

Samantha Maldonado  
Creative Criticism & Inquiry

*Bertha V. Drew Hartzell: Her Young Years*

Lines of red pencil fall down the sides of the pages inside Bertha Drew Hartzell's diary. She wrote in the diary in 1900, but those marks were made after her death in 1950 by the famous pianist Arthur Rubinstein. Bertha was Arthur's friend from his childhood into his adulthood. She took a photograph of him in a sailor suit as a child, baby-faced and gleaming as he puffed out his chest, long before he was heralded as the greatest living pianist. Bertha's son Karl lent Arthur her diaries so he could augment his memory in order to write his autobiography, *My Young Years*. Keeping a diary requires a "conviction that one's individual experience is always remarkable" (Culley). Bertha's collection has 20 diaries as proof of her conviction, as testament of her self-worth, and fodder for Arthur's story, but never her own.

\*

September 26, 1899: Bertha Drew was 22 years old when she arrived in Berlin, Germany, from her hometown of Newton, Massachusetts. Postgraduate trips to Europe were customary for upper class college graduates at the time, and Bertha had completed her degree at Radcliffe College the previous year. Bertha and a Radcliffe friend, Emily Cottrell, stayed with Frau Johanna Rosentower and her three daughters, Marie, Elsa, and Alice. Another houseguest also stayed with them: a 13-year-old Polish boy named Arthur.

Bertha came to Berlin to explore and learn German, whereas Arthur was to receive piano training under esteemed Professor Herr Barth. Arthur was a prodigious pianist: he first performed at age 4 and made his formal debut in Berlin under Hungarian violinist Joseph

Joachim at age 11 (by age 17 he would embark on his first American tour). His mother wanted him to find his musical footing away from his home of Lodz. The duty of motherhood prevented her from following him, so she stayed in Poland to take care of her other children. In Berlin, Arthur found himself alone and being treated as a young professional more than a son, but through playing piano for Bertha, who was also a pianist and highly knowledgeable about the musical landscape of the time. Quickly, they became close friends.

The piano was the means by which Bertha and Arthur first connected. Arthur and Bertha would play piano together, often after dinner or before bedtime. Arthur hated practicing, but Bertha's presence compelled him to play. *My chief delight*, Bertha wrote, *is when Arthur plays on the piano in the parlor.* Before his show at the *Wohltätigkeitsfest*, Arthur played his entire program to Bertha and Emily in his room. *Played magnificently*, Bertha assessed. Bertha took note that when Arthur practiced, he would often *look up to Chopin's picture on the wall to see if he was displeased at the rendering.* Bertha offered him constant encouragement and kept him on task.

With Bertha's support, Arthur wrote his first musical composition, which Professor Barth received with enthusiasm, hardly believing that Arthur wrote it himself. A week later, Arthur dedicated the next piece he composed, called *Barcarole*, to Bertha. *Was very anxious as to whether I liked it*, Bertha wrote. Of course, she was pleased. To her, Arthur was a source of endless delight. When Bertha fell ill, she appraised that she *couldn't have had better medicine* than a visit with Arthur. She treasured their time together, and Arthur admired her equally. Arthur described Bertha as his "daily audience and companion." *Arthur showed evident fondness for me*, Bertha wrote in her diary less than two months into living with the Rosentowers. The pair would take walks together in the Tiergarten, share tea in Bertha's room, and play games.

When Arthur received a new printing press as a gift, he printed Bertha's name on a card before anything else. Biographer Harvey Sachs wrote that Arthur "seem[ed] to have known by instinct that only through the piano did he stand a chance of attracting a woman in her early twenties."

Bertha and Arthur's relationship deepened. Bertha wrote that one night Arthur confessed to her in German, "*Ich habe sie sehr lieb.*" He said, "I love her very much." Later, she asked him, *What is it about me that makes you love me so?* He answered, *I love you because you are so good to me and always do things for me.*

Bertha directly provided Arthur with the maternal love and care he lacked. Even without parents, and in spite of his prodigious skills and ability to rise to expectations, he was just a child, half her age. Bertha referred to him as *my child, my bright-faced child, and dear child* countless times in her diaries. He respected her like a mother by heeding her advice of writing to his parents, going to bed on time, and completing his homework. She made sure to aid him in any way she could, helping him to translate Latin into German and attempting to cheer up *the poor little fellow* when he felt disappointed in himself.

Arthur returned home one rainy afternoon with wet feet. Bertha probably shook her head as she wrote: *Naughty boy! He will not wear rubbers.* In the same entry, Arthur's character seems to slide from that of a disobedient child to an astute teacher as he made her play piano to him and then gave her suggestions. This was not the first time Arthur had taken over the piano when Bertha was playing and proceeded to teach her how to improve. Here, the shift in how Bertha perceived Arthur's maturity to change based on the context is indicative of how his talent and wit often overtook his childishness. When this happened, the difference between Bertha and Arthur's ages muddled so that they seemed to be equals.

*We do understand each other*, Bertha wrote after reflecting on how her long talks with Arthur profoundly affected them both. Their serious conversations spanned such topics as *musicians getting jealous, etc, being broad minded, accomplished, etc*. Of one such intense exchange, Bertha wrote, *Strange! That I felt I could tell him all, and that he would understand. It bound us more together than ever*. Bertha did tell Arthur what she probably kept from others, including, in her words, *the story of my life, and my greatest trouble*. That night, Arthur was visibly distressed and concerned for Bertha. He hardly slept because he had been preoccupied with thoughts of Bertha. *How he looked at me the whole day!* Bertha recounted. *Said he loved me ten times more!*

Perhaps the nature of the conversation moved Arthur to feel as though he was partially responsible for Bertha's well-being. At least, he felt protective over her, in nearly the reciprocal fashion to Bertha's motherly worry about him. When Arthur returned home from a party to find Bertha awake and writing, he told her that she *ought to go to bed, that I looked badly under the eyes—that I ought not to be up so late—he wouldn't allow it*.

Bertha expressed to Arthur her feelings of loneliness when Emily eventually left. Arthur spoke out of frustration: *"You have me to talk to!"* Similarly, Arthur was *full of rage that anyone should dare be so rude* to Bertha after a child of a Rosentower family friend was fresh to her. *Arthur couldn't stand it!* Bertha wrote.

Another subject of discussion was *America's "Indian problem,"* as Bertha described. Arthur proved that he had a considerable power over Bertha's emotions when he *denounced Americans in a way that went through me like a knife*. Despite his age, Arthur's opinion mattered to her. Afterwards, he was *most repentant.... and terribly frightened because my face was so hot. Called himself all bad names as I bade him good-night*. Arthur's maturity shined

through in this moment as he perceived how his comments hurt Bertha and subsequently felt guilty about his words. Bertha, being the elder, felt compelled to soothe his spirits and reassure him that their relationship was not in jeopardy: *told him he had no idea how much I loved him, and heard the same words from him with a MORE than you do me! From the very first night when you came!*

The pair's exchange illuminates merely the surface of how they became fiercely attached to one another. Here were two young people, each from countries on separate continents, with different native languages, finding themselves in the same space and relying on one another for company and reassurance. The circumstance seemed automatic, but the process was organic. Bertha returned from a two week long trip to Dresden and reunited with Arthur, right away holding him in her arms. *How glad he was to see me*, she wrote, *and how he turned me to the light to see whether I looked the same!*

Arthur was indeed elated to see Bertha, but when she didn't grant him attention, he would grow cross. He tried to ignore how Bertha had come to Berlin for a reason: "to improve her German, to visit museums, to go to parties, to the theater, and also, to meet people." Bertha spent her days largely outside the Rosentower home visiting people, shopping, practicing photography, attending her German and piano lessons, and spending time with Mr. Morton Hartzell, the man who'd been courting her since her arrival. Mr. Hartzell was a young ordained minister of the American Church in Berlin, whom Bertha had met two months after arriving in Berlin. His name first appears in her diary encased in brackets and punctuated with an exclamation point: *[Morton Hartzell!]* She wrote no explanation of how they met at all, but she attended church with him once and he made calls to her regularly. Eventually he asked if she *had any one particular gentleman friend here and implied he would like to be the one.*

Meanwhile, Arthur knew about Mr. Hartzell's place in Bertha's life and claimed he was not jealous; in fact, he was glad that she was safe and in good hands. However, not having the time to see Bertha—between his practicing and her busy schedule—“proved to be a major problem.” Once, Bertha came home to discover Arthur playing piano in the dark. He expressed his displeasure that she hadn't come sooner: “*I have been here all alone, thinking about you and improvising.*” Bertha tried to console him by kissing his hand, but he stole it away with “*Nein!*” and knelt on the floor in protest. As Arthur recalled, he was only playing hard-to-get.

Even as Bertha and Arthur grew closer, a separateness emerged between them as they saw their relationship from two distinct lenses. Their different interpretations seemed to pass by each other: Arthur never realized how Bertha perceived him beyond his own perception of their relationship. Perhaps Bertha might've, but she never dwelled on it. The meanings of their bond escaped them. There are no defined lines to cross within ambiguous relationships, but there are always tacit boundaries that require maintenance. What characterizes undefined situations: only until a line is crossed does one realize that the line ever existed in the first place, that crossing it was even possible, or was ever illicit.

\*\*\*

Arthur's birthday party was held on January 27, the night before he turned 13. Before bed, Bertha and Arthur spent time together in the easy chair. Arthur was *his sweetest self*, and got ready for bed around one. Then, Bertha wrote, *I followed him out—it being his birthday—and kissed him goodnight.* As Arthur describes it in his autobiography, “a strange thing happened” when Bertha kissed him on the mouth.

In his autobiography, Arthur wrote that the kiss “was such an incredible shock to me that my heart stopped and I ran off to my room, not out of shyness or modesty—but because I was

simply overcome with emotion. She loves me, she loves me, was all I could think of.” He had known Bertha cared about him deeply, of course, but paired with a kiss, her feelings towards him seemed to him as that of a lover: neither platonic nor maternal, but truly romantic.

From then on, goodnight kisses became regular for Bertha and Arthur. Bertha described in her diary how the two started to shake hands before bed, but would wind up kissing instead. *I cannot help it!* she wrote. Arthur insisted that the goodnight kisses continue, although he conceded that his request was “the kind of thing a child demands of his mother.”

Arthur struggled to downplay his childishness; as many instances as he succeeded—recall that, at times, Bertha felt like he could empathize with her—, there were the other instances in which he seemed to her as if he were a caricature of a child. And what to make of this, between the goodnight kisses and daytime calls? A woman of 22 loving a 13-year-old boy, a boy falling in love with a girl, a mother figure loving a child, young lovers ensnared in their age gap. The boundary blurred.

According to historian Ellen K. Rothman, young women in the early twentieth century often yearned to make friends with men so that they could “enjoy male companionship without the demands of romantic love.” No doubt, Bertha’s friendship with Arthur allowed her a great deal of dependable company. From the way she wrote about their interactions, using vivid descriptions and lively prose, many times squeezing smaller and smaller words into the corners of the page to fit in more detail, Bertha clearly took pleasure in the attention he gave her. There is an obvious intensity to her writing in those sections that stands apart from others.

When Bertha recounted one of their goodnight rituals in a particularly sensuous way, perhaps she focused more on the idea of what Arthur’s touch represented to her: the materiality of his adoration for her. She knelt beside Arthur as he lay on the couch and put her arms around

him. *At last we understood each other perfectly*, she wrote, *and I had the delicious pleasure of feeling him carry my hand twice reverently to his lips.*

In mid-May of 1900, Mrs. Rosentower eventually put an end to five months of Bertha and Arthur's secret goodnights. She had found out through one of her daughters who had walked in on them by mistake. Mrs. Rosentower accused Bertha of "trying to debauch a young boy." In her diary, Bertha does not at all mention this incident except to write, *Great commotion.*

Arthur's memoirs suggest that Bertha maintained that her affection for him was purely maternal, that her kisses were merely an expression of her compassion. Mrs. Rosentower further inquired about Bertha's choice of kissing Arthur on the lips. Bertha became defensive and indignant, insisting that friends and family kissed on the lips all the time in America! Besides, she was only acting out of motherly love for Arthur.

Arthur was dismayed. He was hurt that Bertha insisted with steadfast assurance on her maternal feelings towards him. All along, as he wrote in his autobiography, "I, little fool, thought it was love!" And it *was* love, but here, love was an object each perceived differently from the other. It was easy for him to construe the intimacy of their goodnights as romantic. Bertha recalled in her diary the last of their goodnight rituals before she left Berlin: *He would nestle in to my arms as if he wanted to always stay there, and I clasped him to me as if I could never let him go. My child!* Bertha acknowledged Arthur's dependence on her and responded to his needs as a mother would, perhaps not realizing his comprehension of the action as romantically motivated. This slippage in understanding occurred frequently.

When Bertha wrote about her *beautiful time with the child* as they played duets in his room where he treated her to chocolate and was quite the host, she noticed he was *more demonstrative than ever before*. What, exactly, Arthur was demonstrating was the cause for

dissonance in their views. When Arthur grasped Bertha's hand, she may have seen the habit as a sign of his attachment to her as a mother figure, whereas Arthur reveled in his contact with his older lady. When Arthur spoke to Bertha with what he saw as tender passion, once even suggesting she wait ten years for him so that they could get married, she took his words to be nothing short of adorable. He meant them sincerely, but she took them with as much seriousness as a smirk and quick kiss would allow.

But all of this is assuming that Bertha was oblivious to Arthur's intentions. In all likelihood, she wasn't. She probably basked in his affection and endless compliments, appreciative of his friendship and attention, even if they led to a place that was inappropriate. Arthur, likely, stood as a placeholder for Mr. Hartzell in "a textbook case of transference," as Sachs wrote. Bertha felt more comfortable with Arthur than she did with Mr. Hartzell, with whom she had to be polite and keep her impressions in check. Arthur's certain admiration for her was certain; left wondering nothing, she was free to do as she pleased. On the other hand, Bertha and Mr. Hartzell were careful to never reveal too much to each other, so perhaps Bertha saved her demonstrativeness for Arthur. She might spend the day out with Mr. Hartzell, unable to kiss him at the day's end, but she could return to the Rosentowers's house and kiss Arthur. As Bertha's feelings for Mr. Hartzell gained momentum, their relationship moved slowly through the formalities of courtship. Only after ten months did Mr. Hartzell begin referring to Bertha as such, instead of the formal "Miss Drew", but Bertha hadn't *dared call him 'Morton' yet!* In fact, in her diary, Bertha had a habit of referring to him as "Richard" as if a code name.

Just after Mrs. Rosentowers's discovery of Arthur and Bertha's covert pursuits, Bertha took off on a summer trip with her parents, who had just come to Berlin to visit. Arthur felt that living with the Rosentowers was intolerable without Bertha, but it was an opportune time for her

to get away. During this trip, she spent much time alone with Mr. Hartzell and recorded their moments together—so much so that details about Arthur vanish from the page completely. *I love the easy, quick grace with which he enters a room*, she wrote. *Morton is such a congenial companion and cavalier—so full of delicate little attentions, so charming in manner—now serious and moved, now saucy and teasing.* Bertha was smitten. She wrote about how they rowed on the lake together and visited the castle in Warwick. She laughed at his dramatic attempt to serenade her. They conversed about their different religions—they both felt that the difference was the *one barrier to our intimacy*. Bertha thought their whole visit was romantic. It assured her that they both felt the same way about each other. *The frankness with which he showed his affection for me, and the earnestness of his blessing*, she wrote, *nearly took my breath away and made me very happy.*

Arthur took an emotional hit when Bertha told him she loved Mr. Hartzell—that he was more than just her gentleman friend. Bertha wrote that she *told him there was no one at home whom I loved. But there was one in Germany.* Arthur, dejected, exclaimed, “*Ach, warum, bin ich nicht alter! [oh, why am I not older!]*” Previously he had told her that there was no one else besides Bertha whom he loved like this before and hoped he would never love anyone else again. Bertha reminded him that she *expected much for him as a man, and should always follow his career.* She promised he would always have a friend in her.

\*

Bertha and Arthur kept in touch for the rest of Bertha’s life. In 1904, she and Mr. Hartzell got married and moved to Chicago, and Arthur visited them during his American tour. Whenever he played in the area, Bertha and Mr. Hartzell made sure to attend. Arthur eventually got to know Bertha’s son, Karl, with whom he kept up a correspondence for several decades.

Their letters always expressed fondness for Bertha and acknowledged the role she played in Arthur's life.

Indeed, Bertha's life bloomed with a joy that was contagious. Arthur's accomplishments and reputation are testament of this joy. In 1971, music critic Phil Santora wrote in the *New York Sunday News* that Arthur had spent his years "engaged in a torrid love affair with life—an open, unashamed infatuation that will undoubtedly live on even after his gifted hands have ceased to draw music from the soul of the piano." More than 70 years earlier, Bertha had written in her diary, *How that child loves me! May my influence never cease to be felt and may it always be for good.*

Sources:

**All text in italics is taken directly from Bertha V. Drew Hartzell's diaries.**

Bertha V. Drew Hartzell Papers 1863-1990 (materials consulted):

1899 Standard Diary, Jan. 1, 1899-Dec. 31, 1899

Agenda, Jan. 1, 1900-Dec. 31, 1900

Letter and envelope to Fraulein Drew, from Artek, July 26, 1900 (English translation)

"Rubinstein Materials": letters, clippings, photographs

Assorted letters

**All text in quotes not attributed to a specific source is from *My Young Years*.**

Rubinstein, Arthur. *My Young Years*. New York: Knopf, 1973. Print.

Other References:

Bernard, Jessie, Helen E. Buchanon, William M. Smith, Jr. *Dating, Mating & Marriage*. Cleveland: Howard Allen, Inc, 1958. Print.

Culley, Margo. *A Day at a Time*. New York: the Feminist Press, 1985. Print.

Hartzell, Karl. "The Life of Karl Drew Hartzell." *National Centenarian Awareness Project*. 1998-2012. Web. 13 March 2013. <[http://www.adlercentenarians.org/hartzell\\_memoirs.htm](http://www.adlercentenarians.org/hartzell_memoirs.htm)>

Howells, Dorothy Elia. *A Century to Celebrate: Radcliffe College, 1879-1979*. Cambridge: Radcliffe College, 1978. Print.

Rothman, Ellen K. *Hands and Hearts*. New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1984. Print.

Sachs, Harvey. *Rubinstein: A Life*. New York: Grove Press, 1995. Print.