

EXCERPT from *SERENADE: A MEMOIR OF MUSIC AND LOVE*

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From CHAPTER FIFTEEN
HENLEIN AND THE KING

A letter from Franz in Prague to Franziska in Vienna

1 February 1938

Franziska:

*Oh dearest art, how often in dark hours of sadness,
When life's cruelties have encircled me,
Have you inspired a warm new love in my heart,
And brought me into a far better world!*

Schubert's "An die Musik" may be a hymn to music, but every time I sing it, I turn it into a serenade to you, my sweet Franziska. I sang it in Aussig at Sunday's matinée in commemoration of Franz Schubert's birthday. And at that performance, I really did feel as if life had caught me in its cruel trap, and I needed to envision your gleaming onyx eyes in order to quell my nervousness. Of all the male singers at the Stadttheater in Aussig, the general manager selected me to sing when the guest of honor was Nazi leader Konrad Henlein. I simply didn't want to be there; I certainly didn't want to meet him; and I was glad that I didn't know his whereabouts in the audience. Fortunately I was only called upon to sing three Lieder since there were other musicians and soloists performing. When I sang "Heidenröslein," you could have heard a pin drop. Schubert's music is so lyrical and melodic that I sang Goethe's poetic story of the poor rose being picked from the hedge as delicately as possible, coloring my voice with ample pianissimos. I concluded with a very mournful "Am Meer" ("By the Sea"). The melancholy quality that I always integrate into my voice throughout the Lied was very

difficult for me to sustain since I kept wondering how many Nazis were sitting in the audience and how many of them had contemplated my Jewishness. But by the time the accompanist's chords had urged me on to sing "From your loving eyes, the tears fell," I was already focused into the mood of Heine's foreboding love story. And at the end, a hush fell over the audience before the applause began.

I didn't want to stay until the end of the performance because I was afraid that the general manager, Alfred Huttig, would introduce me to Konrad Henlein. I'm not sure if Huttig was aware that I'm Jewish; he could have selected me to sing unknowingly. On the other hand, he opposes the Nazi doctrine, and might have deliberately chosen me so that he could play a private joke on Henlein and laugh to himself when the Nazi leader complimented my talents. But because I didn't want to stay around to confirm my assumptions, I left.

I was so anxious and apprehensive that morning that I couldn't decide what to wear. I'd just had a tuxedo and tail coat made and had purchased one pair of trousers with silk braided side seams for both. Neither was really appropriate. I should have worn something in between a tuxedo and a suit, so I must have looked quite overdressed in my tails in the middle of the afternoon. I hope that my singing made up for my lack of savoir-faire.

Can you imagine what one of the other singers told me before the performance? Since we knew that Konrad Henlein was going to be in the audience, we started talking about politics. Hermann Göring, Hitler's right-hand man, came up, and I made fun of the array of his made-to-order decorated uniforms. The singer, a German soprano, defended him and announced that she was a friend of Hermann Göring's wife. "They're such lovely people," she said.

Now, my little Franziska, I must reflect on the conversation we had just a month ago when those Nazis attended my performance of Meistersinger. I'm sorry if I was somewhat curt with you. I realize now that I can no longer block the Nazis from my mind. I shudder to think of the future, yet I must try to be optimistic.

Write soon, my darling! And please start planning another trip! I miss you so!

Love,

Franz

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