

THE APPRENTICE YEARS OF JACOB GROSS, SUPERINTENDENT OF THE STIEFF PIANO COMPANY, AS RECORDED IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Students of history always find unpublished materials exciting, even when they illuminate only small aspects of the past. We were accordingly delighted when Mrs. George Jacob Gross agreed to share with us an unpublished autobiographical account of the apprenticeship and early journeyman experience of her late husband's grandfather, Jacob Gross, who in later years gained widespread renown as superintendent of the Charles M. Stieff Piano Company of Baltimore.

The autobiography is a touching account of young Gross's often trying and, at times, deeply disappointing experiences as an apprentice from the time he left home in 1833, as a lad of fourteen, to learn the art of piano building, to 1838, the point at which he had begun to acquire abroad the knowledge and expertise which enabled him to achieve success later in America and especially in Baltimore. While absorbing as a straightforward, at times naive account of frustrations and hardships, young Gross's reminiscences have larger significance as a historical document, for references he makes about the journeyman experiences of his co-workers indicate that the vicissitudes Gross endured were likely typical for many who received their early training in Germany and who then traveled as journeymen to complete it.

Gross recorded his recollections and impressions in a firm clear hand in a booklet measuring approximately four and one-half by seven inches. Attached to the volume are two statements. The first, written by Jacob's son, Charles Jacob, explains that the reminiscences are a partial history of his father's early life. Charles Jacob notes that his mother gave him the manuscript on April 20, 1896, and concludes with the wish that it pass to his sons after his death. As it turned out, Charles Jacob predeceased his mother, and, according to the second appended statement, written by Jacob's grandson George Jacob Gross and dated April 20, 1979, the executors of her estate decided that the

document should pass to George Jacob because he had seven grandsons to carry on the family name of Gross. George Jacob's statement also contains the information that the manuscript was translated into English by a friend of his brother Robert's wife about the year 1953, in Boston.¹

A reference to Bern late in the narrative indicates that the inspiration to record the vicissitudes of his early years came to Jacob at a time when he was already confident of realizing his ambition to become a master piano builder. At that point in his development, as he explains at the beginning of his account, he felt that it might be useful to pinpoint moments and events which in retrospect could be identified as important milestones in his progress toward mastery of his craft and in his intellectual and moral development. "Let it be a mirror," he says there of his narrative, "in which I can see the things I have done wrong and the progress I have made."

In the section following his preamble Jacob provides a brief summary of the history of Untergröningen, the town in which he was born on July 26, 1819, and a short description of the geographical features of the area of Württemberg in which it is located:

The Kocher River coming from Aalen passes a mountain slope in a very picturesque district. On the slope is the great castle of Gröningen. Partly above the castle and partly at the foot of the slope is the town of Gröningen.

Jacob's father, Johann Georg Gross, had eventually inherited the family-owned brewery and inn *Zum Adler* [At the Sign of the Eagle], which his father had built in 1800. As brewer and innkeeper, Jacob recalls, his father had to work hard, for he had also inherited debts. For years his only help came from his wife Creszenzia, née Maier, the daughter of a burgher farmer, and a few hired hands.

In his early years Jacob, youngest of twelve children, was frail, and since his only brother,

Anton, wished to study for the ministry, a vocation which his parents encouraged, Johann Georg "had little hope of leaving the inn and brewery to one of us boys," as Jacob puts it, and decided to make his daughter Marian and her husband his heirs. Having reached this decision, Johann Georg drew up an agreement with Marian and her husband providing that for the duration of his life he retain "for himself and his remaining children one room which could be heated, a chamber, and a kitchen." The agreement also assured Johann Georg a yearly allowance, which he received, Jacob recalls, "mostly in fruit, meat and eggs, and daily drink" in addition to a small cash sum.

After the wedding, Jacob reports, his father and mother stayed on in the inn and continued, moreover, "to work as hard as before for the good of the young people." Jacob also had chores, helping in the brewery and inn during the winter and taking cows to and from pasture in the summer. Concerning his school experience Jacob says rather little beyond lamenting the fact that frequently changing teachers caused lacunae in his education. He learned to read and to write, to be sure, and he also acquired some knowledge of mathematics, he says, but he **had** no chance to study a foreign language, instruction in history was erratic, and he heard next to nothing in school about art or other cultural subjects.

From early childhood on it was Jacob's wish, and later also his parents' wish, that he learn a trade. An opportunity unexpectedly presented itself early in 1833 when a distant relative, an organ builder named Wilhelm who lived in nearby Gmünd and had come to Untergröningen to repair the organ in the chapel of Untergröningen Castle, offered to accept Jacob as an apprentice, with the proviso that he first "learn a little about music." Jacob and his parents quickly seized the opportunity, and on May 1, 1833, Jacob took his first piano lesson. Five months later, having learned at least the rudiments of piano technique, he left home, at age fourteen, and traveled on foot to Gmünd to begin his apprenticeship, on October 24, 1833.

At that time young people wishing to learn a trade were apprenticed to a master craftsman,

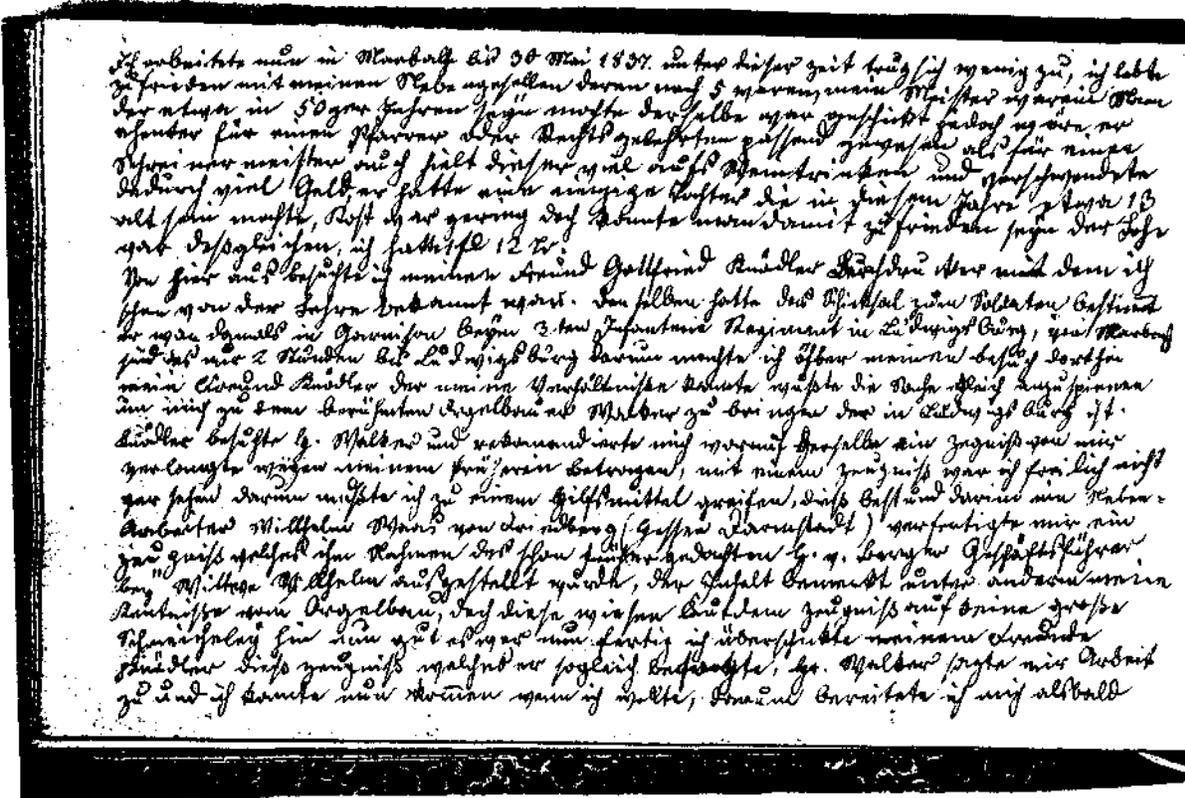
who, in exchange for a fee, offered instruction, shelter, food, sometimes also clothing, and medical care in case of illness. The apprentice was expected to bind himself to the master for a specified period of service. The terms of the agreement were set forth in written form in a contract. At the end of the specified training period the apprentice could present himself to a guild member for a practical examination, which entailed completing an assigned project. After having passed the practical examination the apprentice had to stand an oral examination. By successfully absolving these two requirements the candidate obtained a certificate authorizing him to seek further experience as a traveling journeyman and to work for wages. The additional experience acquired as traveling journeyman was considered to qualify young craftsmen to set themselves up as masters.

As will be seen from Jacob's experience over the next four years, his training was lacking in the standards considered characteristic of a German apprenticeship. His account gives revealing details of his experience with his first master:

Mr. Wilhelm, who was still a young man, was very good to me at first; the food also was good. Regular hours for meals and work helped very much to improve my health and I was always in good physical condition. I was soon used to being there and fortunately I was not homesick. Once a week I had to visit a drawing school and Sundays I went to a school for religious education and a professional school for apprentices. In accordance with an agreement my brother-in-law had made with Mr. Wilhelm I had to serve three years as an apprentice. Board and room was included. My mother did my washing and kept my clothes in order. My brother-in-law had to pay 60 guilders² for my apprenticeship fee besides 1 Thaler extra to Mrs. Wilhelm. Half of the apprenticeship fee had to be paid at the beginning and the other half at the end of the three years.

Mr. Wilhelm promised to make a good organ builder out of me; he could not keep this promise, since he had not much knowledge of organ building himself and he was only rarely busy working on organs. Once in a while he had some repair work or a refinishing or a tuning job. Thus I had to be satisfied with the things I saw and heard.

A Page from Jacob's Memoirs



I worked in Marbach until May 30, 1837. Very few important things happened here. There were five other fellows working at his place. The master was a man about fifty years old, but he would have fitted much better in a position as pastor or lawyer than a carpenter. He did like his glass of wine and spent most of his money for wine. He had an only daughter of about 13 years. The meals were meager and so was the pay. I had 1 guilder, 12 kreuzer. From here I visited my friend Gottfried Knödler, a printer. He was destined to become a soldier and he was at that time stationed with the 3rd Infantry Regiment at Ludwigsburg. It was only a distance of two hours from Marbach and I therefore visited him frequently. My friend, well acquainted with me, suggested that I see Mr. Walker, a well-known organ builder in Ludwigsburg. Knödler called on Mr. Walker and told him about me and Mr. Walker wanted to see a letter of recommendation about me regarding my experience and character, etc. Unfortunately I did not possess a single letter of recommendation, and some means of subterfuge had to be found. A co-worker Wilhelm Maas wrote one for me in the name of the earlier mentioned Mr. Berger. This mentioned my experience in organ building, in fact, it flattered me not a little. I had it delivered to my friend Knödler, who in turn brought it to Mr. Walker

Jacob could also not help noticing that the work done in the shop was poorly paid. The situation worsened when Mr. Wilhelm fell ill. From this time on he no longer "bothered too much" about his two apprentices. During this time of illness and adversity it also emerged that he was the kind of man who, as Jacob puts it, "thought that he could cure his troubles with wine, which did him more harm than good."

Since Gmünd was not far from his parents' home, Jacob could visit his family on his free days. On one of these visits, in late October, 1834, a year after he had begun his apprenticeship, he arrived at home to find his mother quite ill and was deeply saddened when the news came the following day that she had died. Shortly before Christmas that same year he also lost his paternal grandmother, the other member of the family to whom he was especially devoted.

On May 4, 1835, Mr. Wilhelm died, and, as Jacob writes, "things in the shop became critical." For some time, he explains, Wilhelm had been running his business with three helpers and two apprentices, and for quite a while Mr. Wilhelm had been "secretly living with the oldest helper." After her husband's death, Jacob continues, Mrs. Wilhelm's first plan was to manage the business herself with the help of her lover, whom Jacob describes as an able carpenter. The hitch was that the latter was also "going steady with another girl."

The changes and uncertainties resulting from Wilhelm's untimely death prompted Jacob's family at this point to discuss his future with one of his former teachers. Following his advice, the Grosses decided that Jacob should leave Mrs. Wilhelm's shop and continue his apprenticeship elsewhere. His teacher recommended a piano builder in Kirchheim named Keim, and a few days later Jacob set out on foot for Kirchheim, carrying with him a letter of introduction. Arriving in the early evening, after a seven-hour hike, he went at once to see Mr. Keim, who received him cordially but told him that he could not take him on at that time. He suggested that Jacob see an organ builder named Walker in Ludwigsburg and even offered to accompany him there. Later that

evening, however, Jacob had doubts, he says, about following Mr. Keim's advice and accordingly left Kirchheim the following day without reporting back to him as he had promised. He soon realized, he writes, that this impulsive decision had been a serious mistake which affected his entire future.

In Mrs. Wilhelm's shop conditions continued to deteriorate and for several days Jacob was uncertain what his next move should be. Again he offers rather revealing insights into practices of apprenticeship which do not conform to our perhaps idealized concept of apprenticeship:

Someone advised me to take my examination as a full-fledged carpenter and then try to obtain work somewhere else. For my examination I had to make a pine bedstead. I tried hard to do the best I could. In a week my work was finished and it was quite satisfactory. Now I had to undergo a verbal examination, to which my brother-in-law was invited. The two of us went to see the man in charge of the examination. We reached his house a little late, and he was just ready to leave for the town hall, where he had some work to do. He said, "Why didn't you come earlier? I have to leave now."

My brother-in-law was a smart man; he had a little talk with this man's wife and casually he managed to slip her some money, which worked like a charm. The man soon returned in a very pleasant mood. I did not even have to be examined any more. My apprenticeship was declared finished and a paper to that effect was made out. The fee was not so very high: for the chief master 1 guilder, also for the guildmaster and the man in charge of the examination, plus a little extra for the papers. After that the paper had to be sealed at the town hall.

The date was August 5, 1835, and Jacob had just turned sixteen. While his certificate, improperly obtained though it was, officially confirmed that he had completed his apprenticeship, technically he had not fulfilled the terms of his contract with the Wilhelms, which provided for three years of service. Once again his brother-in-law, acting on his behalf, demonstrated his shrewdness in negotiating Jacob's release with Mrs. Wilhelm.

That matter settled, Jacob and his brother-in-law returned to Untergröningen, where Jacob did some painting and carpentry work in

the *Eagle* and visited with his family until his *Wanderbuch* arrived.³

With his *Wanderbuch*, and "fully equipped with a new knapsack, clothes, and 12 guilders," Jacob set out from Untergröningen on September 7, 1835 to begin the next phase of his training, and here he depicts in rather moving words his fond relationship with his father and the caring advice he took on his way:

. . . My father accompanied me to Holzhausen, about an hour's walk from Gröningen. I did not want to have my old father walk any farther with me. He handed me my knapsack and gave me also much advice. He said, "Look here, Jacob, I cannot give you any money; you know what our conditions are at home. Believe in God, do the right things in life, always try to be ambitious to learn something. Take care that you do not spend your money foolishly and lead a decent life; try to keep good company. Do not forget to pray, and God will not leave you; think also about your mother and me, wherever you may be."

My father wept when he left and I could hardly control my emotions. I was thus left to myself. Everything I owned was in my knapsack; the wide world was in front of me.

Walking some fifteen kilometers, he reached Gmünd, where Mrs. Wilhelm tried to tempt him to return to her shop by telling him that an organ builder would soon be coming to work for her. Jacob had already decided, however, to try his luck in Ulm, where his sister Katherine lived. This required another walk, this time of about sixty kilometers. In Ulm he quickly found work, but was dismayed when after a few days his employer told him that he still lacked experience and offered to keep him on as an apprentice for a small fee.

Unwilling to accept such an offer after having successfully passed the examinations which qualified him to work for wages, Jacob returned to Gmünd, where Mrs. Wilhelm was still willing to hire him for a modest wage. But he soon found that he was working only from time to time, for business was sporadic. An additional disadvantage was that in the quarters assigned to him in her parents' home, where she was then living and to which she had relocated her shop, he had no privacy and was unable to

lock up his belongings. One day half of the money he had left in his knapsack ("about 7 guilders") disappeared. Although he strongly suspected Mrs. Wilhelm herself, for she was always in financial straits, he said nothing.

Shortly after this unhappy episode, Mrs. Wilhelm rented a house where she could carry on her business more expeditiously; soon after the move the organ builder, whose name was Carl von Berger, did indeed arrive from Bamberg. Because von Berger was still unknown in Gmünd, his arrival had no effect on the business. To make himself known he decided to demonstrate his skill by building a piano. With Mrs. Wilhelm's approval he proceeded to carry out this plan with the assistance of Jacob and Mrs. Wilhelm's other helper. Work progressed very slowly, Jacob recalls, because everything "had to be made." The piano was finally finished in March, 1836, but there was no buyer and the beautiful piano went to the pawn shop for 60 guilders, so that some of the money spent on materials could be recouped.

At this point in the shop's declining fortunes Mrs. Wilhelm laid off her third employee, and Jacob decided to leave with him. "A few things went to the pawn broker and 2 guilders were obtained in this manner. This was my total capital."

Two days later they reached Aalen, where they collected 18 kreuzer from the head master of the carpenters' guild. In Ellwangen they found work as carpenters, but the work was hard, as Jacob describes it:

My hands were often swollen My new employer liked his drink and went evenings to a local inn, and he slept mornings till 10 or 11 o'clock to get rid of his hangover. . . . Thus I returned to Gmünd. . . . I longed for an employer where I could see and learn things, but the fulfillment of this wish was a long time off yet.

Shortly after this von Berger left to report for military service. These developments made it evident to Jacob that his future in the shop was in jeopardy. The wisest course, he decided, would be to leave before being laid off, and on January 26, 1837 he and Sachsenmeier, the co-worker whom Mrs. Wilhelm had just dis-

charged, set out together for Switzerland, hoping to find work there.

The sortie into Switzerland proved to be less a work experience than a youthful adventure. Jacob had only two guilders in his pocket. He describes his financial plight:

I wish to remark here that Mr. von Berger in paying me off cheated me out of 20 kreuzer on my weekly pay. Instead of receiving 1 guilder and 20 kreuzer, I got only 1 guilder. I had nothing in writing and no witnesses. For the time I worked previous to making an arrangement for an increase in pay he wanted to pay nothing at all. I went to see the Stadtschultheiss—a man whose duty it is to settle debts. I received a few guilders for this time but I lost out on my 20 kreuzer weekly extra pay.

On February 3 they reached Friedrichshafen and were much impressed by their first sight of the Bodensee (Lake Constance). As they left the steamboat at Rorschach, they were able to show the travel money required for passport inspection only after a restaurant owner lent Jacob two thalers on his watch.

In St. Gallen they had the good fortune to be offered a three-hour ride, and then, joined by a soap maker from the Kingdom of Sardinia, continued on foot toward Wiel:

Our soap maker told us that there were two monasteries here and that they always served some food to passing journeymen. This sounded mighty good to us and soon we rang the bell at the first place. We received some soup after the soap maker told the Capucine monk a hard luck story. The soup looked rather dubious and the spoon hanging on a chain near the gate looked awful rusty. I lost all my appetite and we soon started out for the other place, a cloister for nuns. Here we each received a good piece of bread, which I preferred to the Capucine soup.

In the account which Jacob kept of his expenses during this winter trip it appears that shelter and food were much costlier in the larger towns than in the villages, a fact of life for which he may have been unprepared.

Hurrying to reach their goal, Winterthur, they found that there was little work for car-

**Expenses during my trip to Switzerland
for my travel companion and myself:**

At Donzdorf	5	kreuzer		297	kreuzer
Geiseingen	30	"	St. Gallen	10	"
Schuserhaus	5	"	Village 3 hrs.		
Ulm	39	"	from St. Gallen		
Dorf	48	"	Stayed night	45	"
Biberach	5	"	Wyl	4	"
Otterswang	25	"	Village	10	"
Aulendorf	4	"	Winterthur	16	schilling
Dorf	2	"	Zurich	10	"
Ravensburg	10	"	Village	8	"
Friedrichshafen	41	"	"	4	"
Across Lake			Eglisau	10	"
Constance	48	"	Rheinau	10	"
Roschach	34	"		<hr/>	
	297	kreuzer		410	kr
(Baden)					and 52 schilling
Elderdingen	10	kreuzer			
Engin	10	"			
Small village	6	"			
Duttlingen	42	"			
	68	"		<hr/>	
				68	kreuzer
				<hr/>	478 kreuzer
	=	total			
					7 guilders 18 kreuzer
and the schillings	=				1 guilder 48 kreuzer
	=				<hr/>
					9 guilders 6 kreuzer

penters in cold weather. Nor was Zürich more hospitable:

... We did not know what to do; our money was running low and so far we had not been able to find any work and I did not want to leave my friend, since he owed me some money. Therefore our journey turned back to Germany. It was on Feb. 5 when we left Zurich. We had two traveling companions, a carpenter and a coppersmith. One of the fellows had traveled around quite a bit and called our attention to the monastery at Rheinau near Schaffhausen. Thus we marched, four men strong, into Rheinau, where a carnival was being celebrated with music, dancing etc. We went to the monastery and each of us received a loaf of fresh white bread which we took to the inn and enjoyed later in the evening.

Their search for employment in Switzerland having proved fruitless, the two found work in Tuttlingen. Jacob would have been willing to remain there, but allowed Sachsenmeier to persuade him to move on to Tübingen where Sachsenmeier's mother was living. In Tübingen the two were arrested for soliciting work from door to door and had to spend a night in jail. Jacob was released the following morning, but Sachsenmeier was detained until noon because his *Wanderbuch* indicated that he had been previously arrested for the same offense. Sachsenmeier asked Jacob to wait for him, but after his night in jail Jacob was anxious to leave and was soon headed toward Stuttgart.

After an overnight stay in Stuttgart Jacob traveled on to Marbach, where in an inn he met a master carpenter named Malsch who examined him and offered him a job as helper. Although glad to be employed again, Jacob soon realized that his new job would be neither lucrative nor of value as a learning experience. Both the pay and the meals were meager, he notes, and Mr. Malsch, a man about fifty, would have made in Jacob's opinion "a better pastor or lawyer than a carpenter." He also "liked his wine" and "spent most of his money for it."

Since Marbach was not far from Ludwigsburg, Jacob was easily able to visit from time to time an old friend, Gottfried Knödler, who was fulfilling there his military service obligation. When Knödler heard about Jacob's frustra-

tions as an employee of Mr. Malsch, he suggested that he get in touch with Mr. Walker, the Ludwigsburg organ builder whom Mr. Keim had urged him to see during his brief interview with Jacob in Kirchheim two years earlier. Knödler even offered to serve as intermediary.

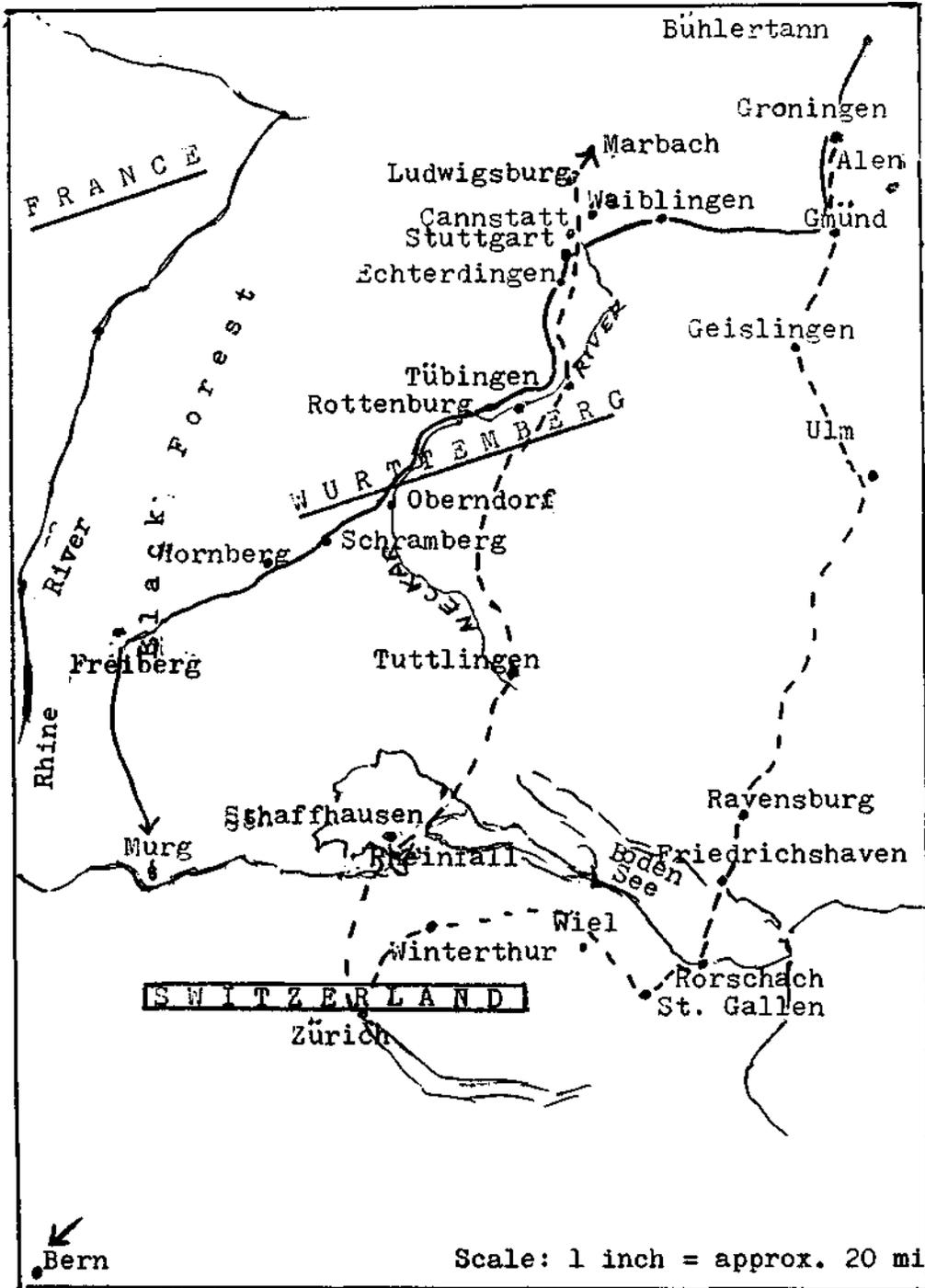
When Knödler called on Mr. Walker he found him very much inclined toward hiring Jacob but not willing to do so before having seen a letter of recommendation attesting to Jacob's character, previous training, and experience. Unfortunately Jacob had no letters of recommendation, but, eager as he was to work with Mr. Walker, resorted, as he confesses, to "subterfuge" by having a fellow worker compose a letter of recommendation and sign it with Mr. von Berger's name. The stratagem worked. Favorably impressed by the letter, which praised Jacob in glowing terms, Mr. Walker told Jacob he could start work at once. On May 30, 1837, two months before his eighteenth birthday, he took leave of Mr. Malsch and his co-workers and went to Ludwigsburg.

When he began work in Mr. Walker's shop two days later, Jacob felt uneasy, he says, because he realized that his meager experience in working with organs would doubtless be quickly detected and that he "would not last long."

...but things turned out all right. On the second day I was severely reprimanded for some work I had not done right. It was nothing out of the ordinary and I deserved it. There were 15-20 men working at this place in several rooms. In one section they manufactured pipes, in another wind chests, etc. At first I worked in a room together with an elderly married man. After awhile I worked with another man, by the name of Hofer, who made registers and wind chests. He received 3 guilders per register and 5 guilders per wind chest, including air valve installation. The helper was paid by Hofer himself, since he had his work on contract. Board and room for the helper was furnished by Mr. Walker. Thus I now made wind chests with Hofer; it was work which required a lot of strength.

During the fall there was a considerable amount of rush work; an organ with 13 registers for Offenbach had to be built and I had to assist with the manufacturing of the mechanism. At this time the son of an organ builder from Freiburg in Breisgau (Baden) started to

Jacob's Travels On Foot To Find Work:



----- Jacob's Travels to Find Work: Jan. 26-Feb. 18, 1837

_____ Jacob's Travels to Find Work: Jan. 2-10, 1838

work for Mr. Walker and we became close friends since we worked together. Mr. Walker had a large workshop where he could erect the large organs. The organs were completely finished and properly tuned, then demounted and packed and finally shipped.

Jacob admits that his attitudes toward his fellow-workers were not always pleasant and that he made enemies. "Mr. Walker always liked me," he writes, "but my enemies soon brought about my downfall." The situation which resulted in his "downfall" arose when a senior employee named Binder reported Jacob and an apprentice named Carl Pfeiffelmann for having entered a workshop after hours, which was forbidden, and for having taken there a board on which Pfeiffelmann had made sketches for a harmonica which he wished to make. For this infraction, which Binder had reported simply as "tomfoolery," Pfeiffelmann and Jacob were both reprimanded. Resenting this, Jacob overreacted by sending the errand-boy to Mr. Binder to thank him ironically in the presence of other workers for having reported his and Pfeiffelmann's misconduct. From his later more mature perspective as a craftsman who was beginning to gain recognition for his work in Bern he realized that it would have been better to remain silent, for "the other fellows kept teasing Binder until he went once again to Mr. Walker to report what had happened," with the result that Jacob was laid off.

The day after Mr. Walker had fired him, on December 5, 1837, Jacob walked from Ludwigsburg to Cannstadt, where two of his friends were working for an organ builder. The older of the two advised him to apply for a job at the shop of an instrument maker named Fetzer in Waiblingen, which Jacob did and was promptly hired. Like some of his earlier employers, however, Fetzer "had hardly any orders and no money," and he proved also to be "a real bum, spending most of his time drinking." Three weeks in Fetzer's shop were all Jacob could endure.

From Waiblingen Jacob returned home to apply for a "passbook" which would authorize him to apply for work in Bavaria and Prussia.⁴

While assembling in Untergröningen the data required for obtaining his passbook, Jacob stayed with his sister and brother-in-law, who had meanwhile relocated their business to Bühlertann. He also visited his father, who had moved to Bühlertann with them, regretfully, the *Eagle* having been sold.

With his passbook in hand Jacob returned to Waiblingen on January 2, 1838. Two days later, with another of Mr. Fetzer's helpers who had just left his shop, he set out for Stuttgart, which the two reached that same day. After a night in Stuttgart they walked to Tübingen, a distance of more than 50 kilometers, where Jacob looked up Knödler, who owed him money. Knödler put him up for the night, Jacob writes, and also bought him a meal the following day, but made no move to repay the money he owed.

In nearby Rottenburg Jacob stopped long enough to visit briefly with his brother Anton, who was just completing his theological studies. Although Anton, the only brother, Jacob had ever known, had disgraced his family repeatedly with his sloth, drunkenness and irresponsible conduct, they had continued to pay his debts and to support the prodigal in his efforts at reinstatement in the seminary, and Jacob visited him whenever he could:

I often recall the day I visited Anton. There I saw him at the end of his long years of study. He had been the hope of my dear parents, but how many tears and sorrows he had caused! The black cassock looked good on him, but he was not to wear it long.

On January 8, Jacob and his traveling companion reached Obendorf, where the latter found work. The following day, in bitter cold, Jacob started out for Freiburg. He describes in detail his lonely, arduous journey over the Black Forest Mountains, through the difficult terrain with which journeymen so often had to contend in mountainous southern Germany:

The villages were rather far apart here and soon I had to travel a road branching off from the main road. This road was entirely snowed in and sometimes hard to see. Occasionally I was afraid I would lose my direction or meet a wolf. Finally I crossed the top ridge of the

Black Forest Mountains. It was possible to recognize the road now and then again, but just the same it was still very tiresome hiking in the high snow. Soon I left the surrounding forest behind me and crossed a plateau where the road led along a mountain ridge. On the other side was a deep valley; a farm house showed here and there through the snow.

It was around noontime when I arrived in the valley, and I felt full of joy in spite of a bitter cold wind which chilled to the bone. I was proud of my accomplishment, and no matter how poor I was I felt happier than I do now here in Bern where I am writing these lines and where I have all comforts life can afford. How often have I thought in later years of the time when I stood with my possessions in my knapsack in the Black Forest Mountains.

Continuing my march into the Brecht Valley I soon met a man carrying a load, and the sight of a human being was something joyful to behold. Soon I reached a pretty village; it was almost in the evening, but I could not afford to stay overnight here and kept on till late in the evening. When I came to a small village I asked at a farm if they could let me stay overnight. They were very nice people and gave me a good meal. Later the mother and the daughters sat down and spun yarns.

In Freiburg Jacob applied for work in the shop of an organ builder named Merklin whose son he had come to know in Ludwigsburg. At first, he writes, Mr. Merklin seemed rather distant and not inclined to hire him, but as soon as he spoke to the master of his son, "things changed like magic. Everyone was happy, wine and bread were placed before me, and I was hired." The date, he recalls, was January 10, 1838. As required, he reported at once to the police and deposited his passbook in exchange for a work permit. In order to pay the fee for the permit he had to pawn his watch [once again].

Although he was pleased to be working in the shop of a well-known organ builder, his salary was low, and working conditions seem to have been almost austere. In the underheated room in which he first worked, for example, he soon developed frostbitten feet and hands as well as rheumatic pains in his arms that kept him awake nights. After he had seen a physician, he writes, he was assigned to a

warmer room, where he worked on organ parts. He also lacked friends, because his co-workers were all older and they kept largely to themselves.

In the spring of 1838, Merklin asked his son to come home and also hired two additional skilled workers to assist in building an organ for the Protestant church of Freiburg. With the arrival of these new co-workers, all of whom were younger men, Jacob had "plenty of friends," but soon noticed, to his growing annoyance, that Mr. Merklin was giving them all of the important work. When at this juncture an offer arrived from an organ builder named Haas in Murg, he accordingly decided to move on.

At this point Jacob's narrative suddenly breaks off. From later newspaper articles and family accounts, however, we know that after having left Mr. Merklin's shop he eventually traveled abroad and worked under several master piano builders in Switzerland, Spain and France and acquired in their shops the technical knowledge and construction skills which he brought with him to America.

Accounts differ as to whether Jacob emigrated to the United States in 1848 or 1850, and they also do not tell us where he first settled. In the early 1850's he was living in Troy, New York and building pianos there with an associate named Hulskamp. By 1857 he had moved to Baltimore at the invitation of Charles M. Stieff to supervise piano construction in Stieff's newly established piano factory. He brought with him to Baltimore one of the pianos he had built with Hulskamp. For years the instrument was on display in the Stieff factory, but was eventually moved to the home of Jacob's son Charles Jacob. Many years later, when the piano had outlived its usefulness as a musical instrument, some of the mahogany panels were incorporated into various pieces of furniture. Thus it happened that the piano's fallboard, embellished with the names of Gross and Hulskamp, became a backboard for an attractive marble-topped washstand, in the home of his grandson, George Jacob.

Like Jacob Gross, the founder of the Charles M. Stieff Piano Company was also a native of Württemberg, where he was born on July 19,

1805, and christened Karl Maximilian. A memorial speech delivered by his son Frederick Paul in July, 1892, mentions that he received "a formal classical education" in Stuttgart, taught music there for a time in the Württemberg School of Music, and married Katherine Regina Rosch in 1830. The following year the young couple emigrated to the United States, arriving in the spring of 1831 after a long and arduous crossing by sailing ship. They first took up residence in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, but soon moved to Wrightsville in York County, where Stieff taught music and science in a local school.

In 1837 he received an offer to direct the choir and teach music and languages at the Haspert School in Baltimore. After school and on weekends he also gave private music lessons and in 1842 began to import pianos for his students and other interested clients. To house these instruments he rented a storage facility at 7 Eutaw Street in 1843. The demand for pianos proved to be lively, and Stieff's business grew apace. Soon he had to relocate to larger quarters at 7 Liberty Street. Until 1855 he continued to import pianos, and by studying the features that made some superior to others he gradually became very knowledgeable about piano building. By 1852 he had already conceived the idea of building his own pianos and traveled to Europe that year to visit leading piano factories. In 1856 he opened a factory on Sharp Street and invited Jacob Gross to join him in his new enterprise as factory superintendent.⁵ On December 19, 1857 fire destroyed the Sharp Street factory, and production was resumed at a new location on Baltimore Street near Greene Street. These quarters became cramped as sales increased, and Stieff moved his factory to Nos. 84 and 86 on Camden Street near Howard Street.

Not long after the move to Camden Street Charles M. Stieff died, on January 1, 1862, and his widow and three of their sons, John Louis, Charles, and Frederick Paul, took over the management of the company. When Katherine Stieff retired in December, 1867, her three sons became co-owners. John Louis left the company in December 1876,⁶ but two years

later the Stieffs' youngest son, George, joined the firm. During all of these changes and restructurings the company name remained unchanged; and under the sons' able management the business continued to flourish.⁷

During the years before and after World War I, its period of greatest prosperity, the Stieff Piano Company made grand pianos, square grands, smaller square pianos, and uprights, and, from the 1870's on, the "baby" grand introduced by Charles and Frederick Paul. The latter instrument, though smaller than the standard grand, had a rich tone, and was much less expensive. The popularity of the upright and the baby grand led the Stieff brothers to predict as early as the 1880's that those two instruments would be the pianos of the future and would entirely supersede the square piano, the former because it required less space and the latter because its three strings to each note and its longer bass strings gave it a more powerful and resonant sound than the square piano was able to produce.

In the circulars describing their pianos the Stieffs emphasized that in building all of their pianos they employed only the finest, thoroughly seasoned grain woods and also noted that every instrument was strung with the best "Pohlmann German steel wires on iron frames." They also pointed out the special attention devoted to balance of tone so that the upper and lower registers were as sweet and as powerful as the middle register and also had the same "bell-like clarity."

At the Paris Exposition of 1878 the Stieff Piano Company won international recognition when the jury of awards selected Stieff pianos for the coveted *Médaille d'Argent* and the *Diplôme d'Honneur*. The jury of awards also accorded to Jacob Gross an honorable mention for his role in supervising the construction of the prize-winning instruments.

In 1880 a Stieff piano won first premium at the California state fair at Sacramento and at the national fair in Washington, D. C. The following year the company's entries were also awarded first prizes in Boston; at the state fair in Worcester, Massachusetts; at the North Carolina state fair in Raleigh; and at state fairs in



Jacob Gross

Richmond, Virginia and in Martinsburg, West Virginia.

Two years later, on July 26, 1883, Jacob Gross's sixty-fourth birthday and the twenty-fifth anniversary of his superintendency, his co-workers expressed their esteem and affection by presenting to him a beautiful armchair. Deeply touched, he invited all of them to be his guests for what *Der Deutsche Correspondent* described as "a few hours of happy sociability," in the course of which "many glasses were emptied to his continuing good health" and the "wish was expressed that he might enjoy many more years as superintendent."

In 1860 Jacob had married Katherine ("Katie") Stieff, daughter of Charles M. and Katherine (Rosch) Stieff. Baltimore newspapers frequently reported happenings involving members of their family. These clearly indicate the family's social position and also reflect a level of affluence and a style of living that contrast markedly with those of Jacob's parents and brother and sisters as he describes them in his reminiscences. One article announces, for example, that Jacob's son, Charles Jacob, then a recent graduate of Baltimore City College, had ranked ninth among two hundred and forty applicants and had been admitted to the United States Naval Academy. Another reports that Charles Jacob's sisters, the Misses Nellie and Clara Gross, had been traveling in Europe for three months, and had visited the principal

cities and the Paris Exposition, and had also spent time with relatives in Bremen. A personal notice imparts the information that a Mr. D. G. Pfeiffer had dedicated to Miss Nellie Gross his recently published composition entitled "Cradle Song." From the later announcement of her marriage we learn that she eventually married the gentleman who had dedicated his song to her. The marriage of Carrie Gross to Charles C. Boyd, a prominent tobacco merchant, also had extensive coverage, including a description of the bridal gown, the wedding gifts, and a list of the invited guests. The author of the article also notes that at the close of the ceremony, which was held in the Gross residence at 143 Camden Street, an uncle of the bride, Professor Michael Stieff, played Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* on "one of Stieff's instruments."

The high regard in which Jacob Gross was held by his fellow citizens is evident in the obituary notices in *The Sun*, *The Baltimore American*, *The Morning Herald*, and *Der Deutsche Correspondent* announcing his death on October 16, 1887 in the sixty-ninth year of his age. A later article in *Der Deutsche Correspondent* reports that on October 19, the day of the funeral, both Pastor Burkhardt of St. John's Church on Biddle Street and Pastor Studebaker of First English Lutheran Church on Lanvale and Fremont Streets had "come to the house of mourning to bring words of comfort to the stricken family" and also notes that "a great number of mourners" had come to "accompany the deceased to his place of final rest and to pay him their loving respect." Among the mourners were all the employees of the Stieff Piano Company. The family had requested no flowers, but so many were sent, the article continues, "that two wagons completely covered with flowers followed the coffin." Among the outstanding floral arrangements mentioned in the article were "a piano made entirely of flowers" from Jacob's co-workers, a "pillow of flowers" from Mrs. Charles M. Stieff, and "a magnificent flower harp" which Charles Jacob and his two sisters laid on their father's coffin.

The spontaneous outpouring of affection at Jacob Gross's funeral and the words spoken by

friends and colleagues in praise of his accomplishments demonstrate beyond all doubt that in the eyes of those who had worked with him he had in the fullest sense realized the ambition that had started him on his quest for excellence. Although modest and never prone to boast of his accomplishments, he must have felt at the close of his life some measure of the special satisfaction that comes from knowing one has done one's best. It must also have been comforting during the last days of his illness to know that his son would succeed him as superintendent and carry on his fine work.⁸

— William H. McClain and Helen Perry Smith

NOTES

¹The English translation is written on the blank pages of the notebook in which Jacob recorded his reminiscences. Members of the George J. Gross family, Jean Rathbone, and Helen Perry Smith have typewritten copies of this translation.

²The guilder in circulation in 1850 contained 9.55 grams of gold and would have approximated the buying power of 40 cents of the American gold dollar. It was worth 65 kreuzer, the other coins most often mentioned by Jacob.

³*Wanderbuch*: a document by which traveling journeymen could prove their identity and work experience. The *Wanderbuch* was also required for admission to craftsmen's guilds, and in it were recorded all infractions.

⁴During Jacob's early years what historians call "The German Confederation" was a loose union of several sovereign states and free cities governed by a central diet or assembly in Frankfurt am Main which had little authority over the individual member states. Each state, for example, could send its own representatives abroad and conduct foreign relations more or less as it pleased. If one wished to work in a state other than the one in which one legally resided, it was necessary to apply, as Jacob did, for a passport authorizing one to take up temporary residence and to seek work in the state.

⁵Three years earlier the piano builder who was to become his most important competitor, Henry Engelhard Steinway, had opened his factory in New York City, four years after his arrival in the United States.

⁶John Louis Stieff's son Charles Clinton became the founder of the Baltimore Silver Company, which was later incorporated as the Stieff Silver Company. The firm was known by this name until it merged with the Kirk Silver Company to form the corporation known as the Kirk Stieff Company. Among the holdings of the library of the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University is a brief history of the early years of the company: *The Stieff Company: Planned and Produced by the Barton-Gillet Company* (Baltimore, 1930).

⁷See: Alfred Dolge, *Pianos and their Makers: A Comprehensive History of the Development of the Piano* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), pp. 291-292. A fine example of the workmanship for which the Stieff Piano Company was noted is a magnificent nine-foot concert grand originally donated to the General German Aged Peoples' Home of Baltimore in memory of Corella Lynn Seeger; it is now at Edenwald in Towson. Its special significance is that it is one of the few Stieff concert grands that can also be played automatically by means of perforated paper rolls. "We were delighted to discover, while writing our account of Jacob Gross, that some of his descendants live in Baltimore. One of them, Mrs. Jean Pontius Rathbone, is a granddaughter of Charles Jacob Gross, and hence a great-granddaughter of Jacob Gross. Her mother, Ellen Gross, married Paul Pontius. In September, 1993, during a reunion of the Pontius family, Mrs. Rathbone visited Untergröningen and several other locales mentioned by her great-grandfather in his reminiscences.