

PART ONE

Life

INTRODUCTION

The Haydns and the Kollers

The question of Joseph Haydn's origin has been much disputed. No less than four different theories have been put forward; all are interesting and merit examination, although they fail to furnish a complete solution to the problem. The families of Haydn's parents had their homes in eastern Lower Austria, north of the large Neusiedler Lake, a district of many different races. Since 1533, besides the predominant German element, a large number of Croats have settled in this district, and from the adjacent Hungarian border there has come, through the centuries, a steady stream of Hungarian immigrants. The Slav ethnologist, Dr. Franz Kuhač,¹ has contended that Haydn's family was by race Croatian, that the names of Haydn and Koller (the family name of the composer's mother) were both Croatian, and that many of Haydn's melodies bear a close resemblance to Croatian folk songs. Undue publicity was given to this theory by Sir Henry Hadow, who declared in both the *Oxford History of Music* and Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*² that Haydn was a typical Croatian composer. On the other hand, the Hungarian historian Elemér Schwartz has attempted to prove

¹This champion of the importance of Croatian art had, incidentally, the purely German name of Koch, which he changed later to the Slav form of Kuhač.

²Hadow's statements are to be found in the "Haydn" articles of the second and third editions of Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. See also Henry Hadow, *A Croatian Composer* (London, 1897).

Haydn's Hungarian descent.³ He bases his theory on the fact that the village of Tadtén (Hungarian: Tétény), where Haydn's great-grandfather lived before he moved to Hainburg, was predominantly Hungarian in the seventeenth century. However, in 1659 the Bishop of Raab wrote about Tadtén: "All the members of the parish are Hungarian Lutherans, with the exception of a few German houses."⁴ There has even been an attempt by the Slav philologist Dedaëlus to claim a gypsy origin for Haydn. This induced Ernst Fritz Schmid to undertake elaborate genealogical research, tracing the family names in German districts back to the Middle Ages and producing most valuable data about Haydn's ancestors.⁵ According to his final conclusions, there can be no doubt that the Haydn and Koller families were of German origin.

But blood and race alone do not determine one's nationality. By race Haydn was a German, by nationality an Austrian. He lived in a melting pot of races, in a country in which cultural elements from both central and eastern Europe were fused together. It was quite natural that he should be familiar with the way of life of the Croats and the Hungarians. He heard their music from his childhood on and attended their festivities; he admired their artistic craftsmanship and the color of their holiday garb. With the instinct of genius he absorbed all these impressions and brought them to life in his music. The inner enrichment that he owed to his acquaintance with the different cultures of Austria and Hungary was more than a minor factor in making him the great artist he was.

Great composers often have someone of artistic or intellectual leanings among their ancestors. Joseph Haydn, one of the most independent spirits of musical history, was exceptional also in this respect. Going back to his great-grandfathers on both sides, we fail to find among them a single musician or even a man who pursued any kind of intellectual occupation. They all toiled with their hands as vinegrowers, farmers, wheelwrights, or millers. They were hard-working, honest men whose infinite diligence, patience, and pertinacity succeeded in raising them from extreme poverty to well-ordered circumstances and esteemed positions in the community. This they achieved under the most difficult conditions, for war raged almost continuously in that part of central Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The little section of eastern Austria where the Haydn family lived lies close to the Hungarian

³In the daily publication *Magyarság* (Budapest, April 20, 1932).

⁴"*Parociani omnes sunt Lutherani Hungari praeter aliquot domos Germanos.*"

⁵Ernst Fritz Schmid, *Joseph Haydn* . . . (Kassel, 1934).

border. It was feebly fortified and thus fell easily to any nation that chose to make war on Austria. Haydn's great-grandfather, the wagonmaker Caspar Haydn, and his wife lost their lives when the town of Hainburg was captured by the Turks in 1683. Of the house and possessions acquired with heartbreaking toil only ruins were left to their one surviving son, Thomas. But less than seven years later Thomas had already built himself a new house and had been nominated a "citizen" of Hainburg. This meant definite progress, for his father had started his career at Hainburg as a modest *Burgnknecht*, a day laborer with a permanent domicile.

On the other side, Haydn's maternal grandfather, the farmer Lorenz Koller (b. 1675), after witnessing as a boy of eight the ravages wrought by the Turkish invasion, lost all his possessions in 1704 when the *Kuruczes*, the peasant army of the anti-Habsburg Hungarian party, plundered the border village of Rohrau. One year later he rebuilt his house, only to see it go up in flames a second time when the Hungarians returned in 1706. But Lorenz Koller was not a man to give up. Again and again he started from the beginning, and so good was his progress that in 1713 he was offered the office of *Marktrichter* (a magistrate supervising peace and propriety in the village), a position in which his son-in-law, Joseph Haydn's father, was to succeed him.

As to Haydn's parents, the information supplied by documents is supplemented by stories based on the master's own accounts. Haydn's mother, Anna Maria Koller, was baptized on November 10, 1707, to the sound of cannon firing against the *Kuruczes* who were attempting another assault on the village of Rohrau. Her father died when she was eleven years old. She became a cook for the lords of Rohrau, the Counts of Harrach, and in their castle she saw something of the way of life of the Austrian nobility. The kitchen staff comprised nine persons, for whom a yearly salary of a thousand florins was budgeted. Menus preserved in the archives of the castle show that the Harrachs demanded high culinary skill from their cooks. Maria had to handle such delicacies as tortoises and crayfish and had an abundance of material at her disposal. We are told, for example, that something like eight thousand eggs, two hundred capons, and three hundred chickens were delivered annually to the castle by the inhabitants of Rohrau as part of their duties to their patron. It must have been quite a change for Maria Koller when, in 1728 at the age of twenty-one, she left the castle to marry the wagonmaker Mathias Haydn. Although she brought her husband a dowry of one hundred and twenty florins and an "honest

outfit" (according to the marriage contract), every penny had to be accounted for in the little house, especially when there was a large family to rear. Maria bore her husband twelve children, but six of them died in infancy. Her famous son often testified to Maria's excellent housewifely qualities. She was scrupulously clean and neat, an indefatigable worker; and these were the qualities that she stressed in bringing up her children. She was deeply religious, this being a characteristic trait of the family. We know that her father bequeathed eighty-eight florins to the church, a considerable sum for the modest people of Rohrau. It was Maria Haydn's great dream to see Joseph's talents devoted to the Catholic Church, and great must have been her disappointment at his preference for the irresponsible life of a musician to that of the sacred profession of a priest. Haydn often lamented that his dear mother did not live to see him succeed. Before he got his first post Maria Haydn, worn out by a life of ceaseless toil, had died in 1754, at the age of forty-seven.

Haydn's father, Mathias Haydn, was born on January 31, 1699, in the town of Hainburg, a son of the wheelwright Thomas Haydn. Only two years after the infant's birth, Thomas died, leaving a widow of thirty with six sons, the eldest being barely twelve. In those troubled times, with war and plague threatening the population, Katharina Haydn naturally sought male support, and four months after her husband's death she married Mathias Seefranz, also a wheelwright. She bore him four children, among them Juliane Rosina, whom we shall meet again as the wife of the schoolmaster Franck. Seefranz, who later became a member of the Hainburg council, was a rather difficult and quarrelsome person, and life with him may not have been easy for his young stepsons, who were all learning the family trade under his instructions. In 1717 Mathias Haydn finished his apprenticeship and set out on the traditional travels of the journeyman, which brought him as far as Frankfort on the Main. When he came home, he brought with him a harp, which someone had taught him to play. Although he could not read a note, it was his great delight to accompany himself on the harp when he sang his favorite folk tunes in a pleasant tenor voice. In 1727 Mathias decided to settle down in the nearby town of Rohrau, remaining at the same time a member of the Hainburg guild of wheelwrights. Why his choice fell on this rather uninviting little market town is not known, but it is not unlikely that the person of his future bride attracted him to it. In 1728 Mathias Haydn and Maria Koller were married, and for twenty-six years they lived

happily together. But Haydn's father was certainly no sentimentalist. When his good wife died, the man of fifty-five did not hesitate to marry his servant girl of nineteen.

Mathias lived in Rohrau in a cottage built by himself, and from the outset was fairly prosperous. It has been the custom of Haydn's biographers to stress the extreme poverty of his father, and judging from the appearance of the house in which the Haydns lived throughout their lives, this attitude seems to be justified. The little low-roofed, thatch-covered cottage is bound to fill us with pity, and we all feel like Beethoven, who on his deathbed, when shown a picture of the Haydn house, exclaimed, "Strange that so great a man should have been born in so poor a home!" For all that, Mathias Haydn was by no means a poor man, and he could probably have built himself a much better house if he had felt his cottage to be inadequate. Several of the bills that he made out have been preserved, and it is known that he was given plenty of work and was not paid badly by the Counts of Harrach for making wheels, repairing wagons, and painting houses. From the taxes he paid we see that he ultimately had his own wine cellar, his own farmland, and some cattle. The high esteem in which he was held is proved by his nomination to succeed his father-in-law in the office of *Marktrichter*, a position that he filled from 1741 until 1761, one year before his death. The list of his duties is imposing, but only a few can be mentioned here. He was responsible for the good conduct of the population and had to keep a sharp lookout for adultery or excessive gambling. He had to see that people went to church and did not break the Sunday rest. It was his job to allot among the inhabitants of Rohrau the labor required by the patron, Count Harrach, and he was responsible for keeping the local roads in good repair. On Sundays at six in the morning he had to report on all such matters to the count's steward.⁶ Every two years an open-air meeting of the whole community took place at which the *Marktrichter* rendered a detailed account of the work done during the past period. To be at the same time a wagonmaker, farmer, vinegrower, wine producer, and important official and to carry out all these duties well was no small matter. Mathias Haydn must have been as efficient as he was diligent.

No personal documents of Haydn's parents or any of his forebears have been preserved. No portraits, letters, or diaries have

⁶These early hours were kept during the period from April to September. In the other months, the *Marktrichter* did not have to report until 8 AM once every fortnight.

come down to us. Nevertheless we know that it was not a mean heritage that they passed on to their great offspring. A deep religious sense, a stubborn tenacity of purpose, and a passionate desire to rise in the world are qualities that we find in his ancestors. Combined with them were a great pride in good craftsmanship, a warm love of the soil, and a healthy streak of sensuality. Indeed, it might be said that this heritage gave Joseph Haydn the very qualities necessary for the life he was to lead.