Beginnings: Eger and Vienna

Art comes not from ability but from necessity.
—ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

SERKINS AND SCHARGELS

Like Rudolf Serkin himself, his family surname resists pinning down. Sarkin, Sorin, Soric, Surin, Suris, Suric, Surman, Sorkin, Surkin, Syrkin, Scherkin, and Sirkin are some of its variants, the last two employed by Rudolf’s father, Mordko, who also went by Mordechai, Marcus, and Max. Derived from Sarah, it was a fairly common metronymic surname among Jews from the area now called Belarus. When an Irving Syrkin wrote to inquire whether he might be a relative, Serkin answered, “My father always told me that there was only one family Serkin; so I feel we must be related somehow.”

Mordko Chazkelewitsch Serkin came from the town of Disna in Belarus, the heartland of eastern European Jewry, once part of Poland but in Russia’s “Pale of Settlement” when he was born there in 1860. He was a musician whose life was dragged down by bad luck, poor choices, and a talent that was probably inadequate to his calling. When Rudi was 9, he wrote a song for his father’s birthday that began with the words Wie kommt’s, dass Du so traurig bist—Why are you so sad?

Mordko was the atheist son of an orthodox Jew, a shoemaker (or possibly a tanner, or both). Working with leather was something of a family tradition:
one of Mordko's brothers was also a shoemaker, and Mordko himself ran a shoe repair shop for a time and later eked out a living making shoe polish in Vienna during the First World War. Mordko left home at 16 to escape his family, religious orthodoxy, and conscription into the Russian army. Having been educated only in the Talmud, he taught himself Russian (free, it was noted, of a Yiddish accent). His German, however, was Russian-accented, and he maintained a sentimental allegiance to Russia all his life. Mordko Serkin's gift was his voice. After working for several years as a cantor in Poland, he went to Berlin to study at the Stern Music Conservatory, only to be expelled from Prussia along with the other Russian students in the spring of 1881 in the aftermath of the assassination of Czar Alexander II.

Austria-Hungary was the obvious next place to go. There, during the previous decades, the government had enacted a series of reforms that removed burdensome restrictions from the lives of its Jewish subjects, leaving them free to move around, settle down where they wished, and participate in the Empire's developing economy. Mordko Serkin headed to the Austrian capital, where, for a time, he sang minor roles in minor operettas. For the next ten years he plied the Habsburg provinces as cantor and stage singer.

In 1892, while performing in the northern Bohemian spa of Teplitz, he met his future wife, Auguste Schargel. The Schargels were Jews from the Galician town of Jaroslav (now in southeastern Poland, near the Romanian border). A part of the postemancipatory Jewish migration that moved westward geographically and upward socially, the Schargels consented to the marriage of their 18-year-old daughter to the 32-year-old singer, but on condition that he abandon his stage career. In exchange, they set him up in business. Amalie (known as Maltschi), Serkin's sister and the family memoirist, speculated that going into business might not have been a big sacrifice for their father: "Maybe he saw that he was not going to be successful on the stage and was even happy to slip into a bourgeois life." Mordko and Auguste Serkin's first child, Wilhelm (Willi) was born in 1893, followed by Robert in 1895 and Charlotte (Lotte) in 1897. Mordko opened a series of stores in northwestern Bohemia and persisted in his restless ways, moving with his family from Teplitz to Karlsbad and back again to Teplitz. In August 1897, now nearing 40, Mordko registered himself, his wife, and their three young children with the authorities of Eger, a town of close to 24,000 in the westernmost corner of Bohemia, hard by the German border.

The Serkin-Schargel marriage cannot have been an easy one. Auguste Serkin later admitted to her youngest daughter, Marthl, that an early love for another man had always cast a shadow on her feelings for her husband.
Auguste’s many letters to Rudi are written in a sad and muted, perhaps depressed voice. Mother and son seem to have been emotionally distant. Mordko, a musician with proletarian roots and strong opinions, was by all accounts a more expressive personality, with a sometimes wicked humor that Rudi would inherit. “And now, my dear son,” he wrote to Rudi, announcing the unexpected marriage of his daughter Lotte in 1922, “I have some family news that will surely interest you: Fritz and Lotte have taken it upon themselves to obtain the legal rights that will permit them to sleep together.”

EGER

Bohemia, where Rudolf Serkin was born, has long been something of a question mark on the map of Europe. A part of the Habsburg Empire since the sev-
teenth century and with a population part Czech and part German, it had a fractured identity all its own. Even today, “It’s Greek to me” translates into German as Das sind mir böhmische Dörfer—It’s all Bohemian villages to me.

Eger (belonging to Austria-Hungary), now known as Cheb (in the Czech Republic), was a town thoroughly German in character and outlook—not merely German-speaking, but more closely linked to Germany than to the Austrian Empire of which it was a part. Eger’s citizens were “more German than the Germans.”* Readers of Schiller know Eger as the site of the assassination of General Wallenstein in 1634, and it was long a stopping-off place for Germans on their way to the nearby spas of Karlsbad, Marienbad, and Franzensbad.

Although Jews had lived in Eger since the Middle Ages, the town had never welcomed their presence, expelling them repeatedly. During the century’s final decade, the period in which Mordko Serkin moved there with his family, its Jewish population doubled to about 550, less than 3 percent of the overwhelmingly Catholic population.9 Eger, meanwhile, “had become a byword for anti-Semitism,”10 a hotbed of German nationalism, and a home base for Georg von Schönerer, the notorious anti-Semitic demagogue, who for several years represented the Egerland in the Austrian parliament and was an early inspiration to Adolf Hitler. “The self-respecting citizens of Eger,” writes historian Elizabeth Wiskemann, “were not expected to buy from Jews nor to have anything to do with them socially.” Maltschi remembered Christian children throwing stones at her.12 A café in Eger posted a sign forbidding entrance to “Jews, Czechs and dogs.”13 A Christmastime boycott in 1909 would have targeted Mordko Serkin’s notions store on the Bahnhofstrasse, the street that links the train station to the market square.14 The animosity was returned: “a cross between Austrians and apes” is how one Serkin characterized Eger’s Germans.

In 1938, when Eger, along with the rest of what was by then known as the Sudetenland, was handed over to Hitler’s Germany, the local citizens welcomed the takeover as a long-overdue homecoming: Heim ins Reich. After the war, Eger’s Germans were put into trains and dumped onto the German side of the border. Today Cheb is a Czech-speaking town of 31,000, lovely and picturesque, with a historic, oblong, cobblestone market square (where the house in which Rudolf Serkin was born still stands), though the street vendors are as likely to be Vietnamese as Czech.

The first Serkin child to be born in Eger was their fourth, Susanna, called Suse. A second cluster of four children came in relentless succession a few years later: the oldest, Rudolf, on March 28, 1903, Amalie in 1904, Martha (Marthl) in 1906,
and finally Paul in 1907. Rudolf was a popular name among the Jews of the Empire in the years following the suicide of the liberal Crown Prince Rudolf in 1889, but given the strong antimonarchist views of Serkin’s father, this would be an inconceivable namesake. According to one family story, Rudi and his seven brothers and sisters were all named after opera characters. *La Bohème* received its Vienna premiere in 1897: might Rudolf Serkin’s antecedent be Puccini’s Bohemian poet Rodolfo?

Serkin later told several of his children that as a young boy he had overheard his mother confiding to a neighbor that he was an unwanted pregnancy that she had hoped to abort: it had been more than four years since her previous child, and she had no desire for more. What does a child do with such a memory? Perhaps this early experience of himself as a contingent, accidental, almost defiant presence, where nothing, least of all love, was a given, helps to account for Serkin’s tendency to deflect aggression inward, or express it covertly, or to transform it in his art.

During their seventeen years in Eger, the Serkins lived at no fewer than six different addresses, the moves, presumably, occasioned by the needs of the growing family and perhaps also by financial exigencies. Serkin’s fondest memories were of a house on the edge of town with a large, untamed garden, chicks, ducks, and a sheep named Dolci. He was to love animals all his life. However difficult their years in Eger, the Serkins would look back affectionately on the German-Bohemian market town, especially after the extreme poverty and near starvation that awaited them in Vienna.

**Jews in Poverty**

In 1926 the *Egerer Zeitung* published an article by Armin Wilkowitsch, Eger’s cantor and resident Jewish historian, about Serkin, then 23 and already famous. Its self-promoting tone offended Rudi’s oldest brother, Willi, who fired off a strongly worded letter to the author. Wilkowitsch, in turn, sent Willi’s letter on to Auguste Serkin, accompanying it with his own furious response:

> Permit me to send you this “thank you letter” from your son for all I have done for you and your dear family. You will remember how the *Egerer Neue Nachrichten* attacked your late husband when I wrote the first report on Rudi’s concert! How they described you as being persecuted by the Russian government, how they described Rudi as a bow-legged Jew-boy who could bang out a few notes, etc... Have you totally forgotten what we have done for your family? Of course we were too polite to mention that we had gone deep into our pockets on
your behalf, that I had lent my money to you for your business without interest for years. That I traveled to Frankfurt to get money for you... that I paid for the journey for you and your family [from Eger to Vienna] without asking for recompense... Everything thrown into the sea of forgetfulness.

This angry letter touches on two issues that figured significantly in Serkin's life: his early experience of poverty and his Jewishness. In interviews he spoke of his family as "bitterly poor." During the worst years of the war in Vienna his father's sour joke was that being full is the fantasy of someone with a stomach ailment. But if early poverty and hunger left psychological scars, they were not apparent; although Serkin enjoyed the material comforts his success brought him, his tastes were modest, and he had no arriviste interest in luxury or display. Still, at the core of his sense of himself, the experience of his family's poverty stayed with him. Sitting as an old man with his wife on a hotel balcony overlooking Switzerland's Engadine Valley, he allowed that he hadn't done badly "for a poor boy from Vienna." And of an old Swiss friend, Serkin said repeatedly that the strength of their bond had come from their shared experience as "the children of poor people."

Serkin's Jewish origins were a subject about which he spoke little. Mordko was a freethinker and outspokenly antireligious. Wrote Maltzchi, "He had no truck with priests or Judaism: 'It's all a fraud!'" He closed his business on the Sabbath, but only as a concession to Eger's Jews. Something of Rudi's early attitude toward religion can be inferred from the handwritten story outline of a four-act play that he wrote in adolescence, in which God "sits on a throne of velvet, smoking a pipe and drinking a schnapps, surrounded by angels and similar vermin... He is somewhat shicker [drunk]." (Serkin's penchant for parody continued into later adolescence, and as an adult he would be both ironic and playful, with a well-known tendency toward practical jokes and scatological humor.)

Serkin's relationship to Judaism never changed, and like most of his siblings, he married a non-Jew. Irene Serkin maintained that in the early 1930s her husband was strongly attracted to Christianity and considered converting, but to avoid any impression of disloyalty at a time when Jews were so vulnerable, he decided against this step. In letters to his wife, he alludes now and then, usually ironically, to being Jewish; clearly he recognized it to be a part of who he was. "Merry Christmas," he wrote Irene in 1983, "from the old Jew Rudi." But the prevailing attitude in the world in which he moved was that to insist on an ethnicity whose religious content had been abandoned was a retrograde tribalism, even a caving in to the worldview of the Nazis. (Violinist Alexander
Schneider, by contrast, was preoccupied with Jewishness to the point of obsession and took delight in writing Serkin about what he called his *Idische nische*, his "Jewish soul."

Though Serkin's attitudes toward matters Jewish were inevitably complex, he neither rejected nor embraced his Jewish origins, but rather confronted with integrity the psychological and social conundrums of being a non-Jewish Jew.

**CHILD PIANIST**

Serkin maintained that his father had tried to make musicians of all his children and forced them to study either violin or piano with an insistence that Serkin thought unwise (this became the explanation he later offered for having handled the talent of his own son, Peter, with such diffidence). He claimed that his musical talent first expressed itself at age 2, when he tried to play on the piano "what I heard from my brother," but according to Maltschi, his musical gift was first recognized when he burst into tears while listening to one of his older sisters practice: "It's all wrong, it's all wrong," he is said to have wailed to his father. Serkin first played the violin, but detested it, finding the sound too close to his ear.

At 4 (or possibly 5) Rudi started studying piano with Camilla Taussig, with whom he took daily lessons until he was 9. Of her, he wrote:

> My first teacher Camilla Taussig was a very sweet woman but scary to look at. She was very short (when I was five I already had outgrown her), and she had an enormous hunchback and very long fingers like spiders. Besides she cooked for me after specially good lessons (as a reward) a hot beer soup, a Czech national favorite, and made me eat it. But I loved her, and I never did throw it up.

Serkin told Dean Elder, his interlocutor in the most extensive interview he ever granted, that he first performed in public when he was "5 or 6" in Franzensbad, the spa neighboring Eger, though he gave different versions of this event at different times. His first documented performance was a recital of Fräulein Taussig's students in Eger's Hotel Kronprinz Rudolf on June 6, 1909. The program lists Lotte Serkin, Robert Serkin, Willi Serkin ... and *der kleine Serkin*—little Serkin. Rudi, of forty participants the only one whose given name was not printed, was 6.

The program testifies to a remarkable level of musical culture in what were, after all, provincial backwaters. It began and concluded with piano transcriptions from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Of the remaining thirty-six (!) works,
most were by long-forgotten nineteenth-century composers of pedagogical and salon pieces, such as Gustav Lange and Fritz Spinder, but also represented were Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Schubert. Rudi played Hirschberg’s E-minor Fantasie and Stephen Heller’s Trotzköpfchen. (Charles Rosen: “I can die happy without ever hearing another piece by Heller.”)\textsuperscript{25} The overwhelming presence of Jewish names among Miss Taussig’s students attests to Eger’s rigid social divisions as well as to the lively participation of Jews in a culture from which, only some fifty years before, they had been largely cut off. A local paper gave young Serkin his first review: “Little six-year-old Rudi Serkin delighted his audience with his extremely precise playing, earning him his first well-earned laurels.”\textsuperscript{26}

The following year Serkin began music theory lessons with a local chorus director. A year later—he was 8—he penned a bit of doggerel (whether his own or copied, we don’t know) on the subject of theory that expressed some of the musical values he was to articulate and exemplify for the rest of his life:

\begin{quote}
Musik verschönert das Leben,
Ihre Theorie ist wichtig,
Drum greife nie daneben,
Und spiele immer richtig.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}
Loosely translated:

*Since music gives life grace,*

*And its theory is crucial,*

*The notes must be in place,*

*And errors unusual.*

It must soon have become obvious that Serkin’s talents exceeded Eger’s normal standard. He applied to the conservatory in Prague but was rejected as too young. (As an 18-year-old he would be turned away by Ferruccio Busoni in Berlin for being too old.) When the Polish-born violinist Bronislav Huberman and his accompanist, the Viennese virtuoso Poldi Spielmann, performed in Eger, Rudi (then 8 or 9) appeared before them to play etudes by Czerny, Kuhlau, and Köhler. It was said that “they looked with astonishment at the tiny magician.”

A few weeks later Mordko and Rudi traveled to nearby Pilsen to play for the Viennese pianist Alfred Grünfeld (1852–1924), who was giving a concert there. Grünfeld was sufficiently impressed to encourage 9-year-old Rudi to move to Vienna to study with Richard Robert.

**VIENNA**

According to Serkin, Grünfeld not only suggested that he study in Vienna, but actually took him there. Although Grünfeld came from Prague, after moving to the imperial capital, he became *the* Viennese pianist—“the embodiment of Vienna.”

The Viennese pianistic style of the time, of which Grünfeld was the apotheosis, stressed virtuosity, but also sensuality of tone, passion, “optimistic, carefree pleasure in life, a warm, beautiful, kind humanity, with a distaste for ‘depth,’ ponderousness, exaggeration, and hardness”—these associated in Vienna with a German style. Serkin later described Grünfeld’s playing as “incredibly beautiful.” He was a special favorite of the city’s Jews, a passion spoofed by a contemporary joke in which a Viennese Jew remarks, “Of the Jewish holidays I observe only Grünfeld’s concerts.”

Grünfeld was unquestionably a serious musician, whose programs favored relatively pedal-free Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms, in addition to nineteenth-century miniatures, especially, it need hardly be added, the waltz.

Richard Robert (1861–1924), the teacher to whom Grünfeld sent Serkin, was a prominent figure in Viennese musical life, though he lacked the international reputation of the city’s most famous piano pedagogue, Theodor
Leschetizky. Born Robert Spitzer, he studied with Julius Epstein (a teacher of Mahler’s), Franz Krenn, and Anton Bruckner. (Although Serkin was one of the few major Austro-German pianists of his generation whose pedigree did not descend back through Liszt and Czerny to Beethoven, he could, through Krenn’s teacher Ignaz Xavier Seyfried, trace his musical lineage to Mozart.) Robert taught piano, composition, and conducting, composed, wrote music criticism for Viennese newspapers, edited the journal Musikalische Rundschau, and briefly headed the New Conservatory of Music, where Grünfeld served on his board of directors.
After Robert’s death in 1924, his student Wilhelm Grosz published an obituary that provides fervent testimony to the impact he had on his students as a man, teacher, and musician:

Words are not adequate to convey what he meant to us, his many students, who loved him like a father . . . He didn’t have a “method,” nor did he form “piano players” (how he hated all these words) but he was to all of his students the most loving guide into the deepest essence of music, whose secrets he knew like no one else . . . Living as he did in the works of the great Masters gave him a reputation among some as a reactionary, but most unjustly.

Anyone familiar with Serkin’s reputation as a teacher will recognize much of him here: the importance of technique, but only as it serves musical goals, rejection of “method,” and the affinity with the canonical composers of the German-Austrian tradition. George Szell, also a Robert student, wrote a similar testimonial for Robert’s sixtieth birthday in 1921 that stressed, in addition to his musical qualities, his “kindness, his integrity, modesty, and readiness to help.”35

In moving from the provinces to Vienna (then with a population of two million, the world’s sixth largest city), Rudolf Serkin was following a well-beaten path: Sigmund Freud, Alfred Grünfeld, Karl Kraus, Gustav Mahler, Joseph Roth, and Artur Schnabel had all done the same. But unlike these other Jewish boys, Serkin, 9 years old, was sent to live with complete strangers. Even young Clara Haskil, who had left her native Romania to study with Robert some years before Serkin, had come to Vienna with a bachelor uncle.

Serkin boarded with “a petit-bourgeois Jewish family” chosen by Robert, where he was lonely and homesick and wet his bed.36 They were, Serkin said later, “terrible people.”37 He lamented to his parents:

I am not able to practice at the Weissbergers, even though I have to! First, Else’s piano teacher arrives. Then she practices herself. When Frau Weissberger has a headache I’m not allowed to practice. Then Else’s singing teacher arrives. Then the others arrive to practice. Then the customers arrive, and visitors, and I’m not allowed to practice then either. And then the whole day is gone. I am allowed to go for a walk only when Frau Weissberger is at home. I can go for a walk whenever and for however long I want to. I’m going to tell her that, too. I am homesick, but it will pass when Lotte comes, at least someone from the family!!! Frau Weissberger is very unfriendly now. I can’t stand her!!!! It’s already cold here.
Please write often. Mama should send me trousers and gloves. Also send winter socks. I am healthy. Many kisses, Your Rudi.

In spite of his complaints, there is a tone of resolve—to practice, to move about in freedom, to resist the restrictions his landlords impose, to prepare for the winter—that is remarkable in a 10-year-old child and no less characteristic of the man he was to become. With his sign-off declaration, I am healthy, he reassures his parents and declares both his physical well-being and an impressive resilience. Subsequently, he lodged with "an old lady with one leg" who, he said, made him chase her around the dining table.38

In the summer he returned to Eger. A letter from Richard Robert to Rudi testifies to the boy’s great good luck in having come to this teacher:

My dear Rudi,

Your letter, which reported your safe arrival in Eger, made me very happy. Too bad that your lamb and Mazi were no longer there, but fortunately you now have
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many more chickens, who will keep you busy. I hope you are romping around and getting a lot of fresh air.

I want you to regain your strength, so that you can work hard again in the fall. In order that you don’t do anything but laze about in the summer, you can start again to practice two to two and a half hours. The most important thing, dear Rudi, are the technical exercises, which have enabled you to progress so far in such a short time. Practice these exercises twice a day (mornings and afternoons half an hour each time), but attentively, with a large, beautiful, singing tone, as if you were playing a melody.

Additionally, please practice the following:
- Bach, 2-Part Invention No. 14 (B-flat major)
- Bach, 3-Part Invention No. 6 (E major)
- Weber, E minor Sonata, 1st movement

Let me know when you are finished with these exercises—when you have practiced them with one hand and two hands, emphasizing each in turn and with clarity—and I will send you new ones. At the difficult passages, emphasize alternately the first, then the second, third, fourth notes, etc., as you did it for me. I am very curious to see how you study on your own, since you will also work alone in Vienna.

Dear Rudi, I want to say once again that the main thing is for you to come back home strong and healthy, so that if in the summer you sometimes practice a bit more or less, or not at all, it doesn’t matter to me at all. You are a good, hard-working boy and you deserve to romp around to your heart’s content. So have a good time, play more with your brothers and sisters and with the animals than on the piano, climb on the trees and—write me now and then how you’re doing. Soon the vacation will be over and you’ll begin work.

I am very much looking forward to seeing you here again in a few weeks. I have become very fond of you in this short time, and we are good friends already, aren’t we?

One notes the admonition not to practice too much—a wish that many would harbor for the mature pianist with at least as much fervor as Robert did for the boy.

Robert and his wife, Laura, were enormously kind to the gifted children who studied with him—they had none of their own—even dedicating a corner of their living room to toys purchased especially for shy Clara Haskil. Irene Serkin recounted that when Rudi played for Robert, he would look at the bust of Beethoven at the end of the piano to see whether he was smiling in approval, and that Laura Robert gave him lessons in “manners.” In later years Serkin remembered the many times he played transcriptions for six hands and
three pianos with George Szell (then Georg Széll) and Hans Gál.⁴⁰ He also remembered with distaste the Weber sonatas and rondos Robert forced him to play.⁴¹

After studying with Robert for some years, Serkin wrote him that he needed to broaden his musical education and would seek another teacher. Robert responded supportively and congratulated him on his maturity and growing independence. The following week Rudi showed up at Robert’s at his usual time and resumed his lesson without either teacher or student referring ever again to the exchange of letters.⁴² Indeed, Serkin turned up at Richard Robert’s for at least one lesson long after he had left Vienna and established himself as a concert pianist.⁴³

During Serkin’s second year in Vienna, events back in Eger took a dramatic turn for the worse. Maltzsch writes:

My father’s business partner turned out to be a crook. He stole all the liquid capital and disappeared “to America,” as one said at the time, meaning simply: gone forever. We were declared bankrupt and most of our personal possessions were sold off to satisfy the creditors . . . And in Eger someone who had been through a bankruptcy sale was all but an outcast. So off to Vienna. To begin a new life, and above all to be reunited with Rudi.⁴⁴

Ominously, the Serkins left for Vienna on the same day as the call for general mobilization that signaled the start of the First World War in August 1914. Met in Vienna by Mordko, who had traveled ahead to find lodging, they found his face “yellowish” and his eyes sad. “He seemed suddenly shrunken.”⁴⁵ Mordko Serkin, however demoralized and defeated, did his best to maintain a semblance of a “normal” family. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to imagine the degree to which Rudi, whose father had failed not once but repeatedly, must have felt the weight of the responsibility that his gift had conferred on him.

Their first apartment was in a “dark, narrow street,”⁴⁶ Pfluggasse, about a mile northwest of St. Stephan’s Cathedral on the periphery of the Ninth District, known for its concentration of middle-class Jews, and not far from the Roberts’ apartment on the Liechtensteinstrasse. Serkin remembered it as a “kind of ghetto” frequented by prostitutes who gave him candy.⁴⁷ Subsequently the family moved further north, to a top-floor apartment in a five-story walkup on the Döblingher-Hauptstrasse, a busy thoroughfare on the unfashionable edge of the comfortable Nineteenth District, across from an old Jewish cemetery and immediately outside the Gürtel, or Belt, that demarcates the limits of central Vienna. Though presumably chosen for its proximity to Richard Robert’s
flat, it was also a part of the city that Mordko Serkin knew well, having lived there in the 1880s. That the Serkins chose not to move into the heavily immigrant, Jewish, eastern European Second District suggests how decisively the family had broken from its origins.

Mordko Serkin never recovered from the disaster that befell him in Eger. In Vienna he lived a hardscrabble existence, doing his best to help keep the family afloat by manufacturing soap ("very bad soap," according to Maltschi) and shoe wax. His two older sons vanished into the war and were reported killed, until they eventually turned up as Russian prisoners. Maltschi remembers "a difficult adjustment—in school we were Russian, Jewish, and Czech [i.e., Bohemian]: enemies, despicable and ridiculous." Given that by their own reckoning they were not Russian (except for Mordko), Jewish only in name, and Bohemian by happenstance, the Serkins must have found their outsider status particularly irksome and in some ways worse than it had been in Eger.

Cruelly, Susanna, their fourth child and the sibling to whom Rudi felt closest, died in 1919 at the age of 20 of a brain embolism (or tuberculosis, depending on the account). Her death affected Rudi profoundly. Over a year later he wrote to a family friend in Eger: "It is very difficult for me to write you. My sister Suse died on May 4, 1919. I must ask you not to write either my parents or Lotte for the time being, since this could only result in their getting terribly upset. My parents, brothers, and sisters are doing relatively well. I have nothing to say, except that it is your duty not to go under." Even as a 17-year-old he struck this note, and withdrew.

Conditions in Vienna during the war were wretched, probably the worst of any city in western Europe. Serkin never forgot the hunger. In a letter to her future husband, Serkin's youngest sister, Marthl, wrote that the war had exposed the absence of love between their parents and destroyed their family. In 1922, eight years after coming to Vienna and four years after war's end, Mordko died there, 62 years old, "a worn-out and disappointed man."

What is striking about Serkin's childhood is the extraordinarily high degree of instability that he had to contend with as a young boy. His parents were uprooted in the extreme, completely separated from their own backgrounds, for many years virtually nomadic, and enjoying, even when settled, few of the ties that normally link family and community. Mordko's bankruptcy and the family's departure in disgrace from Eger and final slide into permanent poverty marginalized them even further. As personalities, Mordko and Auguste could hardly be called rock solid. That this enormously gifted and intelligent son of theirs would himself become a restless and inwardly rootless man is hardly surprising, nor is it difficult to see why a person growing up as Rudolf Serkin did
would invest the one stable point in his life—music—with almost divine attributes.

FRAU DOKTOR

If Richard Robert was Serkin’s first big lucky break, his second was Eugenie Schwarzwald (1872–1940), known as Genia, or Frau Doktor, a remarkable and controversial figure, “much loved and much hated, over-praised and maligned.”53 Serkin would later say that he owed her his entire education. Over thirty years older than Rudi, she formed the beginnings of his adolescent intellectual and social development, became a second (in some sense, perhaps a first) mother, and remained the object of Serkin’s devotion even beyond her death. When, as an old man dying of cancer in Vermont, he was asked by his daughter Elisabeth whether there was anyone he would like to see, he said that the one person he would still want to talk to was Frau Doktor Schwarzwald.54 Schwarzwald was born Eugenie Nussbaum near the town of Czernowitz, as far east in the Empire as Eger was west and later home to a vital literary culture.
As a child she moved with her family to Vienna. Later, she earned a doctorate in German literature and married Hermann (“Henne”) Schwarzwald, a brilliant and ambitious economist and administrator, who was to work in the upper reaches of the Finance Ministry and is credited with keeping Austria’s economy afloat after the First World War. Frau Doktor sported short hair, spoke German “with a Slavic accent,” and looked “like one of the Roman emperors.”55 Vienna could not contain her energy, and her network extended to Scandinavia—the Danish writer Karin Michaelis was a close friend—and even to America: the journalist Dorothy Thompson, who knew Schwarzwald in Vienna and had turned to her in a depression, credited her with saving her
The Schwarzwalds lived more or less openly in a menage à trois with the charming and attractive Marie ("Mariedl") Stiasny, who would later follow them into Nazi-imposed exile and nurse them in their last days in Zürich, where Hermann Schwarzwald died in August 1939, Genia a year later.

Eugenie Schwarzwald is the subject of an extensive literature, most of it in memoirs of Viennese artists and intellectuals who studied or taught in her schools, participated in her salon or in the many events and institutions that she organized. Many of them are not particularly kind. Robert Musil, who described her in his diaries as "this juxtaposition of doing good and doing herself good" (dieses Nebeneinander von Wohltun und Sichwohltun) immortalized Schwarzwald as the slightly absurd saloniste Diotima in his novel The Man without Qualities. Elias Canetti found her "a well-intentioned bore" whose conversation was "a hopeless jumble." Among the harshest of her many detractors was the writer Karl Kraus, whom the Schwarzwalds had supported and hosted, and whose newspaper Die Fackel Serkin read avidly. Kraus renders a cruel portrait of the Schwarzwalds in his drama Die letzten Tage der Menschheit—a self-serving, self-deluding, altogether ludicrous couple falling over themselves as they rush from one miscalculated good deed to the next.

More generous, Alice Herdan-Zuckmayer (a Schwarzwald school alumna who married the playwright Carl Zuckmayer) sensed something beyond the off-putting manner: "I felt for the first time that there was a secret, and began to suspect that behind her overflowing tenderness, the ardent embraces, the declarations of love, lay an area so protected that no one was allowed in." It seems fair to speculate that this well-camouflaged reserve was something Eugenie Schwarzwald and Serkin recognized and loved in one another.

When Richard Robert first brought Serkin to Schwarzwald on July 11, 1915, Rudi was a 12-year-old musical prodigy, she an educator and social activist in her early forties. Schwarzwald’s views on pedagogy were outspokenly progressive: learning, she believed, should take place "without pain and boredom, and should bring only joy." According to one account, Serkin was one of the "few selected boys" to attend Schwarzwald's girls school—a story that has, however, no basis in fact. Serkin asserted throughout his life that because of the demands of the piano he enjoyed no formal schooling of any kind, and there is no evidence to the contrary, though he did occasionally perform in Schwarzwald’s school.

Schwarzwald’s girls’ school in the center of Vienna was the most prominent and stable of her many projects. She also founded Austria’s first coeducational elementary school, wartime community kitchens, and countless other projects and charities. In 1916 she started a fresh-air fund for Viennese children, Wiener
Kinder aufs Land, by which they could escape the heat and squalor of the city’s wartime summers for farms, rural estates, and retreats in Austria and Slovenia. Maltschi remembered the camp in Topolschitz (now Topolšica, in Slovenia) that she and Rudi attended as “pure paradise.” Herdan-Zuckmayer, another Topolschitz alumna, conveys something of the 15-year-old Serkin’s insouciant charm and self-confidence: “Once some important officials were expected at Topolschitz, from whom Fraudoktor was hoping for some favors . . . Rudi came [to perform], as always, in his swimming suit, having also put a tie around his neck, otherwise nothing.” Another veteran of the Schwarzwald camps wrote to Serkin years later recalling memories of lectures by Willi Schlamm (who in the United States was to become an editor of the right-wing *National Review*), Karl Popper whistling a symphony, and especially Rudi himself, biking down the mountain, his legs in the air, bare chested, with a red cloth around his neck.

Through Schwarzwald, Rudolf Serkin made a number of extraordinarily talented friends; in addition to Popper, who described Serkin as his oldest friend, they included the physicist Victor Weisskopf, the painter Oskar Kokoschka, and the architect Adolf Loos. For Loos’s sixtieth birthday in 1930 Serkin wrote a characteristically charming tribute:

> When I was twelve years old, I met Adolf Loos . . . In the children’s camp at Topolschitz there was a small pool, which was fed by a thermal spring. There Loos taught me a somersault: you had to jump, do a complete turn, and land with your feet on the water. Endlessly patient, Loos demonstrated the somersault at least thirty times. Never have I learned something more thoroughly. I can still do the somersault today, and when I do it, I always think with love and gratitude of my teacher, Adolf Loos.

Reading descriptions of Schwarzwald’s school and camps, it is impossible not to think of what was later to become the Marlboro ideal: its purposefulness, the relative informality of its style, but above all the pleasure in the ongoing creation of a community based on meaningful activity, collaboratively undertaken. “The feeling of community came alive in everyone,” wrote Paul Stefan, a prolific and ubiquitous chronicler of the Viennese music scene. Stefan evokes a sense of somewhat self-conscious other-worldliness that also characterizes Marlboro: “There’s no consumerist one-upmanship, no gambling or cards, no noisy bar, no idle plunking on the piano, no dilettantism to torment frayed nerves. From somewhere far away the newspapers report on the usual ugliness.”
EARLY CONCERTS

Serkin embarked on his career as a concert performer during these Viennese years, although Mordko Serkin refused to market his son as a touring Wunderkind. "I'm not going to spoil his childhood!" he is supposed to have said. If Serkin did not tour as a child, he did, from the age of 12, help to support a family of ten.

His earliest concerts, then, all took place in Vienna. He gave his first "professional" concert on February 1, 1916—he was not yet 13—at Vienna's first musical address, the Grosser Musikvereinssaal, the ornate, second-floor hall just off the Ring. The program featured the Berlin Royal Opera soprano Claire Dux, then at the height of her fame. Oskar Nedbal conducted. For the 12-year-old Rudi Serkin it was a distinguished debut indeed. He performed Mendelssohn's virtuosic, spirited G minor Concerto, Op. 25, a work he would continue to play throughout his career and was credited with having revived. Although most of the program was Dux's, it was the 12-year-old Rudi who was the evening's star:

This Wunderkind performed the difficult and beautiful concerto, which has been unjustly neglected by the great pianists, with a clear and calm objectivity, with an agility of finger and a clean, fluid technique [Passagentechnik] that suggest an unusually musical and well-instructed talent. Particularly notable: the secure sense of rhythm, the transparent phrasing. His touch itself is extraordinarily powerful, although he has not yet developed the multi-colored sound palette whose mastery is obligatory for a modern piano virtuoso.

It is astonishing how accurately the critic of the child pianist in 1916 pinpoints the very qualities that reviewers would discern in Serkin's playing throughout his seventy-year career: the technique, the musicality, above all the rhythm and the power, as well as the relative inattention to tonal color. Notice of Serkin's performance extended as far as Leipzig, where the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik also gave him a glowing review.

He gave his first public solo recital later in the same month, playing a program of "sonatas and short pieces" by Mendelssohn, Schubert, Bach, Scarlatti, Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt, "all receiving," according to one critic, "a surprisingly mature interpretation, balanced in its whole as well as in its details." Serkin continued to charm and move audiences and critics in the recitals and concerts that followed. In December 1917 he performed Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto with Franz Schalk and the Tonkünstler Orchestra in a celebra-
tion of the anniversary of the composer’s birth. In these early years in Vienna he also played the Mozart C minor and Grieg concertos with young George Szell conducting the orchestra of the Konzertverein.

**TRANSITIONS: JOSEPH MARX, POLITICS**

Serkin had not undergone a formal, conservatory-based musical education. Richard Robert, who himself had been the director of the New Conservatory, no doubt saw a training in composition as a necessary part of a musician’s preparation, and at about the time of his Vienna debut, Serkin began studying composition, counterpoint, and harmony with Joseph Marx (1882–1964).
Marx, though relatively young himself, was regarded as an epigone. Vienna’s modernists disapproved of him. The composer Ernst Krenek described him as a “hugely fat and noisy man,” who “in later years was to become a spear-carrier of the mindless Teutonic reactionaries and a forerunner of the Nazis.” Marx’s songs, Serkin wrote later, were “very warm and lyrical but rather on the sweet side.” A letter from Serkin to Marx, written in the 1960s, was grateful beyond politeness and acknowledged their affinity as musical traditionalists. Marx, for his part, remembered Rudi as cheerful and highly gifted. The scores of some songs that Serkin wrote during the time of his work with Marx, dedicated to
his sweetheart of the time, Lisl Sinek, have survived among his papers. According to the musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg, they are written in a “popular” and somewhat indistinctive style.78

At home and through Schwarzwald, Serkin was immersed in a thoroughly politicized atmosphere: it was said of Mordko that he expressed his anti-Habsburg convictions so forcefully that Auguste would close the windows to keep the neighbors from hearing, and that he thought of moving back to Russia after the Revolution there.79 As Rudi’s own political awareness sharpened, he began to doubt his calling as a musician, thinking he needed to devote himself to something more useful, and for a time he toyed with the idea of becoming a carpenter.80

After war’s end, Serkin was able to bring politics and music together by playing regularly for workers as well as for large groups of children (whom he also taught) from working-class, politically active families housed by Vienna’s socialist government in a wing of Schönbrunn Castle, the eighteenth-century Habsburg palace on the southwestern side of the city. “We had our own revolution in Vienna, a small one,” he told Otto Friedrich.81 On one occasion at Schönbrunn, Serkin, a good sport if ever there was one, offered up his head to a group of eager boys who had acquired a set of hair clippers. After they sheared a strip straight down the middle of his scalp, he prevailed on them to finish the job by shaving off what remained.82

SCHOENBERG

It was but a short step from political to musical rebellion. In 1918, as the war was ending, Adolf Loos introduced the 15-year-old Serkin to Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), then in his mid-forties, at a concert at the Schwarzwald school, where Schoenberg had taught after-hours classes.83 The meeting resulted in one of the most significant and problematic associations of Serkin’s life. Given the political and social ferment in a city whose conservative taste in music was, in the words of pianist and scholar Charles Rosen, “the most uncompromising in Europe,”84 the bracing, passionately austere climate of intellectual, moral, and aesthetic rigor practiced by Schoenberg and his followers (“artistic and intellectual Puritanism”)85 had a powerful and lasting impact on Serkin.

Serkin later expressed his alienation from Vienna by describing it as a city that was “very—how shall I put it—conscious of its own importance.”86 Paul Stefan entitled his 1913 account of the atmosphere of bitterness and defeat among Mahler’s Vienna supporters Das Grab in Wien: The Grave in Vienna.
He provides a grim list of what he calls “the Austrian foibles”: “lack of persistence, fear of anything new, a platonic love of action (as Frau Doktor calls it), a cold heart and lack of hospitality, a frame of mind that can only be called petit-bourgeois and bureaucratic, a need to dominate.” This was the Vienna that Mahler and then Schoenberg worked so hard to overcome—a struggle into which young Serkin threw himself whole-heartedly. When Serkin informed Richard Robert of his decision to study with Schoenberg, Robert “nearly cried,” Serkin wrote, “but our relationship remained the same.”

For about two years, Serkin played “nothing but contemporary music.” The years of his association with Schoenberg, 1918 to 1920, span the middle of a fallow period in Schoenberg’s compositional activity, coming between his “first” and “second” revolutions, between the total chromaticism that marked the so-called emancipation of the dissonance and the invention of the twelve-tone system, which he developed in the early 1920s. It has become commonplace to recognize in Schoenberg the continuities with and affirmation of principles represented in the music of Wagner and Brahms. Nonetheless, as Charles Rosen writes, “What should be emphasized here is the sense of scandal, the consciousness of moral outrage aroused by Schoenberg’s work after 1908.” The protective way that Schoenberg’s followers grouped around him was both a response to their pariah status—Ernst Krenek writes of having to approach Schoenberg through his “bodyguards”—and also an accommodation to Schoenberg’s rather authoritarian personal style. He took as students not only aspiring composers but many performing musicians, like Serkin.

According to one of Serkin’s fellow students, Schoenberg would include one student in the class who was wealthy enough to pay for the others. In Serkin’s class, it was a Dutchman who knew what was happening and “didn’t mind at all.” “It was very informal,” Serkin told Otto Friedrich. “Once, I wrote a rondo for piano and I brought it to him. He looked at it, and then he said, ‘Serkin, I’m going to cut out all the parts that you like best.’ . . . And he did. All the extra things . . . He wanted only the essentials.”

However pathbreaking Schoenberg’s compositions, his pedagogy was traditional: a complete mastery of theory, he believed, was the necessary foundation for a creative musician. As texts Schoenberg used his own Harmonielehre (published in 1911 and dedicated to Mahler) and Heinrich Bellermann’s classic Contrapunkt, first published in 1862. Schoenberg emphasized objectivity, the striving for truth, whether in composition or in performance, and “clarity and precision.” According to the prospectus of Schoenberg’s Society for the Private Performance of Music (Verein für Musikalische Privataufführungen), “The only success that the artist should have here is that which should be most
important to him: to have made the work and thus its author understandable. The atmosphere that characterized his classes was that of the workshop, and his relationship to his students was one of master-apprentice rather than master-disciple.

“No,” Serkin corrected Isaac Stern, who suggested that Adolf Busch was the decisive influence on him, “it was Schoenberg. Busch just added to it. It was Schoenberg.” Schoenberg gave Serkin an aesthetic that was ethically based and an institutional model for implementing it. Like Schwarzwald, Schoenberg taught Serkin at an early age what total dedication could achieve, how it was possible for, indeed incumbent upon visionaries and idealists and outsiders to transform their commitments into meaningful action with endless work and sacrifice. It was a lesson Serkin would always carry with him.

Serkin’s years with Schoenberg coincided closely with the life span of Schoenberg’s Society for the Private Performance of Music (1918–1921), which had its initial performances in the Loos-designed auditorium of the Schwarzwald school. Charles Rosen again:

The Society was an extension of Schoenberg’s teaching; it was, at least in theory, an instrument of education and not of propaganda. Contemporary works were at last rehearsed for as long hours as needed to be played well: music that required more than one performance to be understood was repeated several times at subsequent concerts. The center of interest was to be the music itself, and the performer was relegated firmly to second place . . . Above all, the music was to be withdrawn both from the dictates of fashion, which inflated and deflated reputations arbitrarily, and from the pressures of commercialism.

Applause was forbidden, and Serkin later remembered with pride that after he once performed a piece of Schoenberg’s, the audience was moved to stand—silently. Each piece would typically receive ten to twenty rehearsals, an intensity of striving that Schoenberg is said to have learned from Mahler. (Not that Schoenberg was always such a perfectionist. Serkin remembered playing second viola to Schoenberg’s cello in the Mozart quintets: “I didn’t play well—but better than Schoenberg.”) Adding to the strong emphasis on community and learning that Serkin had absorbed through Schwarzwald, the Verein gave him an institutional model that fused musical, cultural, and educational ideals. He was to implement important aspects of this model, though under very different circumstances, thirty years later at Marlboro. And like Schoenberg, Serkin was to become a powerful force at the center of something that his friend the pianist Claude Frank described as “like a cult,” adding quickly, “a good cult.”
Serkin’s own performances in the Verein—he was its youngest performer—spanned a wide range of material, including Josef Suk’s Erlebtes und Erträumtes, an eight-hand version of Berg’s Op. 6 orchestral pieces, five pieces collected under the title Exotikon by the Czech composer Vítězslav Novák, Schoenberg’s Three Pieces, Op. 11, and a four-hand arrangement of Stravinsky’s Petrushka with fellow Schoenberg student Edward Steuermann. “People started throwing things at me,” Serkin said. “Sometimes the police were called in.” After a concert in Prague in March 1920 in which Serkin and Steuermann played Debussy’s En blanc et noir, Anton Webern wrote Alban Berg, “The public finally broke through the prohibition on applause. It was a big success, especially for Steuermann and Serkin.” (Serkin knew both Webern and Berg well and studied Berg’s Piano Sonata, Op. 1, with the composer.)

How fully Serkin had become a part of the Schoenberg camp is evident from contemporary accounts and later memoirs. In 1920 Erwin Stein described Serkin’s refusal to accept a fee for performing at the Verein in a letter to Schoenberg: “To my suggestion that he doesn’t have to play for people for free, he said he doesn’t play for people at all. A great guy!” Nonetheless, Serkin began to feel, as he expressed it in later years, that he could no longer perform the music of Schoenberg and his circle “with honesty.” He told others, simply, that he “was tired of it.” After Serkin’s death Karl Popper wrote Irene that he and Rudi had tried, together, to learn to love modern music, and that, together, they gave up. Otto Friedrich quotes Serkin: “Schoenberg was a fantastic
man. I loved him. But I could not love his music. I told him so, and he never forgave me. He said, ‘It’s up to you to decide whether you want to be on this side of the barricades or that one.’ About Schoenberg’s piano pieces, Serkin said—the persistent use of metaphors of war and revolution speaks to the time—‘I had to tell him I didn’t like them . . . He looked at me as if I were a soldier who had deserted.’

Serkin’s need to break away must have been festering for some time before it broke into the open. As early as February 1920, nine months before the rupture with Schoenberg, he wrote Maltschi from Harthof, a Schwarzwald-run country boarding school outside Vienna: “I am so glad to be at Harthof, and not to have to associate with all these small people in Vienna. I want to learn a lot, and then go away, far away.” Yet practically to the end of their association, Schoenberg seems to have been unaware of Serkin’s unhappiness. Responding to a suggestion by the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg that some of his students should join him in Amsterdam, Schoenberg wrote in October—this was a month before Serkin’s defection—recommending Serkin and Steuermann, “both of the very first!!! order . . . I can guarantee you that soon both of them will be famous—each in his own way.” That Serkin would have revealed so little of his disaffection before acting on it was consistent with his need to keep surfaces smooth. There can be little doubt that his sudden departure surprised Schoenberg and contributed to his implacable displeasure.

By the time of his break with Schoenberg, Serkin was a guest in some of the most distinguished houses of the Viennese intelligentsia, even outside the Schwarzwald circle. The writer Arthur Schnitzler, whose son Heinrich was also a Richard Robert student, writes in his 1920 diary that he attended a Serkin concert and had him to tea, along with Richard and Laura Robert, George Szell, and others. Even in Serkin’s earliest years in Vienna, according to Wilkowitsch, he played “in the first boudoirs of Vienna’s aristocracy” and was presented with his own Bösendorfer. But factionalized as Vienna was, Serkin cannot have found it a comfortable place after he left Schoenberg, who refused from then on to have anything to do with him.*

*Schoenberg was not to put him entirely out of mind, however. In 1922, in a letter to Alexander Zemlinsky, he described a young pianist as “a kind of female Serkin—a sensation” (October 26, 1922, Arnold-Schönberg-Institut, Vienna), and he listed Serkin among his former students in a roster he prepared for an autobiography in 1944 (Nuria NonoSchoenberg, ed., Arnold Schönberg 1874–1951: Lebensgeschichte in Begegnungen (Klagenfurt: Ritter Klagenfurt, 1992, p. 390). But Serkin was not among the former Schoenberg students who contributed a photograph and vita in an album compiled for their teacher on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday in 1924.
“Schoenberg never forgave me,” Serkin laments in the Stern interview, adding that he “couldn’t stand it in Vienna any more. I felt I was suffocating!” (In old age his memories of Vienna seem to have been entirely positive, focusing on his involvement with Schwarzwald, Schoenberg, Loos, and Kokoschka.) But he always spoke warmly of Schoenberg: “I loved him,” he told Isaac Stern. “I adored him. He was warmhearted, gay, and funny.” Serkin’s and Schoenberg’s paths did not cross again, though Schoenberg and Adolf Busch were to enjoy a friendly backstage encounter in Los Angeles in 1937, and, according to Peter Serkin, his father had considered playing Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto in the late 1940s as a way of repairing the breach.

What course Serkin’s life would have taken had he not met Adolf Busch and left Vienna for Berlin at this juncture is anyone’s guess. He had been bound for Paris, where he intended to study with Hungarian-born Isidor Philipp (1863–1958), the great “modern” educator of a long series of excellent French pianists, at the time a professor at the Paris Conservatoire. Serkin included Philipp in some accounts and omitted him from others. He told Isaac Stern that he was part of a Schwarzwald-organized cultural program that was “to bring Viennese culture to Paris,” and Otto Friedrich quotes him as saying that he was to go to Paris to study with Philipp, be treated for tuberculosis, and work at the Hôtel de l’Opéra. According to a Columbia Artists Management’s press release from the 1960s, Serkin was going to Paris to join Loos and Kokoschka, accompany Elsie Altmann (Loos’s wife) in her dance recitals, and “introduce the works of Schoenberg in Paris.”

It was, however, not the ticket to Paris (which he lost, the often-told story goes, thus missing his train) that took Serkin out of Vienna in 1920, but a ticket to Berlin, and it was paid for by Adolf Busch. The encounter with the great German violinist signals the major turn in Serkin’s biography. The rest of his life followed from his relationship to this man.

The most reliable of many versions of this first meeting is probably told by Leonie Gombrich (the mother of Ernst Gombrich and a former student of and assistant to Leschetizky). Busch and his wife Frieda were in Vienna, where he had been concertmaster of the Konzertverein Orchestra from 1912 to 1918, and where his daughter Irene had been born in 1917. Seeking a replacement for his Vienna accompanist, who had become ill, Busch turned to Leonie Gombrich. She contacted her friend, the Swedish musician Kalle Söderberg, who recommended Serkin. Unable to find Rudi’s address, they went to the police for the information, whereupon Busch wrote to Rudi and invited him to the Gombriches’ house on the Gumpendorferstrasse. Leonie Gombrich describes the encounter:
We had just sat down to afternoon tea, when the maid came in and said, “There’s a young lad outside who says he’s been told to come.” As a precaution, she would not let him into the room. I went out and recognized Rudi immediately. I took him in right away. He was terribly shy, but we all took a liking to him at once, even before we had heard him perform. There are many anecdotes about this tea, many of them invented by Adolf.

After the tea, Rudi played. Adolf was enchanted and nudged Frieda and me the entire time. Then Adolf said, “Wouldn’t you like to play a little Chopin?” Rudi answered very shyly but very decidedly, “I’d rather play Bach.” He made a tremendous impression on all of us. Adolf said: “The way the boy plays, you see the whole score in front of you.”

Adolf and Frieda withdrew, then asked Karl [Gombrich, Leonie’s husband] and me to join them for a war council, and very quickly it was decided that Adolf and Frieda would have Rudi live with them in Berlin. Rudi was thrilled when Adolf and Frieda invited him and, movingly, said, “I hope that someday I can do something so kind for you—for you and others.”

Busch suggested that Serkin should go to Berlin to study with Ferruccio Busoni (who, as it happens, was a close friend of Isidor Philipp’s). “The next day,” concludes Leonie Gombrich, “father Serkin came, and everything was settled.”
ABOUT THE NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all citations to unpublished sources are to materials housed in the Rudolf Serkin Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

We have endeavored to provide as much relevant information in the citations as we could obtain. Where the information had to be inferred, it is given in brackets. Often, however, it has not been possible to date letters or to identify the sources of newspaper clippings with accuracy. We have not provided notes when it has been necessary to protect the privacy of the source and when there is no additional information to give in a reference beyond what is already in the text itself.

Translations (unless otherwise noted) are by the authors.

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1. RS to Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, March 26, 1942.
2. RS to John McCullough, March 18, 1986.
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5. Ibid., 60.
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2. RS to Irving Syrkin, December 20, 1943.
3. Amalie Buchthal, "Rudi und Adolf Busch," 4. Unless otherwise noted, all Buchthal citations are taken from sketches she wrote about her brother and the history of her family that were generously provided by her daughter, Anna Buchthal, and translated by the authors.
6. Marthl Serkin (Schmältzle) to Reinhold Schmältzle, 1928.
7. Mordko Serkin to RS, February 6, 1922.
11. Wiskemann, Czechs, 103.
14. Christoph Stözl, Kafkas böses Böhmen:
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Zur Sozialgeschichte eines Prager Juden
15. Armin Wilkowitsch to Auguste Serkin, February 23, 1927.
27. January 22, 1912.
29. Stern interview. Also RS to Karl Schumann, January 12, 1978.
32. Stern interview.
34. Noted by the critic Julius Korngold, copy in Serkin Papers.
35. Musikalischer Kurier, April 22, 1921, 91.
37. Stern interview.
38. Ibid.
41. RS to Amalie Buchthal [early 1980s].
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50. RS to Johanna [no surname given], October 29, 1920.
51. Marthl Serkin (Schnälze) to Reinhold Schmälzle, May 1928.
54. Elisabeth Serkin, Interview with the authors, June 15, 1994, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.
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61. Eugenie Schwarzwald to RS, October 27, 1937.
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74. Michaelis transcription.
75. Ernst Krenek, Im Atem der Zeit: Erinnerungen an die Moderne (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1998), 206.
76. From an undated draft of a speech.
78. Jeffrey Kallberg, Personal communication with the authors.
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102. Rosen, Arnold Schoenberg, 65. See also Frederick Dorian and Judith Meibach, “Reger’s Historic Stature” (notes to Rudolf Serkin’s “Reger” CD, CBS MK 39562, 1986).
103. Stern interview.
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105. Saal interview, 21.
110. Friedrich, Before the Deluge, 180.
112. RS to Amalie Serkin (Buchthal), February 3, 1920.
115. Christopher Serkin, Phone interview with the authors, August 8, 2001.
116. Peter Serkin, Interview with the authors, New York, November 18, 2000 and June 10, 2001.
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118. Friedrich, Before the Deluge, 171.
120. Otto Grüters, Adolf Buschs Lebenslauf. Numbering close to seven hundred pages, the manuscript is housed in the Reger-Institut’s Brüder-Busch-Archiv in Karlsruhe-Durlach. As
the pages are unnumbered, citations are keyed to the dates of the entries.

**Chapter 2**

1. Barbara Kempner, Interview with the authors, New York, September 17, 1994.
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16. Interview with Oliver Daniels, December 18, 1984, Stokowski Collection, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.
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50. Krenek, *Im Atem*, 413.