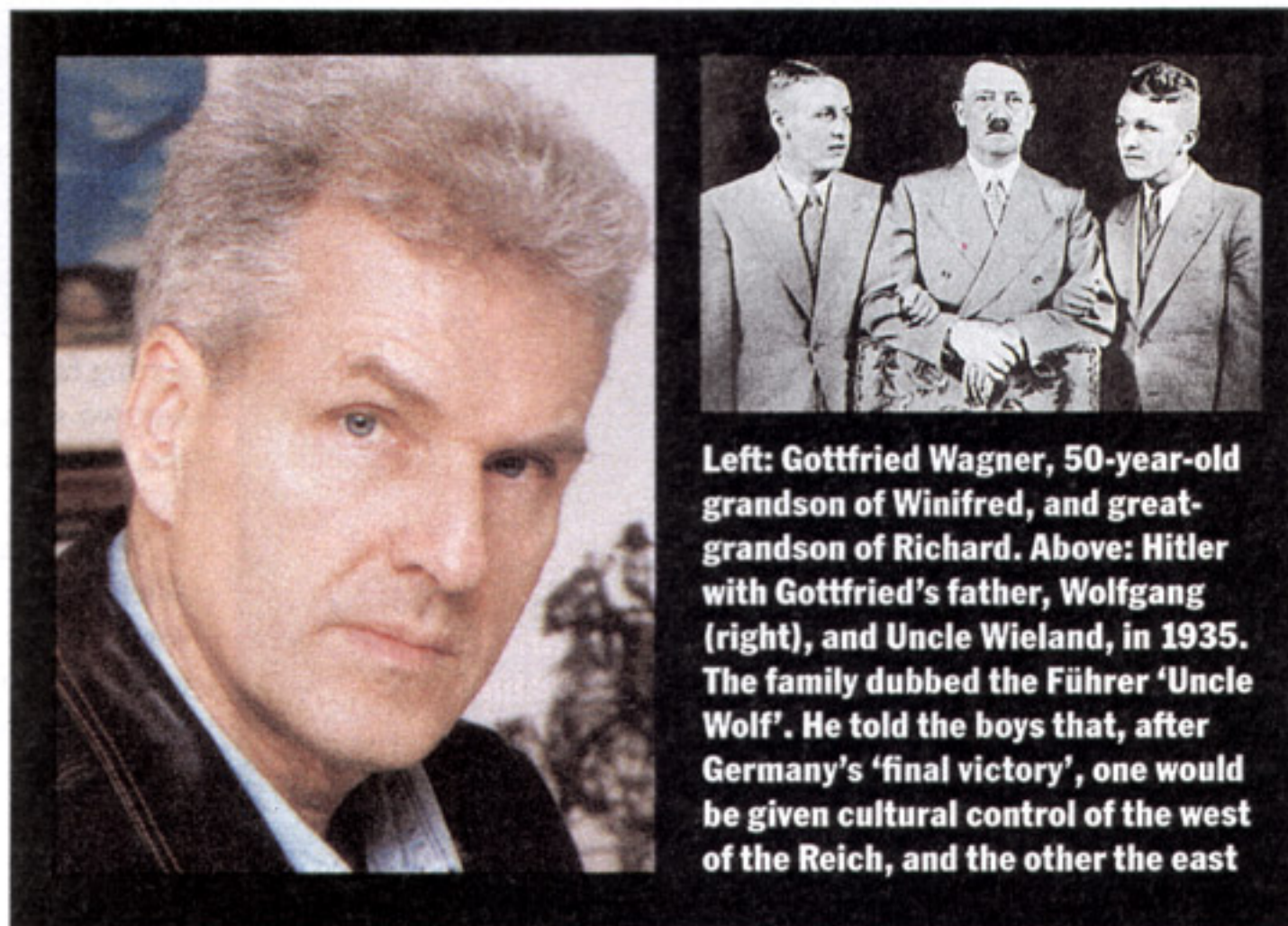


But as he sifts through sheaves of fading black and white photographs taken in his youth and begins to relate stories from his childhood, it becomes clear that he felt compelled not only to uncover the truth, but to expose it — which he does in a searing autobiography, *He Who Does Not Howl with the Wolf*, published in Britain this week.

"Growing up as a member of the Wagner family in Bayreuth in the years immediately after the war, people thought you must either be a Nazi or a born genius," says Gottfried. "I lived in this world of dark shadows for many years without even realising what they were." It was not until he was taken to the cinema as a nine-year-old with the rest of his class in 1956, as part of a government programme aimed at "re-educating" the post-war generation, that he had any idea what had happened during the time of the Third Reich.

As images from the liberation of Buchenwald flickered before him, followed by propaganda films showing Hitler fronting mass rallies of the party faithful, the young Gottfried sat transfixed. The music pounding out in the background was Wagner, and there on the screen was the Führer bowing and kissing his grandmother's hand, with his father, aunt and uncle standing laughing beside her.

"It was a deeply painful and shaming experience. Nobody had prepared us for what we were about to witness and no one discussed it afterwards," Gottfried recalls. When the frightened boy rushed home to ask his father about what he had seen, Wolfgang Wagner told him to get on with his homework, fobbing him off with



**Left: Gottfried Wagner, 50-year-old grandson of Winifred, and great-grandson of Richard. Above: Hitler with Gottfried's father, Wolfgang (right), and Uncle Wieland, in 1935. The family dubbed the Führer 'Uncle Wolf'. He told the boys that, after Germany's 'final victory', one would be given cultural control of the west of the Reich, and the other the east**

the excuse that he was "still too little to understand all that". When he turned to his grandmother for an explanation, she told him, "What you have seen there is all fake... propaganda by the New York Jews who want to make us and the Germans out to be bad."

Gottfried says that he started to lead a "double internal life". Aware of his family's embarrassment at his questions, he started to feign a more sympathetic interest in their wartime past, in order to coax them into revealing the truth. That was how he came to hear more about "Uncle Wolf".

Once his grandmother's defences were down, he discovered, she was only too willing to enthuse about the pleasures of life in the "USA" — not the United States, but the good old days of "*unser seliger Adolf*"

(our blessed Adolf). Sitting chain-smoking her unfiltered cigarettes and staring out over the lawns of Wahnfried Park, one of the Wagner family homes at Bayreuth, in the rolling hills of eastern Bavaria, she would talk about Hitler's "wonderful, bright, hypnotic eyes, his gentleness, his good manners and his charm".

So frequent were the Führer's visits to see "Omni" — Gottfried's grandmother — that, as boys, his father and his Uncle Wieland used to refer to Hitler as Uncle Wolf. In order to make Hitler feel more at home, Winifred even had a small annexe built onto the house for him. It was known as "the Führer's chimney".

Winifred remembered how Hitler used to say to her sons that "after the final victory" Wieland would be allocated cultural control of the west and Wolfgang the east. Although Wieland,

two years older than his brother, was the Führer's favourite — according to some accounts, Hitler sexually abused him during the 1920s — the leader lavished gifts on both boys. When Wolfgang married Gottfried's mother, Ellen, Hitler gave him a gold watch engraved "From Uncle Wolf to Wolfie".

It was painfully clear to Gottfried that he had to read up on the past, grilling his teachers and a few of his friends' parents to piece together a more accurate picture of Hitler's fascination with his family. Gradually he came to believe that the dictator saw himself as the heir to Richard Wagner's anti-semitism. Hitler tried to achieve through the Final Solution what Wagner had strived for culturally: a pure Germanic form "uncontaminated by Judaic idea", as outlined in the ➤➤➤

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composer's notorious anti-semitic pamphlet "Judaism in Music", a fierce attack on the emancipation of Jews. "Richard Wagner contributed his part to the indissoluble link between Bayreuth, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz," Gottfried concluded.

More books are thought to have been written about Richard Wagner than anyone other than Jesus Christ and Napoleon. Much has been written about the origins of the composer's anti-semitism: doubts about the identity of his father, and racist taunts as a boy that he was a Jew played their part, as did the anti-semitic climate of the late 19th century. Many of the wicked characters in his operas, such as Mime and Alberich in Siegfried, are thought to be Jews. "When Hitler wrote his manifesto, Mein Kampf, he mentioned very few people," says Gottfried. "But one of them, a very important influence on him, was my great-grandfather. The first time Hitler came to Bayreuth was on a pilgrimage, and he wept at the foot of Wagner's grave."

The Führer's fascination with Winifred Wagner stemmed from his adoration of her father-in-law. Born Winifred Williams in Hastings, Sussex, in 1897, Gottfried's grandmother was orphaned at the age of two and adopted by distant relations in Berlin. She was just 17, a strikingly beautiful young woman, when a marriage of convenience was arranged with Richard Wagner's only son, Siegfried, a closet homosexual 28 years her senior. The couple produced four children: Wieland, Friedelind, Wolfgang and Verena.

Hitler first met Winifred in 1923 after receiving an introduction through the English philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who was married to her sister-in-law. Chamberlain's racist texts had also helped Hitler form his theory for the Aryan super-race. Winifred was captivated. She thought Hitler "delightful... kind and pleasant to be with... his humour was absolutely marvellous".



Winifred with her husband, Siegfried – who was gay, and 28 years older – and their children, Wolfgang, Verena, Friedelind and Wieland

She claimed she never slept with Hitler, but the two took to corresponding regularly. After her husband died in 1930 and she took over the running of the Bayreuth festival, Hitler became an even more frequent visitor at Villa Wahnfried. When he asked Winifred to marry him, says Gottfried, "she preferred to hang on to the power she wielded as director of Bayreuth rather than give it up to become Frau Hitler". He describes his grandmother as being as formidable as a panzer, steamrolling anyone who got in her way. "She ruled the family like a master race."

**Winifred believed Hitler to be 'kind and pleasant... his humour was marvellous'**

Gottfried's only amusing memory of her was that she kept her British passport and, after the war, enjoyed brandishing it at the German police whenever she was caught speeding, in order to avoid a fine.

When the allies identified her as one of Hitler's most fanatical supporters, she was forced to cede control of the Bayreuth festival to her sons. Still, she continued to exert huge influence over the clan, setting family members against each other. As a result her two sons put up a high wall between their homes on the family estate and young Gottfried was forbidden from talking to his cousins.

Wieland and Wolfgang ran the festival jointly until Wieland's premature death at the age of 49 in 1966. He was the creative force, Wolfgang more of a plodding administrator. All their attention concentrated on staging the festival, and Gottfried and his elder sister, Eva, were bundled off to boarding houses and hotels for months at a time. Once the festival was over, there was no happy reunion with their parents, who would take extended holidays to recover from the stress. The children would be left in the charge of the caretaker on the estate.

It was during one of these long absences that Gottfried discovered the home movies of Ommi and Uncle Wolf.

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It would have been all too easy to have forgotten the hidden footage, says Gottfried. In speaking out, he was alienated from his family and frozen out of the lucrative family business. Why he decided to reveal all, however, is key to understanding the impact of his autobiography. It is all a matter, he believes, of conscience and individual responsibility.

The Bayreuth festival, founded by Richard Wagner in 1876, is no longer under the exclusive ownership of the Wagner family. The Richard Wagner Foundation, ➡➡➡

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set up in 1973 to run it, is sponsored both by the state and by private business. But the festival is highly profitable. There are always about half a million requests for the 58,000 tickets each season, and the festival's patrons include Germany's rich and powerful.

The battle for control of the Bayreuth festival among Wagner's warring descendants has been likened to soap operas such as *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. Wolfgang, now 78, shows no sign of ceding control of the festival. But already his second wife, Gudrun (Gottfried's parents divorced in 1976), their 19-year-old daughter, Katharina, his eldest daughter, Eva, and Wieland's daughter Nike, are sharpening their knives ready for the inevitable succession struggle when he either steps down or dies.

Nike, 52, a freelance theatre critic in Vienna, once summed up the melodrama by describing the Wagners as a family "in which fathers castrate sons and mothers smother them with love... in which men are feminine and women masculine; and in which a great-grandchild nibbles on the liver of another great-grandchild". Such a depiction of the Wagner feud incenses Gottfried. "The moment Hitler becomes a figure in any family drama, it can never be regarded as a soap opera. It is a tragedy." His family, Gottfried claims, has never fully recognised this or shown remorse for it.

Although his Aunt Friedelind rejected National Socialism and exiled herself to Yorkshire during the time of the Third Reich, neither she nor the rest of the family made any connection between Wagner's legacy of anti-semitism and the Holocaust. His grandmother remained an unrepentant Nazi until her death in 1980. For many years after the war, she continued to throw parties on April 20 (the Führer's birthday) and signed her letters "88" (the eighth letter of the alphabet being H, 88 stands for "Heil Hitler").

His family's failure to face up to the past is, Gottfried believes, a metaphor for Germany today. "Modern Germany has compensated for its past failures by striving for economic success... After Hitler a new ethical orientation should have been more of a priority than materialism. Ninety-five per cent of Germans could open up their family cupboard and find dark things. That is very painful. But it is the precondition for a new German spirit."

Gottfried's own personal reckoning was slow in coming. After an undistinguished academic career studying

**'Ninety-five per cent of Germans could open up their family cupboard and find dark things'**



**Winifred and the children with Heinz Tietjen, then artistic director of the Bayreuth festival (founded by Richard Wagner in 1876). Wolfgang (right), now 78, runs it today. There may be a battle for control of the event when he dies or steps down**

music and philosophy, he travelled to the United States to escape the shadows of the Wagner dynasty and research a book he was writing about the music of Kurt Weill. He had trouble finding work with opera production companies, and eventually took up a position as a management trainee with the Deutsche Bank.

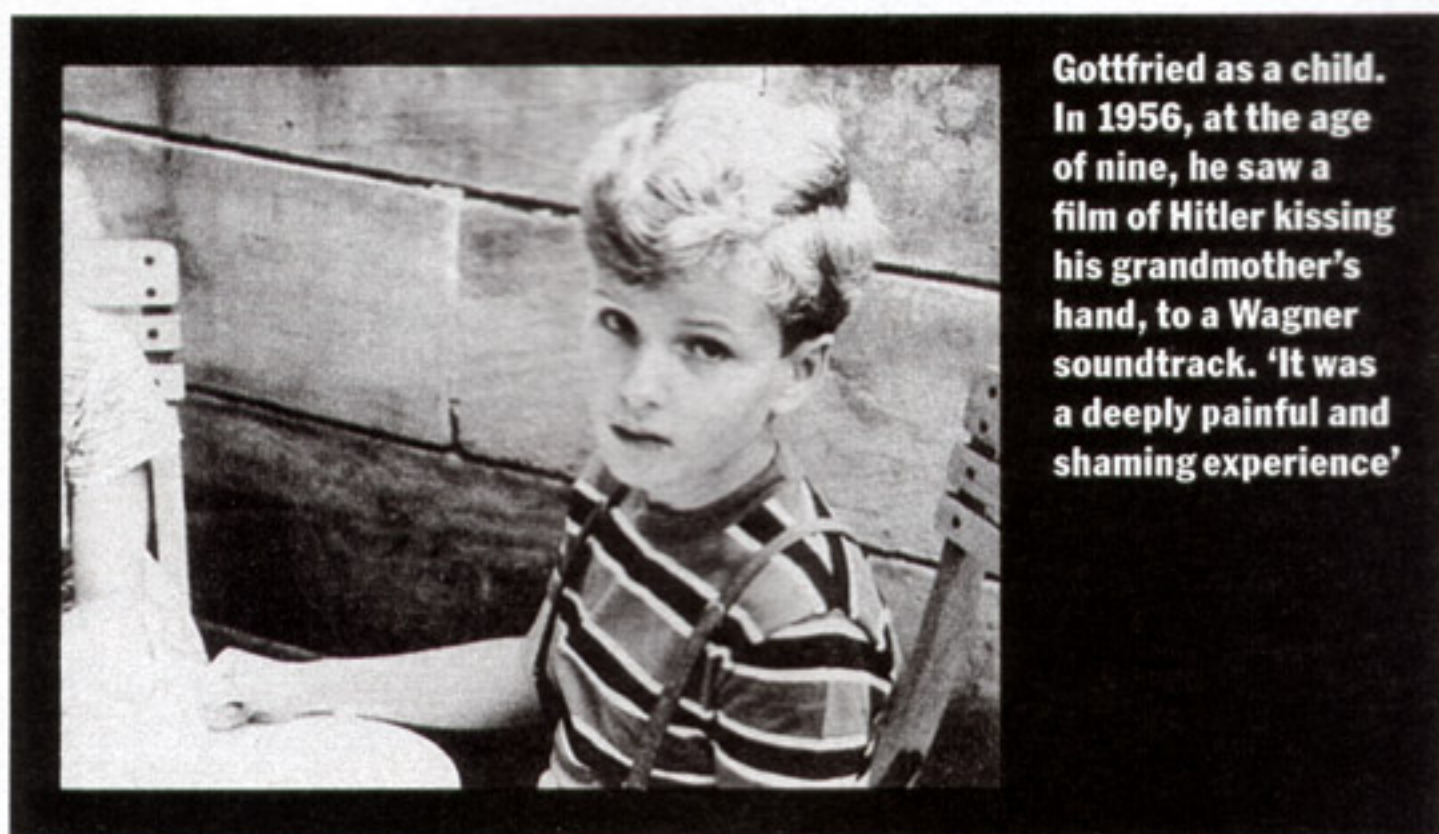
It was not until 1975 that he finally found the courage to hand over the home movies he had found in the sidecar of his father's motorbike to the German film director Hans Jürgen Syberberg, who was making a documentary about Winifred Wagner. His father furiously instructed lawyers to sue Gottfried for the return of the films, and only a limited amount of footage appeared.

It took another 20 years for Gottfried to write about the home movies and their implications in his book. Becoming disillusioned with the world of banking, he returned to work in the theatre and started giving occasional lectures on Weill, Wagner and Franz Liszt. In 1990 he was invited to give a series of four lectures on Weill and Wagner in Israel, where Wagner's music is still largely taboo. A few months later he and his second wife, Teresina, an Italian computer executive, adopted a six-year-old Romanian orphan named Eugenio. It was the cathartic effect of the trip to Israel and the need to make sense of his family's past for his son's sake, Gottfried says, that finally pushed him to write down his story.

Not since the publication two years ago of Hitler's *Willing Executioners*, by Daniel Goldhagen, exposing the readiness of ordinary German soldiers to carry out the Final Solution, has a book provoked such a reaction in Germany. Typical of the hand-wringing response to Gottfried's book was Markus Schwering's conclusion in the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* newspaper that it was "not just about Wagner, but about all of us and the weaklings who dominate our culture".

In Bayreuth the book was condemned by the town council as "malicious agitation", while Gottfried was dismissed as suffering from a "personality ➤➤➤"





**Gottfried as a child.** In 1956, at the age of nine, he saw a film of Hitler kissing his grandmother's hand, to a Wagner soundtrack. 'It was a deeply painful and shaming experience'

disorder". Some critics accused him of simply producing a litany of how "unwanted, unloved, rejected and misunderstood" he was as a child and later by his theatrical peers. Much of the book is a bitter tirade against all the people who slighted Gottfried. The author Frederic Spotts, a historian of Bayreuth, observed caustically that it was "debatable whether such a story should be discussed in a cultural publication or in a journal of clinical psychology". Gottfried's father condemned the book as "slandorous" and "primitive", and banned him from the family home.

"They've all missed the point of the book entirely," Gottfried snorts, his arms windmilling in agitation as he paces up and down the basement study of his modest home in a middle-class suburb of Milan. "All I am trying to convey is how vital it is that we all accept personal responsibility for our past. Only by analysing the past can we ensure a more humane present and future."

Gottfried believes his family should start facing up to its past by opening up its sealed archives, which include the hundreds of letters Hitler wrote to Winifred. His grandmother once opened a steel cabinet containing the bundles of letters to show them to Gottfried, but she was quickly ordered by Wolfgang to hide them from him. Many of the most intimate and compromising letters, Gottfried believes, may already have been destroyed by a former archivist and staunch Nazi who worked at Bayreuth for some years after the second world war.

There are signs that Gottfried's call for more openness about the past are beginning to bear fruit. At the same time as the Bayreuth festival is held this summer, the University of Bayreuth is hosting a conference, sanctioned by the festival organisers, on Wagner and the

Jews. An international panel including experts from the University of Tel Aviv, the United States and festival conductors Daniel Barenboim, James Levine and Peter Schneider will discuss topics such as Wagner and anti-semitism.

Although Gottfried is sceptical about the objectivity of such a conference, he believes it is a sign that a growing number of younger Germans are beginning to question the morality of parents who glided smoothly from the Third Reich into the post-war era. Despite being subjected to death threats by right-wing extremists, he is in increasing demand to give lectures and appear on talk shows in Germany. "Younger Germans are more open and willing to listen to what I have to say. They are less burdened by feelings of guilt." For Gottfried this has made the heavy price he has paid for speaking out against his family worthwhile.

In addition to writing his book, he has helped found an organisation called the Post-Holocaust Dialogue Group, which arranges meetings between children of Nazi criminals and children of Holocaust victims. "We have received letters of support from the children of leading Nazi criminals, including the son of Martin Bormann, encouraging us to continue our work," he says.

Just in case his family and countrymen thought they could relax once the controversy over his book dies down, Gottfried announces that he now plans to write a satirical play about contemporary Germany. "It's only once you step outside a situation — your own family or country — that you realise what is truly ridiculous about it. Germans are not known for their sense of humour. But you have to laugh about life too."

Eager to distance himself from his countrymen, he leaps from his chair to display his own talent for self-mockery. Sometimes, when people ask him if he is related to Richard Wagner and they sing the opening bars of The Ride of the Valkyries, he is ready with the retort: "No, I'm related to Dick Cartwright — that's how you would translate my great-grandfather's name into English, you know. Dick was the star of Bonanza. So I hum them the tune from that old television show." ■

**Gottfried thinks his family should open its archives, which include hundreds of letters from Hitler**



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