

Adirondack Intermezzo

When German opera stars flocked to Schroon Lake

SOME OF THE GREATEST

German opera stars of all time spent summers during World War I in the Adirondack Mountains. Shut out of American opera houses by anti-German sentiment, they were astonishingly indiscreet in their public statements and activities. Yet in the mountains they did what everyone else does—they relaxed and had fun.

The big opera stars of the early 20th century were equivalent to the celebrities of our day. Everyone followed their love lives, where they were appearing, where they dined, what they wore, what they said and what scandals surrounded them. In the pre-TV and social-media world, the public depended on newspapers to report the doings of the German superstars Johanna Gadski and Otto Goritz.

Gadski was the world's leading interpreter of Richard Wagner's operas. She commanded huge fees and traveled with an impressive retinue. Goritz was a versatile baritone who created the role of Baron Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Metropolitan Opera and for many years appeared in Wagnerian productions at the Met. Like Gadski, he performed internationally, and his every move and utterance were described in the press.

In the early 1900s German opera was immensely popular



Clockwise from above: German superstars baritone Otto Goritz and soprano Johanna Gadski. Oscar Seagle, of the famed Seagle Music Colony, in Schroon Lake.

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in the United States; people hummed Wagner's "Wedding March" and "Pilgrims' Chorus." German productions sold out at the Met. The great conductors were interpreters of the German repertoire. Singers like Gadski and Goritz were widely admired.

So it came as a great shock when, after World War I started, German singers and conductors were abruptly dismissed by American opera houses. The British passenger ship *Lusitania* had been sunk by a German submarine in May 1915, and 1,201 people—128 of them American civilians—were drowned. Even before the United States entered the war there was a surge of anti-German feeling. Some people of German origin changed their last names; Schmidt became Smith and Rauh became Rowe. In Michigan, the town of Berlin changed its name to Marne. Sauerkraut became "liberty cabbage" and hamburgers were called "liberty sandwiches." Even dachshunds were affected, becoming "liberty pups." When New York's Lexington Theatre defied a mayoral order and performed *Die Meistersinger* in German, thousands took to the streets to protest.

Unemployed German singers found their way to the Adirondacks in the warm weather, pretending they were simply taking a break in their careers. The mountains were already a summer home for classical music stars: Soprano Marcella Sembrich stayed at Lake Placid before building her villa at Bolton Landing. Violinist Efrem Zimbalist and his wife, the opera singer Alma Gluck, went to Lake George village. Tenors Giovanni Martinelli and Luca Botta stayed at Long Lake.

Otto Goritz was the first to visit Schroon Lake with his family, renting the lakeside Cross Cottage, today known as the Lake House. Johanna Gadski, who owned a summer home on Long Island, stayed at Schroon Lake's elegant Leland House hotel. Another German star, basso Carl Braun, visited nearby Paradox Lake. Mezzo Margarete Ober rented houses in Schroon Lake and Paradox.

Gadski's situation was particularly sensitive. Her husband was the dashing Hans Tauscher, a German army officer who moonlighted as a Krupp arms rep-

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representative introducing Luger pistols to the United States. His wife's fame and his own charm and good looks enabled him to mingle with the socially prominent in New York City. But in 1916, just months before the Battle of Jutland, he was accused of a plot to blow up Canada's Welland Canal, a strategic waterway connecting Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. Captain Tauscher was tried and acquitted in the case, but he was labeled an enemy alien and deported to Germany, banned from returning.

Gadski's American career was immediately compromised. Caught unpre-

TROUBLE FOLLOWED THE GERMAN OPERA SINGERS TO THE ADIRONDACKS. DURING WORLD WAR I, THEIR CONVERSATIONS IN GERMAN ON THE STREETS OF SCHROON LAKE SEEMED SUSPICIOUS AND THREATENING.

pared by a newspaper reporter about her husband's arrest, she blurted: "I would myself blow up munitions factories. I would give up everything and go from one plant to another, singing, if only I could warn the workers in time to save themselves. That I would do gladly, and more—for Germany!"

Otto Goritz did not help matters. It was widely reported that he attended a party at Gadski's home and sang a parody celebrating the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Goritz did not deny the rumors.

So it was no surprise that trouble followed the German singers to the Adirondacks. Their regal bearing, lofty manners, costly clothes and large automobiles were acceptable to the local people because the opera stars were spending money in those communities. But their conversations in German on the streets of Schroon Lake seemed suspicious and threatening. If Hans Tauscher had tried to blow up the Welland Canal, what mischief might his friends be planning for the Schroon

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region? Dynamiting the Starbuckville dam and draining the beautiful lake of its water?

The opera stars became aware of the negative undercurrent and turned to Oscar Seagle for help. Seagle had just established his Seagle Music Colony for aspiring singers in Schroon Lake. A successful baritone soloist, he had taught with famed tenor Jean de Reszke in Europe and developed friendships with many performers abroad and in the States. He knew the German singers retreating to the Adirondacks and was sensitive to their temperament. Seagle had been raised in a small town in Tennessee and understood American rural thinking. His patriotic credentials were secure; he had a best-selling recording of "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag." Seagle met with various townspeople and defused the negative feelings against the visitors.

Gadski, for her part, loved Schroon Lake. She continued to visit the Leland House and was as distressed as the local people when the Ondawa House, a landmark on Main Street, burned in 1917. The next summer she helped organize and sang at a fundraising concert at the Leland House to buy the town's first professional fire-fighting equipment. She and her colleagues Margarete Ober, Carl Braun, Franz Egenieff and Herman Weil—all internationally famed singers—performed at the benefit. Gadski did more than that for Schroon Lake: wealthy music patrons began visiting the Leland House in hopes of seeing and hearing her.

Claiming that she had been misquoted earlier, Gadski spoke now of the importance of art, which transcends national feelings. She told reporters that music could not affect the war "because musical harmonies have no effect on bursting shells." While Gadski and Goritz stated publicly that they were apolitical, Carl Braun later returned to live in Germany and, in the 1930s, became active in the Nazi party.

The German stars largely kept to themselves. The Paradox and Schroon Lake contingents mingled and were the subject of a lighthearted *New York*

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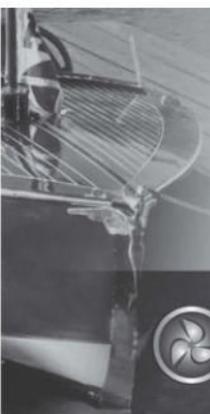
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Times article that described their noisy football games.

The Adirondacks was particularly attractive to the lively mezzo Margarete Ober, who had success singing Verdi and Wagner at the great opera houses of Europe and the United States. She portrayed Octavian in the Metropolitan Opera's first production of *Der Rosenkavalier*, the same premiere in which Otto Goritz introduced Baron Ochs. An excellent actress, she handled anti-German demonstrations at the Met by fainting dramatically onstage. After her dismissal in 1917 she sued the Metropolitan Opera for breach of contract, but that summer she and her husband, Carl Arndt, so enjoyed themselves in Schroon Lake that she failed to appear in court to pursue her case.

When the war ended, Gadski, her husband and daughter, Charlotte, were reunited in Cuba. Charlotte Tauscher later married into the Busch brewing family of St. Louis. Gadski resumed her international career, traveling back and forth between Europe and the United States. Impresario Sol Hurok managed her American appearances. Those who heard her sing, especially during her glory years, never forgot her interpretations. She had an extraordinary ability to move from Wagner to Verdi, Mozart to Mascagni and Strauss to Smetana. Her lieder were considered exceptional. She made numerous recordings, including one in which she sang Pamina to Otto Goritz's Pamina in *The Magic Flute*. She spoke of performing a new role, as a "nice" Carmen.

Ultimately, in the 1920s, a more tolerant America allowed Hans Tauscher to return to the United States. Both he and his wife were granted US citizenship.

In 1932, the end of Johanna Gadski's life at age 60 brought more headlines. She was killed when the auto in which she was riding in Berlin struck a trolley car. News media throughout the world described her as the greatest Brunhilde of all time. She had planned to return to the United States that summer to form her own opera company. Had she survived there may have been a Schroon Lake encore. 🍷

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