

SPOHR'S FAMILY

by Maurice Powell

Louis Spohr was born on April 5th, 1784, into a family of doctors and Lutheran pastors who had lived in the vicinity of Braunschweig, 'Zwischen Harz und Heide', for five generations.

The earliest branches of the family may have been religious refugees from the Spanish Netherlands. However, the Spohrsches Familienbuch reveals that the first member of the family who can be identified with certainty is Christoph Spohr (1) (1605-79) of Ermsleben, who became bath-keeper and surgeon at Alfeld, a small town on the river Leine.

His son, Franz (1644-1709), was a sometime brewer, farmer, bath-keeper and surgeon, 'Bürger und Hausbesitzer' and teacher at the Opfermannschule in Alfeld. He was succeeded in the dual posts of bath-keeper and surgeon by his eldest son, whilst the second son, Hartung Elias (1679-1761) studied theology at Jena and became pastor at Woltershausen.

Three of Hartung Elias' sons became pastors in the Braunschweig and Hildesheim districts. It was with the eldest son, Georg Ludwig Heinrich, that the 12 year old Louis Spohr lived for six months during 1796-7 whilst preparing for his confirmation.

Georg Ludwig Heinrich Spohr, who died in 1805, was possessed of strong, unyielding convictions, and kept a strictly watchful eye on his family's moral fibre. He was the first member of the family in whom the thread of creativity appears, as some poems published in French and German in 1781 amply show. Perhaps he would have achieved more, if his argumentative nature had not ensnared him in futile literary and theological feuding over many years.

Georg's sister, Charlotte, married a pastor from Braunschweig, Heinrich Ludwig Henke. His eldest son, Carl Heinrich (Louis Spohr's father) married his cousin, Juliane Ernestine Luise, when he wed the daughter of Heinrich and Charlotte Henke in 1782.

It is in the life and character of Carl Heinrich Spohr (1756-1843) that we can most clearly discern the powerful traits of character that were to influence the musical personality of his son. At the age of 16 he ran away from home to escape his father's anger after some incident at school. In Hamburg he scraped a bare living by giving private tuition, and somehow acquired a working knowledge of English, French, Italian and Spanish. He eventually secured a teaching post at the Büsch'schen Handelsakademie (2), and began to study theology at the Gymnasium Academicum. By 1776 he had managed to save enough money to gain entrance to Leipzig University, and reconciliation with his family soon followed after he achieved modest fame by publishing some articles based on his medical researches.

Once more supported financially by his family, Carl Heinrich Spohr entered the University at Göttingen as a student of Medical Science in 1777. The following year he transferred to Nürnberg, and graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1780 after an examination at Strasbourg. He received his final qualification on 11th April 1781 after passing with distinction the state examination of the Ober-Sanitäts-Kollegium at Braunschweig, and he began to practice.

Louis Spohr was born in his grandparents' house, the parsonage of the parish of St. Agidien in Braunschweig, (a Spohr museum today). The baptismal register for the following week contains this entry:

Des Herrn Doctoris Medicina
Carl Heinrich Spohr Sohn Namens
Ludewig, ist den 12. April zu
St. Agidi getauft.

Following the fashion of the day, Spohr was called 'Louis' from his infancy within the family, the name he retained throughout his long life.

In 1785 pastor Henke died. After three months' grace the Spohrs had to vacate the Ostphalian half-timbered parsonage. For a while they lived in the house by the Hager bridge near Bassen the Baker's (3). The following year Spohr's father was appointed Stadtphysikus in Seesen, and Zweiter Landphysikus for the Harz district.

The family moved to Seesen in July 1787, and even fifty years later when writing his Autobiography Spohr would recall the tearful departure from Braunschweig and the smell of the freshly white-washed walls of their new 'landlisches' home.

In a future Journal I should like to continue this story for the first half and a half of Spohr's life and examine the family background he grew in and the first specifically musical influences in his life.

- (1) For further information consult 'Louis Spohr, Bilder u. Dokumente' by H. Homburg. A family tree can be found in the new German 'Lebenserinnerungen'.
- (2) Johann Georg Busch became a family friend of the Spohrs, and was able to give the young Louis Spohr some sound advice concerning his career when his father sent him to Hamburg to earn a living.
- (3) 'Bilder u. Dokumente'.