

FRANK PREUSS

Art, Life and Love

By William Schutmaat Loew

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I dedicate this book to my wife Ruth whose careful revision of the text and permanent support were of invaluable help.

Barranquilla
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William E. Schutmaat

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PROLOGUE

One of the most daunting tasks a writer faces when attempting to write a biography is to put down on cold paper the warmth of the life one intends to describe. Luckily, the burden in this case was considerably lightened by the fact that Frank Preuss is not only my distinguished colleague and mentor, but my father in law as well. He is a person with whom I have had the opportunity to study life, art and love from very different perspectives, widening my understanding and appreciation of the world. The family ties that unite the Schutmaat and Preuss families go back to the final throes of World War II, when my father, Dr. Alvin Schutmaat, was named Director of the Colegio Americano in Bogotá, a school Frank later attended. An accomplished pianist, Dr. Schutmaat and Frank played together on many occasions. Ever since that time, both families have shared their lives, art and love in countless ways.

CHAPTER 1

Danzig, December 14, 1930

It was a freezing morning in the Free City of Danzig and Frau Emma Czerninsky's first child seemed anxious to abandon the snug comfort of his mother's womb. No longer content to be waiting patiently for the darkness which had embraced him for six months to recede, Frank Preuss fell into the loving arms of his parentes three months earlier than expected. It was the first sign of impatience shown by their precocious son, a trait that would characterize him for the rest of his life. As soon as they could, Joachim Preuss and Emma Czerninsky placed him in a padded breadbox above the heater in their apartment; this would be his home for several weeks to come. Curled up there, and surrounded by the loving voices of his close-knit Jewish-German family, the baby grew strong, showing a precocious intelligence from the very

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beginning. The Czerninsky and Preuss families had prospered in Danzig, one of Europe's oldest and loveliest cities, and the arrival of a young boy into the family was a true God send. His parents were thankful that Frank would be brought up in a cosmopolitan city, an important port that attracted the best in terms of commerce, culture and education in a climate of freedom and tolerance. But Danzig (or Gdansk in Polish) was now a city-state whose days as a free haven were counted; in less than three years it would soon be caught up in the birth pangs of Nazism; less than a decade later, Hitler's tanks would storm across its borders trampling everything and everyone in their path, and the horrors of World War II would begin.

For the moment, however, things were just fine. During the first years of his life Frank enjoyed his status as an only child and reveled in the love and approval of his parents and extended family. Why not? Brought up in a sheltered environment, surrounded by cultured and educated friends and relatives, the years

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passed without his being aware of the storm brewing to the west of Poland. One day, his uncle paid the family a visit. He brought along with him a small instrument case which immediately caught young Frank's attention. At the family's insistence, he withdrew from it a violin and bow. From the first moment he placed the horse hair on the violin's strings and began producing a sweet, melodious sound, Frank was captivated! The only other musician he had heard in his apartment had been his own father Joachim, who was the community Hassan; he possessed a clear, rich resonant voice with which he led the liturgy at the synagogue. But this was different! The heavenly sounds sent shivers up his spine. "Let me play, please," insisted young Frank. He sat down and placed the violin between his legs like a cello. As he drew the bow across the strings he was gripped by a powerful, wonderful feeling. He couldn't sleep that night. The melodies circled in his head, and around them he heard exquisite harmonies that wove myriads of harmonies in his mind. Soon he was fast asleep. But not before he had

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made up his mind; one day he would also play the violin, perhaps not as well as his amateur uncle did, but he could not resist the urge to try!

The next morning Frank was more quiet than usual. "Are you feeling well, son?" his mother asked, placing extra portions of scrambled eggs on his plate. "Eat up son, this will make you feel better!" To mother Emma, food was the cure to all problems, especially physical illnesses.

"I won't ask uncle to play his violin anymore," Joachim joked, "if it affects you like that! It wasn't that bad, was it?"

"It was beautiful," Frank responded. "Nothing in the world is more beautiful. I want to play the violin!" he blurted out. Joachim glanced at his wife. Their son was soon to turn four and things were hardly the same in Danzig. Although the Free City of Danzig, sandwiched between post-World War I Germany (the Weimar Republic) and the newly independent nation of the Second Polish Republic, was still under the

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protection of the League of Nations, an increasing number of Germans had assumed positions of authority in the city, and most of them were brazenly antisemitic. Several Jewish families had opted for fleeing to less hostile cities.

Their son's sudden desire to study the violin at a time such as this was not expected and posed some problems; many artists and intellectuals were being singled out by the emerging social order as "enemies of the Reich and weaklings dangerous to the German people." But young Frank's insistence won out in the end.

Soon, Frank played the first musical notes performed by a violinist whose career has lasted nine decades; the sounds rose and filled the Preuss residence in Danzig while his fingers searched for musical patterns. There, under the eyes of his parents, Frank was playing a scale that would lead him to the top of his art. A prodigy was born!