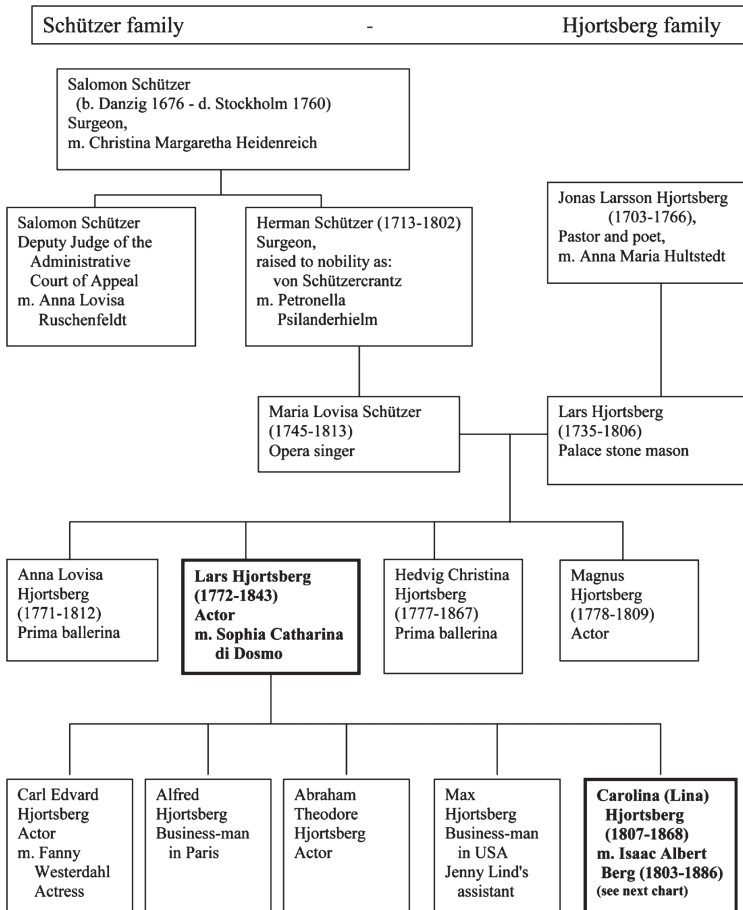
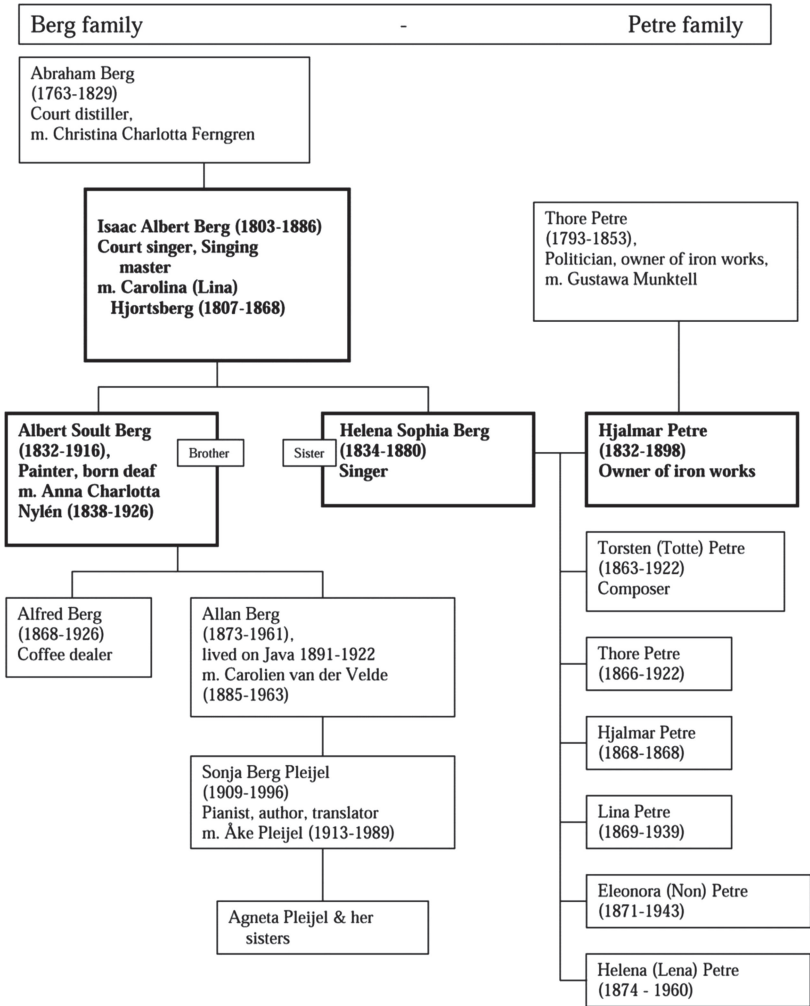




Genealogical Charts of the Four Main Families



SISTER AND BROTHER





Prologue (1829–1834)

One day or another one must begin writing; today is the day. It is November, and it is snowing, with a northeasterly wind blowing in at fifty miles per hour from the Baltic Sea across the Stockholm Archipelago, according to the radio.

On the day in 1829 when my story begins, it was sleeting and there was a strong wind.

THE TENOR Isaac Berg was on his way through the gusts of wind to the Royal Opera House in Stockholm. He was twenty-six years old and handsome, almost like an Italian, people said. Curly dark hair. Firm jaw, shining eyes.

He had proposed to Lina, the daughter of Lars Hjortsberg, the actor, some time ago but had gotten a firm no from her father. His musical training was excellent. He had studied under Giuseppe Siboni, the Italian tenor, in Copenhagen. He had learned the bel canto style of singing and knew all the treasures in the romantic repertoire. He had been on tour abroad for several years and had appeared as a soloist at opera houses in Dresden, Vienna, Prague, and Milan.

He had enjoyed success in Venice, where he sang the lead role in Händel's opera *Jephtha*. His father, Abraham, the brandy purveyor to the Royal Court, had recently died, and so Isaac could expect an inheritance. (All of that made him a good match. That's what I have heard from my mother. And I think that was his view as well.)

He stepped into the actors' dressing room, shook the water out of the folds of his umbrella, and, without any delay, set about the task he had come for. Lina, his chosen one, had agreed to his proposal long ago. Now he needed her parents' blessing for the marriage.

Lars Hjortsberg leaned back in his chair. He was rather plump, and his hair was carefully combed around his ears. He looked down and poked around in the documents on his table—he was proud of his title as a Royal Court secretary—and was silent for a while before looking up.

“Berg, I see you as essentially a bon vivant. You'll never get my daughter if you intend to appear onstage. I don't want any more jugglers in my family.”

Words are uttered in an instant but can live on for generations. “No more jugglers in the family” has become a proverbial expression in my family. Many artists suffered social prejudice because they appeared onstage, which was considered improper. But maybe Hjortsberg also saw something in Isaac that he didn't like about himself, a certain vanity?

“Jugglers?” Isaac repeated after a while.

Outside the window, the wind was driving slushy streaks of snow through the air, and the sky looked like a troubled landscape of gray mountainous ridges. Lars Hjortsberg said nothing.

After long discussions, Isaac agreed to give up appearing onstage. He applied for the post of Chorus Master at the Royal Opera and got the job; he married Lina. He was then also appointed First Court Singer, responsible for musical events and instruction at the Court; now he could thumb his nose at his father-in-law.

The thorn in his side didn't go away. Had he won, or had he been defeated? His father-in-law still stood in the limelight, and would as long as he lived. (The conflict between the father and the suitor over a woman is a mystery; she is both the field of

battle and the prize, and yet nothing at all. Almost nothing about Lina has come down in family memories, so I have to imagine her pregnancy. Let's go.)

In the spring, Lina first felt the baby stirring deep inside. She noticed a scent of balsam poplar in her nostrils. She rested her hand on her belly. She was amazed; nature took over. She felt dizzy and part of a miracle.

The birth was difficult and lasted a long time. But Lina bore a well-formed little boy; that was in September 1832. The crown of his head was covered with a pale down with a whirl in back, and his ears were little pink labyrinths. He was baptized Albert. His father was so proud of his son, he couldn't stop talking about him with everyone at the Opera.

A future musician. Another Schubert! A Beethoven! Isaac mused.

Isaac was so happy that people could only smile. He had breakfast with his father-in-law at the Opera café in cigar smoke and harmony. The fall sun shone in through the windows. Isaac believed that raising a child should be done with love but with a firm hand. A father is a mentor. The child is a plant and needs tending with ideals and morals. Many people come to grief in their lives because they have had no appropriate models and were raised by people not fit for the task.

Hjortsberg nodded patiently, tugging occasionally at his earlobe. "How is Lina?" he wanted to know.

"Just splendid" Isaac answered and rose to go.

The old actor sat there in the café and peered out at the room. Miss Jenny Lind came in, a young actress with whom he had appeared in a few plays. A child actor, as he once had been himself. "Is the young lady hungry?" he asked. She usually was. He snapped his fingers and got her a sandwich. The girl had had to do without

everything that his son-in-law Isaac considered important. She was being raised by people who left much to be desired. She was the illegitimate daughter of a father who had abandoned her mother; her unmarried mother lived with a younger laborer by the name of Lind, whose last name had been given to the girl, as there was no other name to give her. She was unbelievably talented. Miss Lind was being trained in singing by his son-in-law.

Bellini, Rossini, and Donizetti dominated the repertoire at the Opera. Isaac tended his singers carefully, like plants. He taught singing in the Italian style and was strict and demanding. One day, shortly before Christmas, he came home in a rush to fetch a score that he had forgotten. Lina sat in the music room, rocking their son in her arms. Out on Regering Street under their window, a Guards unit was parading by. There was a deafening din of drums, pipes, and brass instruments.

The boy paid no attention. Isaac stood in the threshold of the door and looked at his son, who kept his dark blue eyes trained on his mother. A dreadful thought overcame him. When the noise had died down, he took his violin off the wall. He drew his bow with full force over the strings, right behind the boy's head.

Albert didn't react. Isaac made the violin moan, screech, and whine. His son didn't even turn his head. The servant girl was called in, as was the kitchen boy. Isaac was so agitated that his voice shook. Had anyone dropped the boy on the floor? Had anyone struck him on the cheek?

"His ears have gotten plugged," Lina said, trying to calm Isaac. "It will pass."

"The boy is a mute," the girl said, curtsying. "We've noticed that."

There was weeping and wailing. Doctors were called in, one after another, with their instruments. Little spatulas were poked into the boy's ears. They shone light in. They applied electric

shocks to his aural passages. Nothing helped. The doctors said that he would live his whole life in eternal silence.

It was a hard blow for Isaac. His son would be shut out from music, which is God's purest language. He called Lina in; she was expecting again. With some difficulty, she sat down in the easy chair.

"As you know," Isaac said, "I had hoped to stop teaching and travel around Europe singing at various opera houses. I can't do that with a deaf-mute child."

Outside, light summer clouds were floating by.

"Maybe not," Lina answered.

"A deaf-mute child needs supervision. If you drag him around to strange places, he'll turn into an idiot. If he isn't one already."

"I can stay here with him," Lina offered.

"I can't afford to maintain two households," Isaac answered curtly. His head sank between his shoulders. But soon he burst out, saying that he had promised himself that he would spare no pains to compensate Albert for the defect he had been born with. Nor money neither, as long as he had some.

"So help me God!" he shouted and punched his fist into his palm. Lina nodded. So, they made a pact to make it up to Albert for his deafness.

But Lina blamed herself. She had been terrified during the birth. She hadn't borne down as she should have. It was her fault, and she went with the boy to her mother, Sophia, on Riddar Street to ask how to terminate a pregnancy.

"There are angel-makers," Sophia said. "The graveyards are full of little angels among the graves. But Lina, what are you thinking of?"

The boy sat on the living room table and looked at them thoughtfully with big blue eyes, while he sucked on a sugar spoon. His hair curled around his cheeks. The living room clock was ticking, and Lina said nothing, fidgeting with her neckerchief.

Hjortsberg came in and gathered the boy into his arms and carried him around, showing him his old costumes on hangers around the apartment. There were princes and beggars, captains and moneylenders, a Figaro here, a Sheva the Jew there, along with a whole string of worthy citizens and cuckolds.

“Nothing says that the next child will be misshapen,” Sophia said.

“Mama, can’t you understand, I just can’t hurt Isaac so badly again,” Lina cried out, and her voice was shrill. The living room clock drew in its breath and struck, and Hjortsberg came back with the boy.

“Oh, that Isaac,” Sophia sighed.

“There is an asylum for the deaf and the blind,” Hjortsberg said.

“Oh, Papa,” Lina sobbed and turned to face him. “Are we going to put him there, among bastards and lunatics?” Her tears fell on the dry begonia in the window. Her parents exchanged glances. But Lina blew her nose and wrapped Albert up. She smiled bravely and trotted off. The carriage wheels made a crunching sound in the snow. The snowflakes fell so densely it was as if a crocheted blanket were falling out of the sky, a curtain fall of oblivion. Lina decided to just forget. She forgot the baby inside her. She paid no attention to her swelling belly and her growing breasts.

As the time for her delivery drew near, cholera broke out. It had begun in India and spread all over the world as travelers carried the contagion with them. Ships brought the disease to Europe, and it reached Stockholm.

There was a drought that summer that made the trees gasp for air and the springs stink of rot and death. Isaac kept watch at his mother’s house, as she had caught the illness. In the midst of the misery, Lina’s labor began. She felt contractions in her belly, like a knife ripping into her.

She gave Albert a pen and paper to keep him busy. The boy didn't hear anything, not even when she shrieked like a mad-woman. While the wagons carrying the dead clattered by and the cats crouched in the house gateways, panting from the heat, the cramps got stronger. Lina sent the maid to fetch her mother and got into bed with her little boy.

She lay there on her back and hummed songs up toward the ceiling, louder and louder to ward off the knife. She sang wordless arabesques that grew to cathedrals. When she cried out, they collapsed and became ashes. She sang flowers that blossomed out with a pop and then wilted. She sang trees that branched out and grew taller to reach the sky and then crashed to the ground and lay there, uprooted.

"Albert, my darling!" she shouted when the pain stabbed her.

Sophia came and shut the bedroom door behind her. The boy on the other side bawled; he threw himself down on the floor and kicked and screamed. The servant girl was at a loss and couldn't get him to calm down.

After a couple of strong contractions, the baby slid out like a little boat on a gentle swell. It was a girl. Her grandmother cut the cord, washed her and lifted her up into the afternoon sun. Her eyes were dark blue, and she could see. And her hearing? Her ears reacted to every little sound of rustling and buttoning.

"She's perfect," Sophia said. "A princess."

Albert grew quiet when he got to see his sister. He immediately fell in love. This was a better present than all the rest, rocking horse, cloth monkey, chalk crayons, and the balls. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to stick his fingers in her mouth. He wanted to nibble on her cheeks and touch her button-like eyes.

When his grandmother lifted the object of his affection away, he had another tantrum. Lina held him close to her breast in the bed until he fell asleep. His cheeks were streaked from the tears, and his forehead was as hot as a stove.

“What will her name be?” Sophia wanted to know.

“I’d like it to be Sophia, like yours, Mama, but Isaac will decide.”

Lina leaned over the cradle. The girl was asleep. Everything around the child seemed bathed in peace. The child dreamed, maybe about birds with their beaks tucked in under their wings, about little mice in the forest with soft paws, and about breaths of wind—anything that she could have imagined while she was in the womb. But now she was in the world.