



Bernadette Mayrhofer

Ludwig Theodor Wittels (Violin I)

Born on March 21, 1896, in Vienna; died on December 13, 1956, in New York

Joined the Vienna State Opera Orchestra and Vienna Philharmonic (WPh) on January 3, 1919; compulsory suspension following the 'Anschluss' on March 23, 1938;

Resignation from the Jewish Community Vienna (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde) on Jan. 2, 1930; first marriage to Margarethe Edl (born on Feb. 16, 1908, Catholic) on May 17, 1930 in Vienna; second marriage in exile to Katia Doubek (birthdate and wedding date unknown), no children.

Graduation from grade school, 1908/09 – 1909/10 one year violin preparatory studies with Alfred Rosé (pianist and conductor) at the Music Academy, afterwards two years of private lessons, 1912/13 – 1913/14. Studied at the Meisterschule for Violin, teacher and head of the Meisterschule was Otakar Sevcik (violin virtuoso from Bohemia, instructor and composer of violin studies), finished with a State Diploma on June 15, 1914;



Ludwig Theodor Wittels

1914 – 1917 Engagements at the Vienna Volksooper and the Vienna Symphony, 1917 – 1918 member of the military band of the Royal and Imperial Infantry Regiment No. 4 "Hoch- und Deutschmeister" under the direction of conductor Wilhelm Wacek;

Escaped from Vienna with the assistance of Gerald Felix Warburg (sponsorship for the USA), on Feb. 4, 1940, official de-registration in Vienna, on Feb. 6, 1940, departure on the steamer "REX" from Genoa, Italy to New York/USA; arrival in New York on Feb. 15, 1940;

1940-43 precarious occupational situation in exile consisting of short und infrequent musical engagements in various states in the USA: appearance on May 31, 1940 with the Warburg Orchestra and on July, 31, 1941, as part of the "Austrian Freedom Day in New York"; 1942 - engagements with the Salzburg Chamber Players (Bernardsville, New Jersey), performing during free seasonal interludes with various opera companies; from 1943 until his serious illness in June 1956 he was a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York;



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In December 1952, he was awarded the Nicolai Medal.

For sources see Footnote¹

¹ Information on Ludwig Wittels, collected by Dr. Silvia Kargl/HAdWPh; IKG Matriken, Passenger List, Obituary Newspaper (NY Times), Department of Matters of Restitution, provided by Mag.^a Sabine Loitfellner, Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien; Historical residency records for Ludwig Wittels, Vienna City and State Archives; Information on education, on the Academy und regarding instructor Otakar Sevcik, collected by Frau Dr.ⁱⁿ Lynne Heller, Archives of the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna; Data entry form of Ludwig Wittels, Vienna, June 6, 1938. AdR, SThV 2834/38; Compensation files for Katia and Ludwig Wittels, Zahl 08973/3a/30, AdR – Hilfsfonds; Wissenschaft und Kunst in der deutschen Ostmark, Verlag für völkisches Schrifttum, Wien/Graz (u.a.) 1938, 1329; Archiv/Rupertsberger, Letter of Ludwig Wittels to Leopold Föderl, NY, August 18, 1947.



The Child Prodigy Ludwig Wittels

Ludwig Wittels was considered to be one of the artistically most notable violinists of the Vienna Philharmonic. Two prominent orchestra members mention Wittels' remarkable career with the orchestra in autobiographies written in the 1970's. Otto Strasser, who had been chairman of the Vienna Philharmonic, spoke of Wittels' outstanding musicality, noting in addition that Wittels and two other violinists were very promising young virtuosos, who "*strove for soloistic honors. (...): Ludwig Wittels, delighted Richard Strauss with repeated performances of Strauss' not particularly significant violin concerto (...)*"². Five years later, in 1979, another former chairman, Hugo Burghauser, wrote in his autobiography: "*Strauss spontaneously decided (...) that the youngest violinist sitting in the last chair, Ludwig Wittels, should perform the solo. Wittels had been a child prodigy and had remained child-like in stature. The audience presumed that this little person sitting in his chair, with feet not reaching the floor which swung to and fro, must be a newly discovered child prodigy to whom they were being introduced...*"³

The fact that for two years – between 1912 and 1914 – Wittels attended an academy which had been newly founded in 1909 for master violinists under the directorship of the renowned Czech violin professor Otakar Sevcik underscores his exceptional violin talent. The entrance examination for this exclusive school was particularly difficult and only the exceptionally talented and very advanced students were accepted. „*This is a special school, which (...) is designed to recruit the best graduates out of the music classes and bring them to the highest standard of artistic capability.*"⁴ On June 15, 1914, Ludwig Wittels completed his study at this Academy and received a State Diploma.⁵ Afterwards he played with the Vienna Volksoper, the Vienna Symphony and, in the war years of 1917-1918, with an elite military orchestra under the baton of Wilhelm Wacek. On March 1, 1919, he became a member of the Vienna State Opera Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic.⁶

Little is known regarding Wittels' private life in Vienna before he was forced to flee. On May 17, 1930, he married Margarethe Edl (born February 16, 1908), who was of the Catholic faith. According to the information at hand, the marriage remained childless. Shortly before his wedding, Wittels resigned from the Jewish Community (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde).⁷

Expulsion from the Orchestra and Austria

² Otto Strasser, Und dafür wird man noch bezahlt. Mein Leben mit den Wiener Philharmonikern, Wien 1974, 170.

³ Hugo Burghauser: Philharmonische Begegnungen. Erinnerungen eines Wiener Philharmonikers, Zürich 1979, 23.

⁴ Statutes of the "Meisterschulen für Klavier und Violine", information provided by Frau Dr.ⁱⁿ Lynne Heller, Archives of the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna.

⁵ Wittels completed his study on the violin at the Music Academy with the "Reifeprüfung" ab. Ibid.

⁶ Wissenschaft und Kunst in der deutschen Ostmark (see footnote 1).

⁷ Wissenschaft und Kunst in der deutschen Ostmark (see footnote 1).

On March 23, 1938, following 19 years of service at the Vienna State Opera and the Vienna Philharmonic, Wittels was informed in writing by the administration of the opera that he had been removed from the orchestra and that he was "*effective immediately until further notification suspended (...). With German Greetings. The Administration of the State Opera.*"⁸ According to racist National Socialist terminology, Wittels was classified as being "fully Jewish".

Shortly following the 'Anschluss' on March 12, 1938, many anti-Jewish laws took effect - in the former territory of Austria some 250 anti-Semitic laws had been enacted by the end of the war⁹ - discriminating against, isolating and disenfranchising the Jewish population. Ludwig Wittels must have suffered unimaginable difficulties in Vienna. Much like his other Jewish colleagues, he lived in constant fear of being threatened, denounced, evicted, rounded up and/or deported. Along with all of this, his financial situation was becoming more and more difficult. In December 1938 Wittels was forced to decide between accepting a severance payment in the amount of three month's salary or receiving instead a retirement package beginning at age 60, which would have been reduced by one fourth. A report by the administration of the State Opera (SThV) on December 9, 1938, written to the office of the Reich governorship, documents Wittels' decision to accept the severance payment. In it Wittels also requested that he be paid this sum in advance - around December 20, 1938 - because of his plans to travel to an engagement in Shanghai in December of that year. A note included in this report states that this request became unnecessary because Wittels had changed his travel plans to the beginning of January 1939.¹⁰ Eventually it took over a year before Wittels could flee Austria. Following the remittance of his three months' severance pay from the administration of the State Theatre, the Vienna Philharmonic paid an additional sum to Wittels in the amount of 198 RM on October 27, 1939.¹¹

Ludwig Wittels' last address was Bürgerspitalgasse 5/8 in the 6th District of Vienna. He was officially listed as residing at this address between February 10, 1939, and February 4, 1940.¹² Wittels had probably already been living there, because on June 2, 1938 he had listed it as being the domicile for him and his wife Margarethe in the data entry form which all Jewish employees of the state theaters were forced to fill out.¹³ How long his wife, who was 12 years his junior, actually lived at this apartment could not be ascertained. Margarethe Wittels was classified according to National Socialistic ideology as being "Aryan" and did not accompany

⁸ Data entry form (see footnote 1); IKG Matriken (see footnote 1).

⁹ Erika Weinzierl, *Zu wenig Gerechte. Österreicher und die Judenverfolgung 1938 – 1945*, Graz-Wien-Köln 1986, 36.

¹⁰ Report of the SThV (State Theater Administration), Vienna, Dec. 9, 1938, AdR, SthV, Karton „Judenakten“ 4162/38.

¹¹ Kargl, Information on Ludwig Wittels (see footnote 1).

¹² Historical residency records (see footnote 1).

¹³ Data entry form (see footnote 1).

her husband when he fled to the USA. According to historical records, she later married two times.¹⁴

Escape from Vienna

At the beginning of February 1940, Ludwig Wittels was finally able to escape from the Nazis. The key benefactor aiding his escape was Gerald Felix Warburg, son of the German/American banking family Warburg, who was a hobby cellist himself and a benefactor of European musicians in need. Gerald Felix Warburg was the son of the famous German-American banker, Felix M. Warburg who until 1937, along with Paul Baerwald, was a leading member of the charitable organization "American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee " (JDC), which had already been involved in assisting needy, suffering Jews in Europe since the end of the World War I.¹⁵ Warburg provided Ludwig Wittels with the affidavit (certification of sponsorship) which was necessary for emigration to the USA. Wittels paid the cost of passage out of his own pocket.¹⁶

Ludwig Wittels boarded the steamship "REX" which departed from Genoa, Italy, on February 6, 1940, and arrived in New York harbor on February 15, 1940. Also noted on the passenger lists were the names of those friends and/or relatives in the USA who would provide sponsorship and residence for the immigrants upon arrival. Next to Wittels' name on this passenger list was listed as "friend" in New York "Gerald F. Warburg, Brookville, L.I.N.Y". As his "nearest relative or friend in country whence alien came", Wittels listed his mother, Charlotte Wittels, as well as her address, Bürgerspitalgasse 5, Vienna, "Germany".¹⁷ On February 15, 1940, at the age of almost 44 years, Ludwig Wittels reached his secure country of exile, the USA.

Ludwig Wittels' mother, Charlotte Wittels, born on April 4, 1870, whom he was forced to leave behind in their mutual apartment in Vienna in February 1940, was deported to Riga on December 3, 1941, where at the age of 71 she was murdered. His father, Sieghard Wittels, died in November 1941, just a few weeks before his wife was evicted from their apartment in the Bürgerspitalgasse.¹⁸

Life in Exile

„My forced dismissal from the State Opera and the Philharmonic caused me severe mental anguish. I developed claustrophobia and an extreme nervous condition, neither of which are

¹⁴ Historical residency records for Margarethe Wittels, Vienna City and State Archives.

¹⁵ [Hhttp://americanjewisharchives.org/collections/ms0457/H](http://americanjewisharchives.org/collections/ms0457/H), [Hhttp://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_M._Warburg](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_M._Warburg), [Hhttp://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint_Distribution_Committee](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint_Distribution_Committee) (Internet research on March 15, 2013).

¹⁶ Passenger List (see footnote 1).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Documentary Archives of the Austrian Resistance, Online database, [Hhttp://www.doew.at](http://www.doew.at); Application for Compensation, NY, Oct. 15, 1956, Compensation files (see footnote 1).



good for a musician. Therefore, it was not possible for me to perform as a soloist, as I had done previously".¹⁹

(Information provided by Ludwig Wittels on the question by the aid agency regarding damage to his health and his reduced ability to earn a living.)

Wittels' first years in exile proved to be difficult and emotionally debilitating. "(...) *the first three years of jobbing in various places, afforded him little chance to establish himself. (...)*". His second wife, Katia, wrote in regard to his beginning years in the USA: "*After emigrating here, he had a hard time, being forced to play in inferior orchestras. From all of this agitation he developed diabetes (...)*".²⁰

Very little is known about Wittels' musical activities in his first three years in the USA. Possibly he performed – as did his colleague, Berthold Salander – in the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra. In the emigrants' newspaper "Aufbau", dated May 31, 1940, Wittels is mentioned in conjunction with the Warburg Orchestra. This orchestra, which performed numerous times for radio station WQXR, was conducted by Carl Bamberger.²¹ Wittels also played with Hugo Burghauser's "Salzburg Players" in 1942 in Bernardsville, New Jersey²², and took on various lesser temporary engagements, mostly together with his former Philharmonic colleagues Berthold Salander and Josef Geringer.²³ Worthy of note is Wittels' appearance as part of the "Austrian Freedom Day in New York" on July 31, 1941, along with Hugo Burghauser. The "Austrian Freedom Day" must have been exceptionally successful, with more than 2000 people in attendance. The slogan "Hitler's First Victim Fights for Freedom" was also employed at other Austrian activist events.²⁴ With his acceptance into the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra (Met) in 1943, Wittels' occupational situation stabilized. Nevertheless, the Met opera season during the war years was a very short sixteen weeks, with only a couple of weeks of tours following thereafter. The musicians were thus forced to seek additional engagements to bridge the long hiatus.

This short opera season presented the orchestra members with the necessity of seeking various temporary engagements during the rest of the year and these offered little financial

¹⁹ Application for Compensation, NY, Oct. 15. 1956, Entschädigungsakten (see footnote 1).

²⁰ Ibid. Letter of Katia Wittels to the Hilfsfonds, NY, Oct. 23, 1956, Compensation files (see footnote 1);

²¹ Regina Thumser, Vertriebene Musiker: Schicksale und Netzwerke im Exil 1933 – 1945, Diss., Salzburg 1998, 126f.

²² „The Salzburg Players“: „[...] *an ensemble of twenty-eight, most of whom were members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra [...], assembled by Prof. Hugo Burghauser.*“ NYT, Sunday, July 19, 1942, pg. X5; NYT, Sept. 6, 1942, pg. X4/5, NYT, Sept. 6, 1942, pg. D2, NYT, Sept. 13, 1942, pg. X6 (complete program), NYT, Sept. 21, 1942, pg. 18.

²³ Interview Bernadette Mayrhofer with Roger and Claire Salander, Vienna, May 30, 2005.

²⁴ „Aufbau“, Article about an "Austrian Freedom Day", August 8, 1941; printed in DÖW, Österreicher im Exil. USA 1938 – 1945, Bd. 2, 349; The exile organisation "Austrian Action" was founded in April 1941 by the middle-class liberal Ferdinand Czernin. It was well-organized and had a very active culture section with, among others Paul Wittgenstein, Ernst Lothar and Franz Werfel. It represented "*a melting pot of the non-political majority of Austrian emigrants*". Ibid. 291.



security and small chance for securing permanent additional sources of income. Despite the short season Metropolitan orchestra members were often passed over for other short-term engagements because of possible scheduling conflicts. In a letter dated August 1947, Wittels complained about this to his former Philharmonic colleague, Leopold Föderl: "*When our last trip was over [concert tour by the Met following the end of the opera season, author's note], we had recordings and then a few opera performances in Carnegie Hall. Thus I was busy until July. There are things in the making so that I can play with another opera company around the middle of September. Endless job hunting! Many other jobs are denied us because of their not wanting to hire Metropolitan players who will depart when the Met's next opera season begins. Hopefully I will soon be able to give you positive news regarding this situation*".²⁵ Only in 1966 was the opera season at the Met extended to cover almost the entire year.²⁶

In spite of his stable position in a renowned orchestra in New York, Wittels was deeply stricken due to the past persecution and his traumatic expulsion from Austria. Claustrophobia and panic attacks kept him from continuing his solo career and made his professional life difficult. In June 1956, Ludwig Wittels left the Met orchestra due to severe illness. At this time he was 60 years old.

The Onerous Legacy of the Past

*"I would also like to mention that my departed husband was a born Viennese who endured terrible psychological suffering resulting from his having been driven from his position at the opera when the Hitler regime came to power. He spoke of it constantly. It ate him up inside throughout all these years. He went to bed with it at night and he got up with it in the morning."*²⁷

In June 1956, Ludwig Wittels along with his second wife, Katia Doubek-Wittels, embarked on an unimaginable path of suffering. Wittels fell ill with lung cancer and other complications and, due to his traumatic persecution in Austria, was thus plagued both physically and psychologically. His wife wrote the Austrian Aid Society: "*Following his immigration here he had difficult times (...). From all of this agitation he developed diabetes (...).As you gentlemen will see from the record, my husband is very ill, was in two different hospitals for 36 days, and had a small operation which led to the diagnosis of the worst of illnesses, from which there is no real recovery. He does not know what is truly wrong with him, and he dare not know it (...).*"²⁸ Later she augmented this information in another letter to the Aid Society: "*He was ill for six months, also with pleurisy and pneumonia, not just with the lung cancer.*"²⁹

²⁵ Archive/Rupertsberger (see footnote 1).

²⁶ Burghauser, Philharmonische Begegnungen (see footnote 3).

²⁷ Letter of Katia Wittels to the Hilfsfonds, NY, Feb. 3, 1957, Compensation files (see footnote 1).

²⁸ Letter of Katia Wittels to the Hilfsfonds, NY, Oct. 23, 1956, Entschädigungsakten (see footnote 1).

²⁹ Ibid



In addition to the physical hardship of having to live with this dreadful fate, the couple stood on the brink of financial ruin. Except for a small pension from the State Opera of about \$90 per month, which Ludwig Wittels had been receiving for a few months, they were suddenly without any income and had no other assets, yet were confronted with high doctor and medication costs. On October 15, 1956, Wittels applied for compensation for the injustices he had suffered to the Austrian "Fund for Political Refugees with Permanent Residency in Foreign Countries" (Hilfsfonds).

This relief fund was only established by the Austrian Parliament after long negotiations - and under pressure from the USA - between the Austrian Government and the Committee for Jewish Claims on Austria (Claims Committee) on January 18, 1956. The amounts paid varied according to age and the degree of impairment of health and the victims' ability to earn a living between 10,000 and 30,000 Austrian Schillings.³⁰ On October 19, 1956, the following certified medical statement from Dr. Kurt Jellinek was presented to the *Hilfsfonds*: *„Mr Ludwig T. Wittels (...) has been a patient of mine for many years. He suffers from diabetes and at his last hospital examination metastasized tumors were found in his lungs (cancer). His general condition is bad and he is completely incapable of employment. The patient has not been informed of his condition and should not be told“*.³¹ The *Hilfsfonds* reacted to this critical situation very hesitantly. Katia Wittels wrote many letters to the Aid Society in an attempt to accelerate the compensation process. In desperation she requested a friend in Vienna at the end of November 1956 to intervene on their behalf. At last on December 7, 1956, the *Hilfsfonds* in Vienna acknowledged that the applicant, Ludwig Wittels, was completely incapable of employment. *„The applicant (Ludwig Wittels, author's note) states that he is totally and permanently incapable of earning his living“*,³² In a later letter to the *Hilfsfonds*, Mrs. Wittels reiterated the precarious social situation in the USA: *„Here in this country one is allotted less time for sick leave than in Europe. What it costs! The medications alone can empty one's pockets and then there is the hospital routine. Every time he is admitted, the examinations begin all over again: blood, sputum, etc. etc.“*³³

By the beginning of December 1956, the situation for the Wittels' had become unbearable: *„(...) inform you that my husband is very, very ill and was until Friday the 7th in Lenox Hill Hospital and he will most probably need to return there once again tomorrow. This has been*

³⁰ The *Hilfsfonds* was endowed with 550 million Austrian schillings. The term *Hilfsfonds* was intended to obscure the actual purpose, which was the financial compensation of the victims of National Socialism. Austria, which only met its obligations under pressure from the USA, did not wish to create the impression that it "in any shape or form took responsibility for National Socialist crimes". Thus the payments were declared as assistance and not compensation. See Brigitte Bailer-Galanda, *Die Entstehung der Rückstellungs- und Entschädigungsgesetzgebung. Die Republik Österreich und das in der NS-Zeit entzogene Vermögen*, Vienna, Munich 2003, 374, 581-584.

³¹ Compensation files (see footnote 1).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Letter of Katia Wittels to the *Hilfsfond,s* NY, Feb. 23, 1957, Compensation files (see footnote 1).



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the routine since June. He weighs about 77 American pounds. It is emotionally unbearable for me, not to mention the dreadful expenses."³⁴

The former member of the Vienna Philharmonic, Ludwig Wittels, died on December 13, 1956, at the age of 60 in Lenox Hill Hospital in New York. His wife, Katia Wittels, was by his side. She and the doctors and nurses kept his deadly illness a secret from him until his death. *"You can imagine for yourselves how difficult it was for me, being alone, to keep secret from my husband the gravity of his illness, when I myself was suffering under the psychological weight of it before his death. He was ill for six months, also with pleurisy and pneumonia, not just with the lung cancer.*"³⁵

In addition to her widow's pension from the State Opera in the amount of \$45 per month, Katia Wittels, who also declared herself as being Jewish, was awarded a compensation payment of \$30,000, of which 50% was transferred on April 16, 1957, and the other 50% on November 26, 1958.³⁶ Katia Wittels' previous personal history and whether or not she also had been a victim of the National Socialistic policies of expulsion, has not yet been able to be clarified by the author.

The research regarding Ludwig Wittels has left the author with the distinct impression that as a result of the traumatic experiences of the Nazi era this persecuted Philharmonic musician suffered from a buildup of much grief, bitterness and sorrow. With the brutal expulsion from the Philharmonic after 19 intensive years of service, Ludwig Wittels' world collapsed. He was able to save himself physically, but, as has already been stated, psychologically he was permanently traumatized by his experience of persecution and the murder of his mother: *"He spoke over and over again about it. It ate him up inside all these years. He took it with him to bed at night and got up with it in the morning.*"³⁷

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³⁴ Letter of Katia Wittels to the *Hilfsfonds*, NY, Dec. 2, 1956, Compensation files (see footnote 1).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Compensation files (see footnote 1).

³⁷ Katia Wittels (see footnote 27).