

Tullio Voghera, my father

by Guido Voghera (with Ulrika Voghera)

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Tullio Voghera, in about 1940



“With *that* name, you can have a cab.” That’s what made me curious and interested.

It’s Midsummer Eve in the early 60s. I have to catch a train, and I’m late. The taxi dispatcher tells me there are no cabs available, followed by, “What’s your name?” I answer “Voghera,” followed by complete silence on the phone. Then the pleasantly surprising response: the name that moved me to the front of the taxi line was Tullio Voghera.

The dispatcher had earlier sung in the Royal Opera chorus, and I was still in danger of missing the train because she HAD to tell me how wonderful it had been to have him as chorus master. That’s when I understood that there was something special about the name Voghera.

I myself had only seen his portrait: an elegant man, and I had heard about a caring family man who loved surprises and often hid gifts for the pleasure of being part of the hunt. I had listened to stories about trips to Italy every Summer before the war, and knew that Tullio had worked together with Toscanini, Huberman and Caruso at the Met. I had heard my mother-in-law Iwa tell about the moth-eaten fur which her husband got from Caruso and about teaching parts to Jussi Björling on Siarö, and working at the Royal Opera.

Later I was often asked about my connection to Tullio Voghera, and received remembrances, positive and enthusiastic, and became more and more curious.

I began to collect information but how should I present this man, who no doubt had a great importance in Swedish music life? “Important contributions” is what’s in the Sohlman’s music dictionary, and both JB and Anna-Lisa Björling write about him in their

memoirs with warmth and respect.

After many years a first step was taken on April 16th, 2005, when Tullio Voghera's son Guido spoke to the JB Sällskapet about his beloved father—and about a meeting with Jussi on Siarö.

—Ulrika Voghera

Tullio Voghera's daughter-in-law

Tullio Voghera, my father

by Guido Voghera

That person, my father Tullio Voghera, about whom I will speak, was strongly connected with Jussi Björling, but my own memories of Jussi at Siarö don't have anything to do with singing. For a long time, I have suppressed the memory of my father. I was only 14 when he died, and when I heard of his death, I nearly fainted. He was still the person I loved most, except perhaps for my mother. There was something special about him, he was a cultured man, not broadly educated, but firmly grounded in classical culture. He himself wanted to be a physician, but the family thought that music was a higher calling. That's the way it was in Italy in those days.

Today, as I drove here, I heard on the radio about the premier of *Boris* in Gothenburg and that opera was important to my father: he conducted the first performance of it at the Royal Opera on April 26th, 1911 in his first guest appearance. And then JB was only a few months old.

Later, as an employee, he conducted Royal Opera oratorio concerts at Storkyrkan (the Stockholm Cathedral) and was for a time the head of the Opera School and a member of the Repertory Council. Besides being choral director, he was the conductor and coach for, among others, Hjärdis

Schymberg and JB.

My father was an adventurous man and wasn't afraid of stepping into the unknown. He traveled around the world for a year with his own opera company, was a guest at various big opera houses and toured and played with Caruso for many years. They were good friends, and I have a drawing of my father which Caruso drew on the back of a restaurant bill.

Caruso was a wonderful and generous person, and I have understood that they were such good friends that when Caruso went across the Atlantic to the Met in 1903, he missed my father and sent for him the year after.

For a long time, my father was only Dad for me, and a loss which hurt. I didn't know much about him as a professional, but when I heard from the Society and Ulrika showed me all the interesting material she had dug out, I gathered myself to remember him.

We lived in Äppelvikén and Dad took the #12 tram to the opera house, the same as our Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson used to take (note: Hansson was Prime Minister from 1932 until his death in 1946). It could sometimes happen that Per Albin and my dad were sitting there, each with his Swedish crossword puzzle. That shows a person who knew 7 languages! My father spoke, besides his Italian, brilliant German, French and English, as well as Hebrew and he could manage Greek. He swiftly learned Swedish.

I am also a bit of a linguist and have an ear for languages, but I can't write as my father did. There are a few notes here on the paper, but I will mostly ad lib, as memories come to me. Dad thus wrote good Swedish and there is a charming letter which he wrote from La Scala, with my mother Iwa Aulin, daughter of Tor Aulin to opera manager John Forsell asking him: use me!

Dad learned Swedish from litera-



Tullio Voghera in Venice in 1936. The family lived in a house at Lido di Venezia (above).

With Jussi Björling on Siarö, July, 1940 (right).

ture, Frans G Bengtsson and Strindberg were among his favorites...talking about literature, I would like to mention my father's travelling library with miniature books in a little bag. What does an Italian musician carry with him when he is travelling around the world? A complete Shakespeare, including the sonnets, Dante, Voltaire's *Candide* as well as Russian and Italian poetry.

Dad had a solid academic and musical education. First he studied music theory and conducting at the Bologna Conservatory and later at the University of Padua, where he got his doctorate in 1902 with a dissertation on Wagner's esthetic, which might seem remarkable and should also be seen from the humanistic perspective.

Why? Yes, he was Jewish, and it strikes me how relatively free of preju-



dice my father was, and how much he knew. I know that he loved Wagner's music, probably he detested him as a person. But Wagner is important as a musician and my mother told me that she had been scolded by Toscanini who declared: "If you don't understand Wagner, you don't understand music at all."

Dad was a good friend of Toscanini's and it was thanks to Tullio that Toscanini visited Stockholm in 1934. Dad wrote many long letters, and Toscanini answered, "no, no." I'm sure there is much about this visit in the press. I myself read in a book by Evert Taube who noted from his seat in Den Gyldene Freden (restaurant in Stockholm), "here comes Voghera in with Toscanini." Taube knew dad as conductor and manager of the Stora Teatern in Gothenburg.

This takes us to a story about Caruso, who was a generous and kind person, but also aware of his value and position as leading tenor in the world and demanded a large fee when he sometimes sang at private functions. My mother recounts: the great tenor had been engaged to appear at a huge party at one of the most elegant restaurants in NY, but there was no singing. Why? When Caruso and Dad, who was his accompanist, came to the main entrance, they were stopped and sent to the service entrance. Then Caruso got angry and said, more or less: "They don't want to see me, they just pay to hear my voice." There was no Caruso that time, either to see or to hear.

But Caruso was as already noted, a generous person, and JB writes in his memoirs (given to me by my father):

"A musician who naturally meant very much to me is Tullio Voghera, choral director, coach and conductor at the Royal Opera. He conducted the oratorios which were annually given at Storkyrkan in Stockholm, either *Messiah* or *Missa Solemnis*. I never forgot his kindness to me at my audition with Forsell and all the generous advice he gave me. He had taken part in WWI and before then he had been Caruso's coach for 16 years. As a memory of him, he had a precious gold watch with the inscription, 'to my dear friend Tullio, with gratitude from a devoted Enrico.' Voghera was also with me in London to help me get around and to greet his friend Toscanini. During several summers, he was my constant guest and with him, I studied all my Italian parts. His death was a hard blow to me."

There has been speculation about who was the greatest tenor. My father thought it wasn't possible to choose, that you could possibly talk about great artistic geniuses who succeed in reaching out to people. But—I think his opinion was that there were TWO tenors who were the voices of voices—Caruso and Jussi, but in different ways. Likewise, Jussi was a follower of Caruso's spirit, even if Dad perhaps regarded Jussi as a little more macho, more masculine.

Dad was an Italian and woman's man, I think I understood that, and the "little Italian" was loved by the women of the opera house. He himself loved everybody who worked and had learned their parts when they came to rehearsals. Perhaps he loved Hyordis Schymberg most. She always knew her part, and then he was happy when he came home.

Dad was at the Royal Opera in various periods between 1910 and 1922, and there he invested his entire artistic soul. But then he did something which

was absolutely forbidden: he left. He got an offer which he couldn't turn down. For a man does not say no, thank you, when an English multimillionaire and Italophile offers: "Make an opera company and go around the world with it on my ship where we will market Italian culture and show Italian products."

It was before WWI and for a year he traveled around the world with his opera company, mostly to Commonwealth nations such as Australia and India, but also to European coasts and North and South America. And Dad had his sea legs. that I have understood!

Siarö

I also had my sea legs since I have become a sea captain, but a large part of my love for the archipelago, boats, and the sea I got directly from that Summer on Siarö. And what did that little boy think of JB?

When we got off at the Siarö stone pier there was a short powerful man who yelled, "Oh maestro," and then ran forward to hug my father. That was JB who was so strong and had such big muscles, a real hunk. I admired that a lot. We three brothers were really skinny next to him.

We stayed in a guest cabin down below and Dad walked up every day to the studio to work with Jussi and I remember that when we sometimes swam near their little cabana, he jumped into the water with a shout, naked, and we right after him. But what I still have in my memory from Siarö is that you can fish with minnows for bait. Jussi taught me that. We kids had fished with worms earlier, but with minnows, one got fish—both pikes and bass.

If they cooked the fish in the house, I really don't know. But my father had certain issues with food. One Summer

later, during the war, when the rest of the family was in Dalarna, and Dad was on Siarö with Jussi, we had fantastic funny postcards. The letter carrier laughed when he brought the mail. He couldn't resist reading them, they were from Siarö where Jussi was, everyone knew that.

On one, Dad had drawn himself as a skeleton with lots of pancakes in his "stomach." But I understand that he had his problems finding his beloved spaghetti which he wanted at least 3 times a week. Well, there is Kungsörns macaroni on Ljusterö, where Dad rowed (there was no gas for the motorboat during the war) in the little boat called Lasse, after Jussi's youngest son, to buy some. Then he put himself in the kitchen and cooked pasta a la Voghera from the ingredients which he found there and a similar recipe is still made by the Björling family, as Lasse just told me. In her book, Anna-Lisa B writes also with appreciation that he contributed much Italian cooking.

Dad mostly spent his time with Jussi rehearsing and studying. One could hear that and they could repeat the same phrase maybe a hundred times and that might still not satisfy my father. He thought that a singer who could neither hit a note nor phrase or accent correctly could not do justice to any music at all. In any case, not to Mozart or Italian opera. Some learned to parrot, but those who learned from the ground up, sang better.

Love

My mother was called Iwa Alida Aulin and I'm afraid that she is turning in her grave when I tell that. She herself wondered with amusement how two musical parents could give her those names. But there were other suggestions: Albert Engström (Swedish author and artist), for instance, suggested

Masis Knosis. Masse was her nickname and her grandmother called her Little Masse, when she visited from Gothenburg.

And it was in Gothenburg that Tullio met Iwa Alida, who was to be my mother. She was a charming and elegant young girl, just back from her singing studies in Berlin. Grandmother Anna, who was a concert singer, had soirees in her home where musicians, poets and artists came to play and sing or read their own or others' verses. Tullio Voghera also came there when he was conductor and manager of the Stora Teater from 1924 to 1926.

One evening Dad, who was a well-known accompanist, sat down at the piano when the household's daughter sang some intensely romantic, perhaps erotic song of Schubert or Schumann. Suddenly he stopped playing, turned toward the singer, looked her right in the eye and asked in front of all, in his broken Swedish: "Who have you loved?"

And who could resist that, my mother later said. They were a loving couple, but decided not to marry for questions of principle. However they did later marry for practical reasons, when my father was employed at the Royal Opera in 1927.

The First meeting with Jussi

Both Jussi himself and Anna-Lisa Björling tell in their memoirs about the "second" audition sung for opera director John Forsell in 1928, which was Jussi's first meeting with Tullio Voghera, the later so appreciated "little Italian." This is how he describes their first meeting in *Med bagaget I strupen*:

When I came to the theater, I was shown to the Queen's foyer and this time I didn't have to cool my heels for so long. The director came soon along with Tullio Voghera and that was my first meeting with the house's choral conductor,

vocal coach and conductor, who later played an extremely large role for me. First John Forsell asked me, what I knew about music theory and music history, and I myself didn't think I knew very much. Forsell probably thought it was even less. The composers I knew were mostly Italian. The director told Voghera to play a note on the piano to test my ear and I passed that test.

I took out my music and said, "I would like to sing an aria from *Martha*! I gave the music to Voghera and he smiled a little to himself when he looked at it. Forsell went into an adjacent room where he used to wander around listening through the open door. Voghera hadn't played more than a few bars when we suddenly heard Forsell shout, "What the hell key is that"?? My voice hadn't broken, that is it had only sunk from treble to a male range, and my father had transposed the music so that it fit my voice. The aria which I wanted to sing lay a whole tone higher than the usual setting and Forsell immediately noticed that. I told him what had happened and he thought that my father had handled it very well.

The rest is history and Jussi's real debut at the Royal Opera was as the lamplighter in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, not in Massenet's *Manon*, of which my father conducted the premiere on March 29, 1916 (6 months before he left the Opera to take part in WWI). For my part, it's interesting to note how quickly dad noticed David Björling's transposing, but he was capable, he was professional.

In both Anna-Lisa and Jussi's memoirs, they write that Tullio Voghera knew the text of practically all roles, both male and female, so that he could assist if someone forgot their lines. But he couldn't sing at all, he squawked like a crow. Anna-Lisa Björling also got lessons, and stresses that he was extremely demanding.

Italy

Every Summer before the war we went to Italy to see father's family and learn a little bit about the country where he was born. Naturally that was a big event for us three guys. We took the train and we were ordered to speak Italian after we boarded. That was important.

But he also took us up to the engine, the enormous machine that pulled. In Germany, where they had steam engines, this musician explained where the power came from. He began with the furnace, explained the boiler and on the top there was steam which pressurized the cylinders which ran the wheels which moved the train. It was important to him that we understood, it was important to him that we were not people with only music in our thoughts. You should not be an idiot outside your specialty, you have to also know other things.

Therefore when I once heard Leonard Bernstein say that he had learned to fly, I thought that could have been my father. He might also have flown his own plane. I think it's a Jewish tradition; one has to know something outside one's profession, as much as possible. The better and more one therefore understands of the world.

That little man, he was only 1M 70 (about 5' 6, the same height as Jussi) a little shorter than my mother Iwa, had a vision and a will and he did fantastic things hidden from the eyes of others. He understood early the danger in Italy. Suddenly in 1936, a portrait of Mussolini disappeared from the wall; I remember that although I was only 8.

When we asked, "Why," Dad said, "He has betrayed his country." This was in connection with the war in Abyssinia. Later came Hitler and I think Dad quite early understood



Caruso's sketch of Tullio Voghera, on the back of a restaurant bill (around 1909)

what he was about. But that it would become that awful, I think he could never have understood. He died in February of 1943.

But I know that he was harassed in Germany during the last trip we made to Italy in 1937. I recognize fear, it has a certain smell.

At the same time he had so much courage that at the beginning of the war, after Siarö, he traveled through Europe with all our assets and tried to get the families to flee from Italy. Get out while you can! Try Switzerland. But they couldn't believe that his fear

was grounded. They didn't think there was any danger with Mussolini. Maybe not, but he had another man beside him, and his idea hit my father's Italian family very hard in 1944.

My father's youngest brother Mario, who had eight children, tried twice to cross the border into Switzerland, but they were kicked out at Como. Because the border police were Italians, they were allowed to escape. The third time they succeeded in convincing the authorities that they had enough means so they would not have to rely on the Swiss for support.

I leave this painful chapter which has several dark spots for me. I know that my father could travel there because he became a Swedish citizen in 1936. I am eternally grateful to him for

choosing a small country which was an island in the world, which has been prosperous for a long time and brought me into the world here.

My heart is very Swedish, even if I seem Italian and my temperament hints at something else which might be Jewish or international. There is nowhere in the world where I feel at home as I do in Sweden. I love this country—and so did my father, even if he detested these dark autumns, cold winters and long springs, when you saw the sun but almost never felt its warmth. I can understand that he appreciated the fur that Caruso sent him!

There's so much more to tell, it flows over for me, but I must say that I actually saw my father collapse. This boy detested school and most of all the Bromma high school. He took the same road as his father because his

mother, who was a strong woman, the strongest of all, forced him to take private lessons in German and math. She found a sympathetic teacher who could take care of me and so I was on that road.

Dad had been very ill, but he wanted to go to the Opera to listen to his pupil. Conny Söderstrom, who was to have his debut.

I was just behind him and saw him fall. Then other people came forward also and a little boy who asked me, "Did the guy crap out?" "No," I answered. "That's my dad, and he is just a little sick." Then I went on to my lessons.

The shock and grief came later; at that moment it was impossible for a young kid even to

imagine that his father had died. It now makes me think about Boris Godunov and the Tsars who, according to tradition, were to die standing up. My father did that too, on his way to work.

I have heard that my father taught JB much of Caruso's technique. And there has to have been something special with a person who worked with and was loved and appreciated by two of the world's greatest tenors. Our father—Tullio Voghera.

*Translation Harald Henrysson
and Sue Flaster*

From Sohlman's Music Dictionary

Tullio Voghera was born in Padua on May 4th, 1879 and died in Stockholm on February 19th, 1943, only a few months before he would have retired.

Conductor, pianist. Married Iwa Aulin. Education Music Conservatory of Bologna, Italy (Enrico Bossi, director G. Martucci), doctorate University of Padua. Assistant conductor Metropolitan Opera, NY (Toscanini's assistant) 1904-09, at the same time Caruso's accompanist on several tours. conductor Royal Opera, Stockholm, 1910-11, 1915-16, 1921-22, conductor Stora Teatern, Gothenburg 1924-26, choral conductor Royal Opera 1927-33, vocal coach and conductor 1933-40 Royal Opera, important contributions to the study of primarily Italian repertoire and as conductor especially notable in French repertoire and Puccini. conductor for the Royal Opera's oratorio concerts (including the *Messiah* beginning in 1928, Paulus beginning in 1938); also conducted the Stockholm premieres of *Boris Gudonov* in 1911 and Wolf-Ferrari's "*IL segreto di Susanna*" in 1911). For a period, head of the Opera school. ■

A studio portrait, inscribed to Forsell

