

“Unconsciously American”

Josh Tarjan¹

A fair amount has been written about Jerome Moross, my grandfather. There are many good liner notes to his various recordings. You can find pages devoted to him in books such as Christopher Palmer’s “The Composer in Hollywood.” As of 2007, there is a very good masters thesis specifically about *Frankie and Johnny*, by Lindsey Boone of Florida State University (easily found online). You can also obtain information on the website maintained by my mother, Susanna Moross Tarjan: Moross.com. And there is now the requisite Wikipedia entry. So far, however, no thorough biography of my grandfather exists. In 1990, Screen Classics (Screen Archives Entertainment) issued a boxed edition of *The Big Country* CD with a gorgeous, oversized booklet replete with photographs and articles. Two pieces therein—John Caps’ “The Composer” and my mother’s closing recollections of her father—in my opinion give the most comprehensive biographical treatment to date. Here I will do my bit to add to the Moross biographical literature and attempt to flesh out a tad more who Jerome Moross was, not just as a composer, but as a person.

Ancestors

Jerry’s father was born in Russia, probably in Minsk, around 1886. Samuel was the younger of two sons born to a Mr. and Mrs. Vondorfchik.² The husband was an

¹ This piece was written in 2008, and revised in 2013 for the centennial and revamped Moross.com website. Copyright 2013.

² The spelling is in dispute. The name appears in family accounts as Von Dorfchick, Fedorvchik, and Fedorchik.

engineer for the czar; he was apparently a railroad architect and was killed while working on the railroad.³ It's been speculated that he was Dutch and came to Russia for the work. In any case, he died prematurely, leaving behind his wife, Sonya, and their two boys.

Next to enter our story is a Mr. Moross, his pregnant wife, and their three sons. It seems that Mr. Moross had obtained passage for himself, one wife and four children to emigrate to the United States. But when his wife died in childbirth—with the infant—Mr. Moross was left with two spots to fill for the journey. Whether for love or purely practical reasons we don't know, but Mr. Moross and Mrs. Vondorfchik got married. The problem was that Mr. Moross had passage to the US for only four children; but between himself and his new wife there were now five. Apparently they were unable to procure an extra place. Sonya (Mrs. Vondorfchik) now faced a terrible choice: which of her two sons to take with her to the new country.

She chose the youngest, Samuel, a small child. The older son, whose name we don't know, was left behind and eventually emigrated with an aunt to South Africa. We have no indication that Sam saw or communicated with his brother ever again. Mr. Moross adopted Samuel, whose name changed from Samuel Vondorfchik to Sam Moross, and according to a US census sheet they arrived in the US in 1890. Jerry's father would have been about four years old. We have no idea what Mr. Moross did for a living or even what his first name was, but Sonya ran a restaurant of some sort. She and her new husband subsequently had two children of their own, and it was only at the end of her life that Sonya revealed to the brood that they were not all full siblings, that

³ Sonya ("Sonny") Moross, phone conversation with the author, December 23, 2007

Mr. Moross had adopted Sam, and that she wasn't the biological mother to three of them. As a playwright and general student of drama, I wish I'd been a fly on the wall for that exchange.

Several original, photographic portraits of Mr. Vondorfchik exist to this day. My cousin Sonny—Jerry's niece—has the large version, framed like a painting, hanging in her home, and a few years ago she sent me a smaller version, an oval portrait in a small, black velvet frame. On the back of the photo itself one finds printed ornate 19th century Russian lettering with the name of the studio, the fact that this is a photograph, and the location: Minsk. It's intriguing to contemplate what the original Sonya (not to mention her new husband) must have felt when she hauled the various portraits with her to the United States.

Jerry's paternal grandfather, Levi Greenberg, came to the US in 1885, from Bialystok, which then was part of Russia. He settled in New York's Lower East Side, worked as a deliveryman, bought his own horse and wagon, and progressed to owning a successful stable on Avenue B. (A 1910 census sheet dryly lists his occupation as "Proprietor" and his place of work as "Stable.") He rented out buckboards, carriages, hearses and other horse-drawn vehicles, and eventually ran an omnibus line along Avenues A and B.

He was involved with the local Jewish community, and a plaque in the Bialystoker Synagogue on Willett Street describes him as a "founder and for many years treasurer of the Bialystoker congregation."⁴ The congregation was originally founded in 1865, several decades prior to Levi's emigrating to the US. So he was

⁴ Rabbi Zvi Romm, email to the author, January 21, 2008

probably a “founder” in the sense of his involvement with the congregation when it moved to its current location in 1905, when they purchased a Methodist Episcopal church. There are no pictures or anecdotes of him, just these dry facts.

Levi and his wife, Rachel, had four sons and three daughters; the second oldest was Jerry’s mother, Mollie, born in 1892. Two of their sons, Jerry’s uncles Jack and Isidor (“Izzy”), took over their father’s business and converted the horse-drawn omnibuses to autobuses. This became the Avenue B Bus Line. It seems they also might have started the Green Bus Line in Queens. In any case, the brothers eventually sold the bus line(s) to the city for a hefty sum, and Jerry’s mother would forever complain that her brothers cheated her, that she never got a dime from the sale of what she considered the family business.

Mollie and Sam

In 1908, at the age of 16, Mollie Greenberg married Sam Moross (formerly Vondorfchik). Mollie’s youngest sister, Ida, had advised her not to marry Sam, believing he lacked ambition. Sam was an electrician, and must have had *some* ambition when he switched professions and became the owner of several, what my cousin Sonny calls “Punch and Judy” movie houses, on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn. According to Sonny, who was very close to her grandmother Mollie, the movie houses were quite successful. Sonny says that Sam and Mollie put all their money—approximately \$100,000—in the stock market—and lost all of it in the 1929 crash. But Jerry’s younger brother Charlie told me that the impact on his parents wasn’t actually that devastating: “They had some money put away in Liberty Bonds and things like that, so they didn’t get

hurt so bad, but they got hurt.”⁵ It’s not clear how, but Sam eventually lost or sold the movie houses, and became a real estate broker specializing in theatrical properties.

Having been burned once, Sam was hence wary of purchasing anything. After the crash he forever insisted on renting their apartment, and though he was in a good position to buy theatrical properties, he wouldn’t. Indeed, an often-told story in our family is how in the 1940s Sam got involved brokering the sale of the New Beverly Theater on 53rd Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan. The Sixth Avenue elevated train had been torn down and it was obvious to Jerry and Charlie that the Third Avenue “El” would eventually come down as well, and that property values along the avenue would only go up. The two brothers encouraged their father to buy the theater. They would even chip in money, and Charlie, who had experience managing theaters, would run it. But their father waffled and only came up with reasons not to buy. And so they didn’t. The Third Avenue El came down, and eventually the theater was sold to make way for a skyscraper. Charlie later pined that the family would have been quite wealthy if they’d gone through with the deal.⁶

Jerry’s relationship with his father was difficult, as Charlie recalled in a 1998 interview: “My father was really close to Herbert [the oldest son]. Well, he was the oldest, you know. Jerry he didn’t understand at all.” I asked Charlie if Jerry and his father fought. “Yeah,” he replied, “I remember crossing the Manhattan Bridge, and they got into a battle, and my father stopped the car and said, ‘Get the hell out.’ Kicked him out of the car, on the Manhattan Bridge! I forget what the fight was... And Jerry

⁵ Charlie Moross, unpublished interview with the author, April 12, 1998. Larchmont, NY.

⁶ Ibid.

walked.” Charlie added that despite their differences, Jerry had “great respect” for his father, for where he’d gotten in life.⁷

Fighting in the car seems to have been a habit. My mother recalled: “Once when my grandfather was driving us to LaGuardia airport to catch a plane to Los Angeles, he and my father got into an argument about something. My father finally told him to stop the car, we got out on the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn and much to Grandpa’s dismay and my father’s delight, a taxi came along immediately and off we went. It was quite some time before they spoke again!”⁸

Mollie, Jerry’s mother, was strong-willed and enterprising. After World War I she went around the neighborhood and bought up incomplete collections of war saving stamps for a fraction of the original cost, steamed off the stamps, stuck them back together as complete sets, and made a nice profit.

Mollie had a bit of a gambling streak in her. I grew up with the notion that she played poker on trains, and in my imagination this would have been on classy transcontinental liners with high stake rollers. Perhaps my grandfather told me that story? In later interviews with other family members (post-1997), nobody had heard of Mollie playing poker on trains. Oh, well. But everyone agreed that she was an avid poker player. By different accounts she would *mysteriously* disappear and go off to a game (according to my aunt Lila), or, more banal, she simply had a weekly game in her building (cousin Sonny).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Susanna Tarjan, recollections in *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet (Screen Archives Entertainment, 1990)

Lila recalls that Mollie and Sam were always involved in get-rich schemes—and I now suspect it was Mollie who fomented these doings. One day in the 1960s Sonny, on a lunch break, bumped into her grandmother—who lived in Brooklyn—in the middle of Manhattan; Mollie was dashing off to visit her stockbroker, and Sonny was shocked when her grandmother barely stopped to say hello.⁹ One of Mollie’s more ill-fated investments was their purchase of Russian bonds; when the Soviets took power the paper became worthless. (Mollie would have had to wait until 1986 to see any money on those issues, when the Soviets finally settled on them.)

Sonny remembers that Sam had to bail out his wife on a few occasions with some of her poker games.¹⁰ But the sense I get is that Mollie never bet the proverbial farm in any of her gambling/investment schemes—at least not after 1929. But her pecuniary habits later in life did become a source of friction in the family, leading to what some call “the big fight.”

In 1952 Sam had a heart attack. He and Mollie had very little savings and not much Social Security, so the three sons—Jerry, Herbert and Charlie—discussed chipping in and sending their parents money every month. Jerry and Charlie were behind this idea (and Herbert may have been too), but Herbert’s wife, Helen, put her foot down. She felt that Mollie spent money “like a drunken sailor” (according to Herbert and Helen’s daughter Sonny). A gifted seamstress, Helen said she would gladly sew them clothes, bring them food, and so on—but she would not give her parents-in-law cash. A rift later ensued over another issue involving money—“the big fight,” which my mother has asked me not to talk about—and Charlie and Jerry and their wives, Lila and

⁹ Sonya Moross, phone conversation with the author, December 23, 2007

Hazel, stopped speaking with Herbert and Helen. Only after many years was the rift repaired.

I asked Lila if she at all saw Jerry or Charlie in their mother. After a sizable pause she said, “I don’t know. That’s a good question.”¹¹

By all accounts Mollie could be quite controlling, and Sonny mirthfully recounted the time she and her husband, Hal, moved into a new apartment—which Mollie had found and negotiated for the newly married couple. As Hal and Herbert (Sonny’s father) painted the place, Mollie sat and supervised.

Lila said that Mollie *thought* she controlled her sons, but that in reality she didn’t—at least not Charlie and Jerry. But she tried, and the result was that Charlie and Jerry often got very angry with their mother. But Lila makes it clear that the sons really cared about Mollie and were very respectful toward her.

Their more tractable father seems to have been a good fit for his headstrong wife. In Lila’s opinion, “Sam was along for the ride.” He was a very nice man, she said, but “he didn’t have much control over anything.”¹² If Mollie wanted an opinion, she typically consulted with her sister Ida—although Sonny insists that Sam would eventually get fed up with all the “yacking” and tell Mollie to get the hell off the phone. “Are you giving her a full report, Mollie?!” he would shout from the other room sarcastically.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lila Moross, phone interview with the author, December 18, 2007

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sonya Moross

The Brothers

Jerry's relationship with his brother Herbert was mostly a difficult one. The two seem to have been cut from completely different cloth. Herbert was extroverted, athletic and well-built, and worked as a camp counselor and lifeguard. He was not intellectually incurious; according to Sonny, over his lifetime he amassed a collection of history books and read extensively about the Civil War. He was interested exclusively in popular music—Sonny mentions Al Jolson and jazz—and he would eventually come to be an Elvis fan. Growing up Herbert thought his brother's budding compositions were, according to Sonny, "too way out."¹⁴

Early on, growing up on the Lower East Side and later in Brooklyn, the brawny Herbert looked out for his weaker, intellectual, introverted younger brother; Aunt Ida told Sonny that Herbert stuck up for Jerry in fights. Lila said that the relationship between Herbert and Jerry turned for the worse in the third grade. Being a genius, Jerry had rapidly advanced in school. Then in the third grade Herbert, three years older than Jerry, suddenly found himself in the same grade as his younger brother. Herbert was understandably humiliated.

Mollie recognized Jerry's brilliance early on, and fiercely proud of her genius son, did what she could to support his talent. Not that she wasn't proud of her other sons, but Herbert may have come to feel himself a sort of second fiddle. Sonny recounts that in the late 1920s her father was attending NYU and playing basketball for the school. He was apparently quite good, and Sonny has newspaper clippings of Herbert's prowess on the court. But when the stock market crashed Herbert was forced to drop

¹⁴ Ibid.

out and work for the family bus company. It's not clear when, but sometime within three years of the stock market crash Jerry sailed off to Europe.¹⁵ We know he was in France and Germany, although we're not quite sure what he was doing there. (A wealthy aunt had given him a 16mm camera, and we still have some of the footage he shot. (He was a better composer than filmmaker.)) Sonny insists Jerry was studying at the Sorbonne, that he was there when the market crashed, and that Mollie insisted he stay and finish his studies. (My grandfather was sixteen when the market crashed, so Sonny's version seems slightly improbable time-wise.)

In any case, Herbert, now dropped out of school, would hand over part of his paycheck to his mother, who then sent some of that money to Jerry in Europe. Sonny believes that Jerry did not then know that the money was coming thanks to his older brother. Herbert was a good sport (sport being an operative word) and we have no evidence that he was overtly jealous of his brother's gallivanting off in Europe while he, Herbert, had his nose to the grindstone and was paying for his brother's wanderlust. But it probably didn't help the relationship.

Herbert eventually quit the bus line—Uncle Jack didn't pay him enough—and started his own trucking/delivery company. Herbert's dream of becoming a professional athlete or coach never materialized, while his brother went on to become a famous composer.

But all differences, resentments, and rifts aside, Herbert was ultimately extremely proud of his brother. He loved *The Big Country* theme—it was tonal enough for his

¹⁵ My mother believes he went in 1932. And in an interview with Craig Reardon, Jerry speaks of entering Julliard in 1931 and getting "tossed out" at the end of 1932. A trip to Europe at that point, a bout of wanderlust, would seem fitting.

tastes—and when the score was nominated for an Academy Award, Herbert was thrilled.¹⁶ (Actually, he was probably *more* ecstatic about the Oscar nomination than Jerry was. Lila recounted that after the nomination, “people” told Jerry that if he wanted to win he’d need to promote himself and send out letters and records. But he really didn’t care about it, she said. “It didn’t matter to him.”¹⁷)

The rift between the brothers was eventually healed (more or less), and I remember family get-togethers at Sonny’s house in Larchmont, New York. The three brothers, their wives, and all their children and grandchildren would assemble, and everyone would at least pretend to like each other. My impression—and I was only a kid—is that Herbert really wanted to be back together with his *meshpucha* (family) and emotionally connected with his brothers. I don’t know how Charlie felt, but my sense is that my grandfather tolerated and accepted his brother Herbert, but was perhaps a little cool to him.

By contrast, Jerry was extremely close to Charlie, who was younger by eight years. Lila, Charlie’s wife, says that at the age of six or seven, Charlie was shunted off to Jerry. Mollie was busy doing we don’t know what, and Jerry became the babysitter. It was late the 1920s, Jerry had just graduated from high school, at a very young age, and he was essentially a young man about town. The up-and-coming composer took in the New York art scene with a vengeance, attending avant-garde and popular music happenings of all kinds. And Charlie went along. Speaking of this time Lila said that Charlie “had a very avant-garde education.”¹⁸ Charlie himself recounted: “He’d drag me

¹⁶ Sonya Moross

¹⁷ Lila Moross

¹⁸ Ibid.

out to some little basement theater where he was auditioning to play in a two-piano version of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. For instance one time when he must have been writing some piece and he absolutely *had* to hear a carousel— so, there we went, off to Coney Island, which wasn't far from our apartment, and found the most fabulous carousel and he sat me down and bought a couple of beers (why not!) and he listened."¹⁹

Charlie told my mother how one time Jerry took him to Esther Junger's apartment—she was a famous modern dancer-choreographer—and everyone took off their clothes and danced naked. This was “experimental dancing.” I don't know if the eight-year-old Charlie took off his clothes and participated, but I imagine my grandfather did.

Charlie and Jerry remained extremely close and devoted to one another throughout their lives. Lila recounts that after her first or second date with Charlie, in 1949, Charlie insisted on introducing her to Jerry and Hazel. (Charlie later said that he knew on his first date that he was going to marry Lila.) It wasn't that he sought his older brother's approval; Jerry and now Hazel were just such a big part of his life, that it was simply natural that Lila should meet them.

Jerry and Lila were wont to have strong disagreements, on matters of art, politics and other heady topics. Speaking of her brother-in-law Lila said, “I loved him, but when he said something, he was supposed to be the God's honest truth. And sometimes he made a statement that was so terribly wrong.”²⁰ Though Lila and Jerry had their heated

¹⁹ Charlie Moross, interview with John Caps in “The Composer,” *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet (Screen Archives Entertainment, 1990)

²⁰ Lila Moross

arguments, the two couples were very close and spent a lot of time together. Charlie eventually helped start a theatrical accounting company, which handled payroll for most Broadway shows and many road companies as well. Consequently Charlie knew every general manager of every theater in the city and could get free tickets to just about everything. The two couples went to the theater together constantly. Charlie was “the provider” in other ways as well: during World War II cigarettes were rationed and civilians couldn’t get them. “Fortunately” for Jerry and Hazel, who were inveterate smokers, Charlie was drafted into the Army. Charlie, who spent the war stationed in northern California, would buy cigarettes in the PX, and send them to his brother and sister-in-law.

Charlie was the consummate uncle. My mother gets “choked up” talking about him, and remembers mornings at her grandparents’ house after Charlie had come home from the army.²¹ He was now managing a movie house, and in the mornings she would wake him up, and they would put on records, and dance and sing along to musicals like *High Button Shoes*. She recounts: “Uncle Charlie had a different personality than my father. And in the sense that he and I had a wonderful time, he was more fun than my father. [...] My father didn’t put on songs from *High Button Shoes* and sing and dance with me in the living room. That wasn’t his style. But that was certainly Uncle Charlie’s style.”²²

Recalling my own experiences with my grandfather and Charlie (both of whom I adored), my grandfather was the type who would take my brother and me to the park

²¹ My mother was living with her grandparents because after the war it was very difficult to find housing. Jerry and Hazel found a place in Long Island, and Hazel traveled to Brooklyn every day.

²² Susanna Tarjan, unpublished interview with the author, May 31 & June 1, 2004. Astoria, NY

(say, Riverside or Central) and let us run around. Charlie was the type who would run around with us. Charlie died in 1999.

The Talent

Where did my grandfather's prodigious musical talent come from? He began playing the piano by ear at the age of 4 or 5. His mother, who apparently had some experience as a piano teacher, gave him lessons, but quickly realized the precocious boy needed a more qualified instructor. So we see that his mother had some musical ability—although apparently nothing extraordinary.

And his father? "My father was completely uninterested in music," Jerry said in an interview with the author Craig Reardon.²³ This may have been an exaggeration, for Sonny remembers her grandfather listening to the radio when she was growing up, and said that Sam enjoyed operas and operettas (e.g. Gilbert and Sullivan). Jerry was friends with Bernard Herrmann in high school, and made his remark to Reardon in the context of discussing Herrmann's father who, unusual for the time (the 1920s), had a large record collection. Herrmann's father clearly *was* interested in music, and perhaps made any interest Jerry's father had seem minor. In any case, the point is taken: Sam played no overt role in Jerry's musical life.

Yet strong musical roots—musical DNA?—may nevertheless have resided in Jerry's father's side of the family. According to Sonny, Sam's sister Lena (the biological daughter of Mr. Moross and Mrs. Vondorfchik) was an excellent pianist. Lena played organ (or piano) in Sam's Punch and Judy movie houses, and Sonny recounts a get-

²³ Interview with Craig Reardon, April 16, 1979. New York.

together at Jerry and Hazel's apartment during the 1970s.²⁴ Lena, by then in her 70s, arrived wearing a miniskirt and high boots, and with her boyfriend in tow. Jerry invited Lena to play. Sonny recalls this invitation with some awe; for Jerry to invite anyone to play would have said a lot about the talent of the invitee. Lena sat down at the keys and tossed off song after song, with all present singing along.²⁵ Sonny said she was amazing.²⁶

Much has been made of the influence that popular and traditional music had on Jerry. "I was surrounded all my life by American and American Folk music," he said, "things we sang when I was a child, at camp, you know..."²⁷ One can imagine that growing up Jerry would pop into his father's movie houses and hear Lena playing—although that's just speculation on my part.

Hazel

My grandmother's father was also named Samuel. Born in Lithuania in 1860, he emigrated to the US as a teenager, worked on the Panama Canal, and ended up in Dallas, Texas. There he met his wife, Clara, who, born in 1872, had emigrated with her parents and siblings from Memel, Lithuania in 1888. The couple married in Dallas in 1896 and moved to what was then the Oklahoma Territory, where Sam and a partner ran a general mercantile store (we have a wonderful photo of the storefront), and where

²⁴ My mother believes this occurred in 1965.

²⁵ My mother fondly remembers the songs as all being from the 1920s and 30s.

²⁶ My father also says this episode occurred some years earlier, and recounts it this way: "This was at our 'Second Wedding Reception' in January 1965, a month after the first one. Earlier that day Jerry was musing about what was coming. Lena was going to claim the piano and perform her entire repertoire from 1910 and then cousin Rollie was going to sing Schubert songs. And his predictions came true." My father, who does not recall the miniskirt, adds, "But I don't recall Lena as anything but a nice little old lady with white hair and much enthusiasm for singing and accompanying herself on the piano." Peter Tarjan, notes to author, January 15, 2013.

at least two of their four children were born. (The idea of my Ashkenazy Jewish kindred in the middle of the Wild West never ceases to amuse me. *Blazing Saddles*, anyone?) The family was itinerant; my grandmother Hazel, the youngest child, would be born in Dallas but grow up in Marin County, across the bay from San Francisco.

According to my mother, Hazel was the most adventurous of her siblings, and took off for Los Angeles—although it's not clear whether her older siblings followed her there, or she them. She met Jerry while working at the Stanley Rose bookstore. Hazel was interested in rare books, although it's not clear whether that interest developed prior to the bookstore job or as a result of. If my grandmother had come to Los Angeles in search of a bohemian life, she certainly found elements of that. Stanley Rose was a colorful character, and the back of his store had been a speakeasy during Prohibition. After 1933, when Prohibition ended, writers and other intellectuals continued to congregate there. We don't know when Hazel started to work at the store, but it's possible she had interactions with the likes of William Faulkner and other literary luminaries.

My grandfather would have naturally gravitated to such a place. He was a voracious reader and had a history of frequenting intellectual-artist hangouts. In the interview with Craig Reardon he recounted his youth in New York, how he and Bernard Herrmann as kids, after school, used to “go to all the places around town that we thought were interesting,” such as Harms publishing (later to become Chappell). “Gershwin was there, Jerry Kern was there, Vernon Duke was there,” he said, speaking of Harms. “It was the place to be.”

²⁷ Unpublished interview with John Caps, August 31, 1979

But back to Los Angeles: The abstract painter Herman Cherry had a gallery at the Stanley Rose bookstore,²⁸ and it was he who introduced Jerry to Hazel. At some point during their period of getting to know each other, Jerry became very ill and feverish, and ended up at Hazel's apartment, being nursed by Hazel and her older sister Rose.

Frankie and Johnny, which choreographer Ruth Page commissioned as a ballet for the WPA's Federal Theatre, premiered in Chicago on June 19, 1938, and it's interesting to me that Jerry met my grandmother shortly after writing it. *Frankie and Johnny* was a watershed piece for Jerry: "I would say that the moment that I personally knew that I was through with fussing around with other people's style—with Schoenberg's style or Stravinsky's style or Webern's style—and I wanted to write my own style, was *Frankie and Johnny*. [...] In the midst of writing it, this was in 1937, I suddenly realized that I was really being myself. I was being like nobody else I knew."²⁹ My grandfather found himself as a composer, and then met the woman who would be a cornerstone to him for most of the rest of his life. Act One of his life culminates with *Frankie and Johnny*, Act Two begins with an introduction in a bookstore.

My grandmother was physically short, but massive in her devotion to my grandfather—and fiercely protective of him. The two almost didn't get married; prior to their meeting she'd had an ovary removed and been told she couldn't have children. She told Jerry her situation, and though he wanted children—and was now effectively being told he wouldn't have any—they went ahead and got married, in New York on August 28, 1939.

²⁸ According to my mother, Herman Cherry *worked* at the store.

Two months later Hazel was pregnant; my mother was a surprise. After Susanna's birth in Los Angeles in 1940, Hazel would have two miscarriages, and Susanna would be their only child.

My grandparents were peripatetic in those early years, crossing back and forth between Los Angeles and New York. Jerry couldn't get work as a film composer, but got a break in 1940 when his friend Aaron Copland asked him to orchestrate *Our Town*. Jerry was pegged for the next decade as an orchestrator, a lucrative gig, but ultimately a rut. My mother recalls numerous trips between the two coasts and how she was frequently upended between schools, as they would go to Hollywood for a picture, then return to New York once it was finished.

Sometimes Jerry and Hazel went out to Los Angeles and left Susanna in New York with friends, particularly once my mother entered high school. Lila recalls that "it was odd" that Hazel didn't stay behind with Susanna, "especially those years. Most women would stay with the children." Susanna might not always be with her parents, but her parents were always together. (According to Lila, there was also a period when Jerry and Hazel were living in New York at one place, while Susanna was staying with her grandparents.)³⁰ But my mother said she never felt abandoned—and had the bonus of getting to spend lots of time with her Uncle Charlie. Lila felt that Jerry and Hazel were so close when Susanna was little that Susanna was somehow outside their relationship: "I think they were so much in love that they didn't have room for her." Of course, Lila didn't meet Charlie until 1949, when Susanna was nine years old, so Lila's

²⁹ Interview with Paul Snook (WRVR radio, New York, 1970)

³⁰ My mother says Lila here is referring to the period right after the war, when housing was scarce.

views on Susanna's early years need be taken with the proverbial grain of salt—although they may reflect Charlie's view of Jerry and Hazel's relationship back then.

In any case, what's absolutely clear is that Jerry and Hazel were absolutely devoted to one another.

Style

Sonny recalls that my grandmother smoked with an elegant cigarette holder. I remember as a child coming across these holders—perhaps in my grandparents' bedroom—although I don't remember her smoking with them. Sonny growing up thought Hazel was very chic and looked like a movie star.

In *The Big Country* boxed collector's edition, there is a photograph of my grandmother circa 1937. The image has that glossy look of old movies, the gel on the lens. There is an enigmatic quality; she's not quite smiling, but there is a warmth and intensity to her look. She does look beautiful, elegant, sophisticated—and in that photo I can see how Sonny would think my grandmother was like a movie star. I wonder if growing up Sonny knew that her Aunt Hazel had been a stand-in for film star Sylvia Sidney. (Sylvia Sidney was taller than my grandmother, though, and my grandmother told me that she used to have to stand on a box as the cinematographers and gaffers did their work.)

And yet, I always knew my grandmother as utterly unpretentious, in no way affected. I remember her as always dressed casually in comfortable slacks and a simple blouse, with her reading glasses suspended from her neck. (I'm sure she had some dresses—a photo of a family get-together shows her wearing one—but I don't

remember her ever wearing them.) Her style reminds me of Katharine Hepburn—but without any (New England) affectation.

From pictures of him in his 20s, my grandfather had, if not a clear sense of style, a definite sense of seriousness. He looks directly at the camera, daring us not to take him seriously. By the time I knew him, though, his purposeful bravado was gone; he knew who he was and what he was capable of, and he dressed for his own comfort. He hated wearing a watch on his wrist and had horizontal slats sewn onto the front waist of all his trousers; he would suspend his inexpensive Timex watch from this little strap. This way of wearing a watch was his own invention, and the detail somehow seems quintessentially my grandfather—practical, yet individualized, a customized solution.

Youth

For years my mother thought her father was born in Brooklyn. Consequently this detail was propagated in some of the literature about my grandfather. Creating some confusion, however, Jerry's younger brother, Charlie, eventually attempted to correct her, and said that Jerry was born on Manhattan's Lower East Side. However, in a copy of my grandfather's resume, which my mother found, and which Jerry presumably wrote, he listed Brooklyn as his place of birth. What's certain is that a 1920 census sheet lists the six-year old Jerome, his parents and older brother, Herbert, as residing at 200 Henry Street in Manhattan. The family moved to an art nouveau-decorated brownstone on Avenue K in Brooklyn, the heart of Flatbush, in 1927.

My grandfather, despite his brilliance—or perhaps because of it—had a difficult time in school socially. Charlie recounts that he was overweight, “kind of round.”³¹ In the process of skipping grades, Jerome found himself an outsider among the older kids. In public he was shy, and his being smarter than everybody else was probably not exactly endearing to his classmates. Our family is perhaps proud that the precocious Jerry graduated from the New York public school system at a particularly young age, but it’s easy to forget that his brilliance had its costs.³² Once he’d skipped a few grades and found himself perpetually the outsider, he probably couldn’t wait to get the hell out of the system, and probably hoped his accelerated graduation wouldn’t come soon enough.

We know that he liked to sit at the back of the class and do his own thing: In the midst of his school-borne isolation, one year shy of graduation, in what now seems to be one of the great coincidences of contemporary music, he found himself in a class seated near Bernard Herrmann, who would go on to have his own stellar film composing career. In the 1979 interview with Craig Reardon, my grandfather recounted how they met:

“We were in a German class, I was sitting in the back of the room so the teacher shouldn’t disturb me while I was composing. I looked up and I see a boy sitting across the aisle, twirling his hair, studying the Mahler Fifth Symphony in an Eulenburg Miniature Score, and so he looked at me and he said, ‘You know Mahler?’ I said ‘Mahler stinks,’ or something like that which I thought then. I’m still not a Mahler

³¹ Charlie Moross, interview with John Caps

³² For years we thought he was the youngest person at the time to graduate from the school system. But as my mother recently said about this mistaken bit of family lore, “Myths tend to grow.”

devotee. He got quite angry and grabbed what I was writing, and looked at it and tossed it back at me and said, 'Dishwater Tchaikovsky', and we started to argue because I felt he hadn't even looked at the thing. Suddenly the teacher was calling the two of us up—stand up, get out! She threw us out into the hall."

My grandfather was upset that he wouldn't get the day's homework, but Herrmann told him to forget it and suggested they go to a rehearsal of the Philharmonic. My grandfather continued: "I said, 'How can we go to a rehearsal of the Philharmonic?' He said, 'There's a broken door.' [...] So we walked over to Carnegie Hall and we went in the entrance to the studios on the side and climbed up to the dress circle level—you walked down the hall and there was the broken door. Benny knew about it. We walked in and kind of got on our hands and knees and crawled. [...] I knew that if they saw us they'd throw us out. And then we just peeked our eyes above the level of the balustrade in front of the dress circle and it was Mengelberg. We watched Mengelberg rehearse for the next hour and a half. We became friends after that."

The two remained friends for life. Jerry recounted meeting up with Benny in London after many years of not seeing each other, and said that it was as if no time had passed; they were like adolescent kids again.³³

My grandfather's only complaint about Benny was his friend's sometimes abrasive personality, which was never directed at my grandfather, but which he witnessed turned on others. My grandfather was appalled and embarrassed by these lacerations—which inadvertently could be detrimental to my grandfather. Bernard took Jerry to meet Constantine Bakalanikoff, the head of RKO, to help my grandfather get

³³ Interview with Craig Reardon

work there. But when Bernard ended up berating the man, my grandfather “suddenly knew that as long as Bakalanikoff was at RKO I would never have a job there. Benny thought he was doing me a favor.”³⁴

Personality

Against the backdrop of Bernard Herrmann, we see what my grandfather was not. Though my grandfather could have his moments of arrogance—he was after all extremely well read and not afraid to express his opinions—he was never cold or rudely condescending. He wasn’t mean. If he corrected you on a fact, it wasn’t so much to show off; he simply had a love for knowledge and truth, and believed in setting the record straight. In reading the transcripts of the various interviews he did over the years, I can so clearly hear his voice as he politely but firmly corrects the interviewer on a mistaken piece of information.

He was extremely generous, one of the last great tippers. I remember him treating my brother and me to a meal at Burger King. An employee came over and wiped down our table, and I remember that Jerry gave him a tip. My brother and I were appalled; who tips a fast food employee?! Well, my grandfather did.

He and my grandmother were loyal to their friends. Though I was 11 at the time, I remember the 40th anniversary party my mother threw for them—and all their friends who came and celebrated them, and all the warmth, respect and love that was shown them, and reciprocated.

³⁴ Ibid.

Politics

In 1935, at the age of 21, in the midst of the Depression, my grandfather composed music for *Parade*, a social revue to be produced by the Fourteenth Street Theater Union, which, according to Jerry, “had a reputation—or *wanted* a reputation—for producing socially important plays.”³⁵ (The Theater Union folded, and the Theatre Guild picked up the show.) *Parade* was a topical look at current events and had a decidedly socialist bent. “People were shocked at the subject matter,” my grandfather said. “One of the skits concerned a woman who smoked cigarettes and had to hide it from her husband.”³⁶

According to my mother, despite her father’s leftist leanings, Jerry was never a communist, and certainly never joined the Communist Party. My mother recounts that her mother, Hazel, joined an anti-fascist group at one point, but that “My father was never a joiner, of anything, in particular. It just wasn’t his style.”³⁷

By the end of the 1930s any sympathy with communism seems to have evaporated. “He had really totally given up on any positive thoughts about the Communists during the Stalinist purges,” my mother said.³⁸ “A lot of people he knew remained if not Communists, believers, but he really didn’t. And I’m very grateful for that. They had enough difficulties, and life was complicated enough trying to earn a living being a composer, and being an individualist and not writing the type of shows that were popular. He was a very individualistic type of person and did what he wanted

³⁵ Interview with John Caps, “The Composer,” *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet (Screen Archives Entertainment, 1990)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Susanna Tarjan, unpublished interview with the author, 2004

³⁸ Ibid.

to do, which made life difficult enough. If he'd been a communist on top of that it would have been impossible."³⁹

During the Red Scare of the early 1950s, Jerry and Hazel rented a TV for the McCarthy hearings, and watched as some of their friends who had been Communists were called to testify. My mother recounts: "It was a terrible, terrible time. Terrible. Actually they had one friend who did give names, and they had a very hard decision as to whether or not they were going to stay friends with this person. They did." She adds, "There was another friend that I think they felt was a stoolie, [. . .], and I think they kind of broke with him."⁴⁰

Money

For much of his career, my grandfather struggled to make ends meet. And I suspect it was partly this struggle that helped keep him humble. Of course, my grandfather was not without hubris. As a relatively unknown composer he had the *chutzpah* to go backstage after a concert and tell Sir Thomas Beecham that he had a symphony the great conductor might be interested in. Beecham asked for the score, my grandfather delivered it the next day, and three months later Jerry got a telegram from Sir Beecham out of the blue: Performing in three weeks. Where are the parts? Jerry hired copyists at the studio where he happened to be working to knock out the parts, and the piece was performed by the Seattle Symphony in 1943. But while that was a great achievement for Jerry, the coda had its downside. According to my mother, Sir Beecham was going to perform the piece again, in New York, but the war was on,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the mail was unreliable, the parts arrived too late, and this great symphony was never performed in Jerry's hometown.⁴¹

My grandfather's first show with lyricist John Latouche was *Ballet Ballads*, four individual pieces completely sung and danced, in which some characters have both singing and dancing alter-egos.⁴² *Ballet Ballads* was first produced in New York in 1948 to great acclaim but a short run. When Jerry produced it in Los Angeles with two colleagues in 1950, the show got great reviews and was slowly but surely building an audience. According to Susanna, the actors' union gave my grandfather and his co-producers a break on actor fees, allowing them more time to build audiences until the show was in the black. But finally the union pulled the plug, requiring my grandfather and the others to either pay the actors what they were due, or close the show. Alas, they had to close the show. Prior to that, however, to keep the show afloat, Jerry and the other producers had dipped into the money they'd set aside for payroll taxes.⁴³ Now, when the show closed, the tax money was of course gone. One of the producers fled the scene, and my grandfather and Richard Grayson, his close friend and fellow producer, were left with a sizable debt to the government, which my grandfather then spent several years helping to pay off. In any case, the success of his Broadway show *The Golden Apple* in 1954 altered his financial situation, and allowed him to pay off his debts.⁴⁴ But such frustrations tend to keep you humble.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Ballet Ballads* has always been performed with just three pieces as it would otherwise be too long.

⁴³ My mother wishes to emphasize that Jerry and Dick had every intention of paying the taxes. Phone interview, January 15, 2013.

⁴⁴ Susanna Tarjan, unpublished interview with the author, 2004

My mother said that while she was growing up her family's finances were never dire—the electricity was always on, for example—but money was always tight. She recounts how her mother used to take her shopping at upscale department stores—not so much because the stores were fancy, but because they had the best sales and Hazel could buy on credit.⁴⁵

Hollywood & New York

At the age of 23 my grandfather went west. “The first time I hit the west was in the late fall of 1936 when the opera season was over in Chicago,” he said in a 1970 radio interview. “I didn't want to come back to New York. There seemed nothing here so I headed out for Hollywood to see what would happen there. Being unmarried I was footloose and could go anywhere I wished. [...] And then when I hit Los Angeles and California [it] was not the way it is now, of course. It was marvelous. I just fell in love with it. I wandered all around the West. I just was ecstatic about it.”⁴⁶

Los Angeles was at that time an intellectual-artistic haven in its own right, and there was plenty there that would have interested my grandfather.⁴⁷ But regardless of whatever infatuation he might have had for that part of the country, my grandfather was fundamentally a New Yorker, and generally speaking would have happily stayed ensconced in New York writing ballets, orchestral music and pieces for the theater. His subsequent pilgrimages to Hollywood were mostly about one thing: getting the green stuff.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with Paul Snook

⁴⁷ Jerry had worked on the New York production of *Porgy and Bess*, and George Gershwin (apparently at some point after Jerry had arrived in Los Angeles) asked him to work on the West Coast

For many years he hustled as an orchestrator in Hollywood. He would have obviously preferred composing, but the field was locked down, mostly by European emigrants, and looking back my grandfather said that he “was considered too wild.”⁴⁸ Aaron Copland praised Jerry in a 1936 article as “probably the most talented” of his generation of composers⁴⁹ and four years later gave Jerry his break in Hollywood: Jerry was the uncredited orchestrator for Copland’s *Our Town*. As I mentioned earlier, fortunately (or unfortunately) my grandfather did such a good job that for the next decade all he could pretty much get was orchestration work. He scored his first film in 1948—*Close-Up*—but that was a New York production. In Hollywood he was pegged, and he wouldn’t score his first film out west for another three years—a full fifteen years after he first approached the movie business.

The experience of orchestrating in Hollywood, however, was not wasted on him. “I was a good orchestrator when I began,” he said in a 1975 interview with Noah Andre Trudeau. Prior to Hollywood he certainly knew his way around an ensemble. He’d played in pit orchestras, and even a Dixieland band, and his studies at Julliard had included conducting and orchestration. And *Frankie and Johnny* shows a mastery of the orchestra. But orchestrating in Hollywood taught him a few things.

“I didn’t feel noncreative,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I really learned the orchestra then—and I thought I was a good orchestrator when I began—but there was nothing like this business of sitting and orchestrating away at 10 or 11 in the morning,

production that was being done. “I was delighted,” Jerry said in an interview with Craig Reardon, “so I worked on that.”

⁴⁸ Unpublished interview with Noah Andre Trudeau, September 1975

⁴⁹ Aaron Copland, “1936: America’s Young Men—Ten Years Later,” reprinted in *Copland on Music* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960)

and then get on the stage in the afternoon and hear it. You really learn what goes with the orchestra and you learn not to make orchestral mistakes.”⁵⁰

But ultimately he came to feel orchestrating was “cutting into what I wanted to do.” He added: “You were always in a rush. You were always working all night long.” Trudeau asked if he would label himself “a film music composer or a composer who writes film music.” Jerry answered that he was the latter.⁵¹

Orchestral and theatrical music were his love, and New York was where he felt at home and could write such works. So he would return to New York and write what he wanted—and head back out to Hollywood when he needed the money. New York was always his artistic and personal home, and it’s telling that he never became a California resident. As he explained to Craig Reardon, “A lot of Hollywood composers used to say to me, ‘why don’t you stay here?’, not realizing that my symphony and other things would never have gotten written if I’d stayed there.”⁵²

New York was his home and in New York he *wrote* at home. In a 2007 interview devoted to my grandfather, Sam Goldwyn, Jr. observed that most film composers would write at home.⁵³ But Jerry was a migrant in Hollywood, and was always renting a house or an apartment—it was always temporary—places that didn’t necessarily have a piano. It’s a minor point, but in Hollywood he always did his composing on the campus of whatever studio he was involved with.

⁵⁰ Interview with Noah Andre Trudeau

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Interview with Craig Reardon

⁵³ Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., interview with Jon Burlingame, December 10, 2007. Los Angeles, CA.

In 1948 my grandparents moved to an apartment in Manhattan at 134 West 93rd Street, overlooking a junior high playground. They became close friends with many of the people in the building, but according to my mother the neighborhood “turned sour”—she describes “neighbors peeing out windows”—so in 1957 they and their friends all moved out at the same time, literally within days of one another. (They had to stagger their moves because the building only had one elevator.)⁵⁴

My grandparents moved to apartment 9C at 610 West End Avenue. A friend had found the place; it was fifteen dollars more than they could comfortably afford, but they took it. The entrance was on 90th Street just west of Broadway, and it was an old but grand building. The apartment was spacious, with high ceilings—my mother believes there were four feet of ceiling space between floors—and my father recalls drilling into the ceiling at one point and coming across ancient gas fixtures and coal powder insulation.

Jerry and Hazel (and my mother) moved in as renters, but in the late 1960s the co-operative movement began, and in 1968 the building was one of the first to go co-op. Now my grandparents had a choice: to buy or move out. According to my mother Jerry was “terrified” of a mortgage; his income was simply too capricious for a regular mortgage.⁵⁵ But they loved the apartment which by now felt like home. My grandfather’s solution: he called his agent in California and told him to find him composing work. This resulted in my grandfather’s three “co-op” films—*Rachel, Rachel* (1968), *The Valley of Gwangi* (1969) and *Hail Hero!* (1969), and (according to IMDB) the theme music to one TV series, *Lancer* (1968).

⁵⁴ Susanna Tarjan, unpublished interview with the author, 2004

Though his intentions with these projects were mercenary, he never cut corners. With *Rachel, Rachel* he recounted: “I remember that I was working on a flat sum with so much money allotted for music and that was all. And the production manager said to me something to the effect that if I wrote for just a few players, that I could pocket the rest of the allotment for myself. And I said absolutely not and used an orchestra of about twenty players. He looked at me as if I was mad. So I didn’t make as much money as I should but I did use the right orchestra.”⁵⁶

He never compromised his artistic integrity. That was easy with a good film like *Rachel, Rachel* (although he was originally advised not to take the project)—and perhaps more challenging with the B-movie, stop-action, dinosaur-wielding *Gwangi*, which one reviewer called “a sterling example of a truly first-rate score gracing a really rather forgettable film.”⁵⁷ *Hail Hero!* was the last film my grandfather composed, and even though he knew it was “a terrible movie” and told everybody around him so (except the producers) the score is, as Trudeau says in their interview, “lovely.”

My grandfather suggested that as a composer, if the film didn’t inspire you, you had to find inspiration in yourself. He told Trudeau: “If you do a lot of films, you do get in the habit of— I suppose I don’t know, I haven’t done that many, but I suppose you would say, ‘well this film is nothing, I’m doing it for X dollars and I’ll just toss out something.’ But I’ve never felt that way about the films. No matter what they are I always try to exert myself. Maybe it’s vanity, but it’s also the feeling that perhaps I can

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Unpublished interview with John Caps

⁵⁷ Gary Dalkin, “Editor’s Choice August 2003,” *Film Music on the Web*, http://www.musicweb-international.com/film/2003/Aug03/valley_of_gwangi.html (accessed January 24, 2008)

help this film somehow.”⁵⁸ He was the consummate professional, fundamentally dedicated if not to the movie itself, then at least to the music, which always had to serve the movie anyway.

Bernard Herrmann had previously scored several pictures for film producer Charles Schneer. Now, when Schneer hired my grandfather to score *Gwangi*—probably with Bernard’s blessing—he expected a Bernard Herrmann score. Jerry recalled: “Benny had done marvelous things for him but that’s not my style. And I just wrote my style and he was startled. And I said, ‘Well, if you wanted that other, you shouldn’t have hired me.’”⁵⁹ (Jerry believed that ultimately Schneer was happy with the music.)

It’s important to note that while Jerry did everything he could to serve the film, he was never simply an artistic lackey. He brought himself and his style to the work. “As far as musical statements go,” he said, “I never felt that I was writing any differently for a film than I would write for concert or theatre.”⁶⁰ That is to say, he approached the film as an artist. We know he could have prostituted his style; he was versatile and could compose in any number of styles. For example, when *The Cardinal* called for Dixieland music and tango music as part of the story, he provided it—even though he wasn’t *per se* a Dixieland or tango composer. But as far as the incidental music itself was concerned, when you hired Moross to score your picture, you got a Moross score.

⁵⁸ Interview with Noah Andre Trudeau

⁵⁹ Unpublished interview with John Caps

⁶⁰ Interview with Noah Andre Trudeau

Many composers never develop a distinct style, as my grandfather observed in Benny Herrmann's music. He felt that Herrmann was an excellent composer, but that you never watched a Herrmann picture and said, that's a Benny Herrmann score.⁶¹

This leads me to the question of why my grandfather developed a distinct, specific voice when so many other composers did not. And I believe the fact that he did makes him stand out as a great composer. Of course style can sometimes become a straitjacket. We hear a piece and think, "Oh, there you go again." But I don't think that was my grandfather's case. We see this in his ability to write great melodies that feel unique, and yet at a deeper level owe some allegiance to one another. I'm thinking of *The Warlord* and *The Big Country* for example. Both stand on their own and sound completely fresh and individual—and yet have elements in common. I'm not a musicologist but it's been pointed out by others that my grandfather was consciously (or not) a huge fan of the pentatonic scale (found frequently in folk music worldwide) and harmonizing in simple thirds (a mainstay of early American music).⁶² Of course, a predilection for such elements does not a style make.

Somehow he understood in his musical core something that was very American. In *Frankie and Johnny* he creates a gritty American urban landscape, dissonant, jazzy, bluesy. In *The Big Country* he evokes not only the vastness of America, but an energy of pushing through it, like the stagecoach in the opening credits, speeding through the open plains, wheels spinning in a blur. And I'm thinking of my grandfather on his many trips between Los Angeles and New York, sitting in a bus or on a train, watching the

⁶¹ Interview with Craig Reardon

⁶² John Caps, "The Music," *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet (Screen Archives Entertainment, 1990)

endless landscape fly by. “My own style is American—unconsciously American” he once said.⁶³

My grandparents bought their West End apartment right about the time I was born. Jerry would do his last film the following year, and then turn to writing music strictly for his own edification. I would say that my life happens to coincide with what I would call Act III of my grandfather’s. My younger brother, Aaron, would be born in 1971, and in this next phase, the geographic poles for my grandparents would shift from East-West (New York-Los Angeles) to North-South (New York-Miami). Every year they would visit us in the winter, usually for several weeks, and we would stay with them in New York during the summers.

Act III

Aaron recalls our visits to their West End apartment: “Whenever we arrived at 9C, I always remember him giving big sloppy kisses—they were pretty gross.”⁶⁴ As a child the apartment seemed larger to me than it probably really was; but with several bedrooms, a large dining room, an expansive living room, a good-sized kitchen, and a backroom office, there’s no argument: It was spacious, and most New Yorkers I know would kill for a place that size. It may seem excessive to go on and on about my grandparents’ apartment, but it was so much a part of who they were. It was the home of an artist couple, and the set dresser for a Woody Allen movie could have taken a page from it.

⁶³ Interview with Noah Andre Trudeau

⁶⁴ Aaron Tarjan, email to the author, December 17, 2007

My mother described the flat: “There were several thousand books, dozens of posters and lithographs, pictures by their artist friends, some modern sculptures, Mexican ceramics, Japanese and Chinese prints, printing blocks from China and India, cases and cases of musical scores, and I could go on.” She adds: “It was all an informal, wonderful mix of things that they liked and truly enjoyed living with. Things got put wherever there was space so you might find a small Mexican hibachi made out of license plates next to what my father always believed was a Tiffany lamp (it wasn’t).”⁶⁵ (I remember that license plate hibachi and always wondered what the hell it was!)

My grandfather’s record collection was surprisingly not that impressive, and I don’t remember him ever listening to recordings. However, I do know that he and my grandmother were avid concert-goers. I recently re-read some of the letters my grandfather sent to me at summer camp. The repeated references to attending Mostly Mozart concerts almost starts to seem like a running joke: “Tonight we are going to a MOSTLY MOZART concert with James Galway, the flutist, as soloist.”⁶⁶ And “It was a quiet week - we went to two ‘Mostly Mozart’ concerts and otherwise stayed home.”⁶⁷ And: “Since you left life has been rather quiet around here - there is nothing on Broadway that we haven’t seen and we have seen most of Off-Broadway; so next week we are planning on seeing some Off-Off-Broadway things. Thank heavens the Mostly Mozart concerts start in a few weeks.”⁶⁸

What my grandfather was never short on was books—all of which, he told me, he’d read. His interests were eclectic, with everything from Isaac Asimov expounding

⁶⁵ Susanna Tarjan, recollections in *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet

⁶⁶ Jerome Moross, letter to the author, July 22, 1978

⁶⁷ Jerome Moross, letter to the author, July 21, 1979

on the Bible and black holes, to Gore Vidal narrating the life of Aaron Burr. He owned numerous *Time-Life* book sets—you know the kind, the ones about, say, bugs, that people order but then never read. Well, he read them. He also had something of a wicked sense of humor, and scanning the shelves one would find the dark humor of Edward Gorey along with collections of, say, 14th-century bawdy humor. He'd apparently read most of the classics, and my mother recounts that "When I was struggling with geometry homework he gave me the unique advice to read Euclid. He always insisted he learned geometry that way and in spite of my husband's disbelief, he probably did."⁶⁹

I also recall his devotion to *The New Yorker* magazine. And he almost always started his day at the breakfast table with—along with coffee and cigarettes—his beloved *New York Times*. Incidentally, he folded the paper into small sections, as rush hour commuters on subways and buses used to do. Perhaps folding the paper so was simply convenient. But as he worked only a few rooms away, at the piano in the living room, perhaps this folded-paper-breakfast-reading also subconsciously constituted his daily commute.

It's important to mention the expansive living room, which really felt like two living rooms put together. One half contained modern couches, a ceramic-sealed fireplace, the license plate hibachi of course, and a double manual (i.e., two-tiered) harpsichord that was forever out of tune. My mother said that her father originally made a big deal of buying the harpsichord, from an instrument maker in Seattle, Washington. It was specially crafted, the best, etc. But after the harpsichord arrived, Jerry soon stopped

⁶⁸ Jerome Moross, letter to the author, June 25, 1981

playing it, and nobody could understand why he wouldn't get rid of it if he wasn't going to play it. After he passed away, however, my mother had an expert appraise the thing, and was told that it was not a very good harpsichord to begin with. My mother came to the conclusion that "he realized it wasn't a very good harpsichord after he had it for a while," but couldn't admit he made a mistake when he bought the thing—so he ignored it and just left it there.⁷⁰ Conclusion: My grandfather could be stubborn.

The other half of the room contained a wall of books but was otherwise devoted to music. One wall in this section was lined with tall, Scandinavian, teak cabinets full of pull-out trays bearing scores and sheet music. A baby grand Steinway stood in the middle of this part of the room. This was the piano Jerry composed at, and according to my mother he *hated* the thing; at some point the soundboard had cracked, and my grandfather dreamed of replacing the less-than-stellar-sounding instrument. Lack of money seems to have prevented him from making that dream come true.⁷¹

Sitting at the (despised) piano in his modernist swivel chair, my grandfather could turn to the left and look out a row of paint-chipped uptown-facing windows. (This wall of aging window sills hovered like a precipice nine stories above 90th street, and I remember endlessly studying the water towers and myriad details of the lower buildings across the street.) My mother reminds me that an ashtray always sat on the corner of the piano, replete with lit cigarette when Jerry composed.

Swiveling to his right he faced his square, linoleum-covered bridge table, which bore the tools of his trade: variously sized custom-made pads of music paper with

⁶⁹ Susanna Tarjan, recollections in *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet

⁷⁰ Susanna Tarjan, phone conversation with the author, January 24, 2008

⁷¹ Ibid.

“Jerome Moross” embossed at the bottom, mechanical pencils, enormous erasers, different-sized protractors, and other draughtsman-like accessories that were fun for a kid to play with. (“I loved his erasers,” my brother recalls. “They were bright and colorful, and bounced really well.”⁷²)

Our grandfather had perfect pitch and could read music by sight. But usually his composition style was a back-and-forth process of playing something at the keyboard, then swiveling over and jotting some notes, then swiveling back to the keys. (A really detailed point: As a photo of him in a *New York Times* article shows, he had the unusual habit of writing with the pencil clutched between his index and middle fingers.⁷³)

He composed constantly, even when he wasn’t at the piano. My mother recounts: “He read a good part of every day but usually while he read he was also composing. Mother and I knew by his facial expressions when he was composing but his absorption was such that we did not have to tiptoe around. What amazes me is that he knew what he read during those times.”⁷⁴ My brother too “was always amazed with his incredible sense of focus.”⁷⁵

My grandfather enjoyed sharing his musical gifts. My mother writes, “My father loved to share with us what he had written and would call us in regularly to listen to something.”⁷⁶ And I remember once asking my grandfather to play the Masterpiece Theater theme for me. He immediately played the piece from memory and declared that it was by Jean Mouret. I played clarinet at the time, and my brother was a budding

⁷² Aaron Tarjan, email to the author

⁷³ Photo by Sam Falk, article by Richard F. Shepard, “The Civil War with Tambo and Mr. Bones,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1963

⁷⁴ Susanna Tarjan, recollections in *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet

⁷⁵ Aaron Tarjan, email to the author

pianist. The next time “grandpa” came to Florida he brought a present for us: a simplified version of Mouret’s piece (First Suite in D, first movement), which he’d orchestrated for clarinet and piano—just for us! He had his publisher print up the parts.

Aaron writes: “He was my first piano teacher. One night, during dinner, while you were away at camp, he asked me if I wanted to learn to play. I immediately jumped up and ran as fast as I could to the piano. When he didn’t follow, I went back to the table and asked why he didn’t come. He politely proposed we start the next day. Learning scales and some simple tunes was very exciting, especially since it was on his baby grand.”⁷⁷

Jerry was a devoted grandfather, and while he (and Hazel) regularly took my brother and me to the high points of culture—concerts, musicals, plays, museums, etc.—he was also good enough to take us to *The Muppet Movie*, *Capricorn One*, and other fare that he obviously would never have attended on his own. There was a string of summers in which he endured Doug Henning’s magic show again and again and again. He was a good sport.

Speaking of sport... My grandfather (unlike his brother Herbert) had no talent for sports but was an avid Mets fan. Jerry would watch the games on a black and white TV set up in the one room of the apartment that had air-conditioning. (The AC was imperative on some of those scorching, muggy New York summer days.)

Incidentally, when Jerry, Hazel and Susanna got their first TV, in the mid 1950s, Jerry rigged possibly the first television remote control ever, a cord with an on-off switch

⁷⁶ Susanna Tarjan, recollections in *The Big Country* Screen Classics booklet

that he attached to the TV. By clicking the switch he could turn off the sound and mute commercials. My mother recounts, “He was very pleased with himself. He was the only person who had such a thing.”⁷⁸ While I don’t remember my grandfather as being particularly handy, and can’t recall him ever changing so much as a light bulb, my mother says, “He had that toolbox in the back. He liked to fancy himself as somewhat handy. He didn’t do any big jobs. But he did that one.”⁷⁹

But back to sports: I remember that he took my brother and me to a Mets game once. Someone popped a fly ball which flew over the backstop fence and headed straight for my grandfather. All Jerry had to do was reach out his hand to catch the ball. He ducked.

Card games were more my grandparents’ “athletic” speed. My brother writes: “He and grandma loved to play games. Puzzles and cards. He was ruthless with her. I think he could probably count all three decks in ‘Spite and Malice.’ They used to play a penny a card. His bowl was always overflowing with change while grandma’s was typically fairly bare.”⁸⁰

In hindsight, the second hand smoke my brother and I absorbed from my grandparents’ constant chain smoking would today be considered criminal. (I actually liked the smell of their smoke.) And the two not surprisingly developed lung problems. My grandfather wound up with a terrible case of emphysema, but after suffering a heart attack in the fall of 1981 he quit cold turkey—while defiantly declaring that he’d enjoyed every cigarette he’d ever smoked. His horrible hacking cough cleared up.

⁷⁷ Aaron Tarjan, email to the author

⁷⁸ Susanna Tarjan, phone interview with author, January 6, 2013.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Although a hacking cough did not convince my grandmother to stop smoking, she quit when her doctor told her it would kill her. Even then she snuck a cigarette every once in a while. After she was diagnosed with incurable lung cancer in 1982, my grandfather, despite his own poor health, and with help from Hazel's sister, Rose, somehow managed to take care of her. "It was a miracle that he could take care of her like that," my mother said. "He managed to keep himself well to take care of her for almost two years."⁸¹

In their last years, my grandparents purchased a condo near us in Miami (with an upright Yamaha), and Hazel died there on March 29, 1983. On the drive back from making funeral arrangements, Jerry said he planned to live another fifteen years and continue his intellectual pursuits.⁸² But in the end it seems he could not endure the loss of the wife he adored. His health, stable while taking care of her, immediately deteriorated, and the brilliant man was reduced to confusion and disorientation.⁸³ "It's my opinion that he had no idea how dependent he was on her," my mother recently said. "He didn't really comprehend that. The emotional attachment was such that he couldn't go on."⁸⁴ He passed away on July 25, 1983, within four months of his beloved Hazel.

I wonder now where my grandmother was in his music. To my knowledge he never wrote a "Piece for Hazel"—but she was so clearly a foundation for him, if not his very muse.

⁸⁰ Aaron Tarjan, email to the author

⁸¹ Susanna Tarjan, phone interview with author, January 6, 2013.

⁸² Ibid.

* * *

With my grandparents gone, my mother was left with the unenviable task of packing up the New York apartment. During a relentlessly hot summer, she and my father boxed up and sold the thousands of books. Scores and papers were cataloged. Clothes and furniture were sold or donated. Piano movers flipped the baby Steinway on its side, removed the legs, hauled the body into the hallway, and shoved the instrument into the elevator with shocking dexterity. The apartment sold quickly, and my mother said my grandfather would have been stunned at the high value it fetched. A young family with children moved in. In time my grandfather's collection of rare (and not so rare) four-hands piano music was donated to the Manhattan School of Music, and his own scores and personal papers were given to Columbia University.⁸⁵

And that was that.

Jerome Moross was not the most famous composer to ever live, nor the most prolific. But he was fervently individualistic, and the unique sound of his music reflects that unique, individualistic voice. Yet I still sometimes find it difficult to reconcile the man and his music. How is it that a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn grew up to write one of the quintessential Western scores, and pushed the envelope of Americana? How is it that the young, socially awkward Jerome, who sat in the back of the class working on his scores, came to create the sexy, gritty, salacious and utterly physical music of *Frankie and Johnny*? When I think of my grandfather, his incredible intellect, infectious

⁸³ My mother recounts an episode from the last month of his life: "One afternoon in July when we were with him in the hospital, doing a crossword puzzle, he answered 'Byron' to a question about the poet, even though he did not know what day it was."

⁸⁴ Susanna Tarjan, phone interview with author, January 6, 2013.

⁸⁵ *The Jerome Moross Collection* at Columbia University, Butler Library

laughter and keen wit spring to mind. It's almost incongruous to me that the old man with the thinning, receding hair, who sat at his old kitchen table every morning in his pajamas and bathrobe drinking coffee and reading the *Times*, that this person—my grandfather—was this amazing, passionate artist who somehow so fully heard, and *felt*, and reflected the sound of America—an America that was somewhere so deeply rooted in what can only be called his soul—so that we today listen to his music and think, Yes, that is American music.