

Foreword

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My mother liked to tell this story. So do I.

One sunny Sunday afternoon, on a bus heading up New York's Riverside Drive, she overheard a fellow passenger observe, "There goes an oak tree out walking with a daisy." She then caught sight of what they were observing—a striking, peasant-sturdy older gentleman with a big mustache, holding hands with a blonde little girl as they crossed from Riverside Park and disappeared into an apartment building facing it.

He was my grandpa, Konrad Bercovici. I was that daisy.

Like some sort of creative commune, for much of my childhood, my mother, brother, grandparents, aunt, and I all shared an apartment in that building. Most of the rooms overlooked the park, Hudson River, and George Washington Bridge beyond. The ever-changing views of water and sky were considered essential, not only for painting, but also for your brain to breathe when writing, composing, playing music, or just thinking.

Do not disturb signs were frequently posted on the closed doors of the apartment's rooms. And although everyone was quite communicative—so many stories to tell!—you never bothered anyone while they were working. The thundering chords emanating from grandpa's Hammond organ did not count as a disturbance. It was, after all, Bach. This respect for work had a practical side, too. From a very young age, my mother, Mirel and her sister, Rada, had come to think of stories as currency. If they wanted something, they didn't see why their father couldn't just write and sell a couple more stories and make it happen. Which he usually did.



Figure 2. Bercovici with his daughter, Mirel, as a young artist. *Source:* Mirana Comstock.

An internationally acclaimed writer, journalist, and historian, Konrad Bercovici authored forty books, hundreds of short stories, plays, screenplays, magazine and newspaper articles. All while raising four brilliant, highly independent children with my grandmother, Naomi, and maintaining households in Hollywood, New York, Connecticut, and Paris. I really can't figure out how he did it. Sure, no TV. But I also remember my mother telling me grandpa just didn't need the same amount of sleep as other people did. When he was younger, he would get up early and go dance in the woods to burn off excess energy without waking up his sleeping family. It's funny to imagine him out there in the wee hours, head back, barrel chest thrust forward, arms and legs flung about. What did the animals think?

When he wasn't writing stories, grandpa was telling them. My brother—"Little Konrad," as opposed to his namesake, "Big Konrad"—and

I would snuggle up to him, enraptured. Far too lively to be bedtime stories, if anything, they kept us awake and probably also laid the groundwork for my becoming a writer. That, and with three generations of artists in the family, there was simply no wall space left by the time I came along. Not that everyone didn't also write. I was convinced our veins were blue because there was ink in them. Unfortunately, I shared that theory with my third-grade science class one time.

A large mahogany double-doored deco cabinet we called "The Tarambula" occupied a wall in the living room of our apartment. I'm not sure if it had that name before it was moved from my grandparents' home in Ridgefield, Connecticut, to Riverside Drive. I'm also not sure what it really means. Googling yields a bird, some guy in Ukraine, and a girl's first name representing spirituality. It now resides in my home, outside Boston. And it's still called "The Tarambula." As the last of my branch of the family, it contains most of the papers I inherited from them.

When I finally start to go through these papers—my dislike for anything resembling filing or organizing another inherited trait—I begin to get a firsthand look at my grandpa's seemingly endless supply of that family ink. In addition to his impressive body of published work, there are also thousands of pages of unpublished manuscripts—books, stories, articles, plays, even reality series concepts! There are photographs with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks on the back lot, Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard at the theatre, Louis Nizer and Joe DiMaggio around the Algonquin Round Table. My favorite, however, is one in which you hardly even see grandpa—he's a tiny speck in a white suit, lecturing thousands of troops during World War II about the dangers of Hitler and the Nazis.

There is also lots of writing about his writing—hundreds of laudatory reviews and interviews in crumbling newsprint from all over the world. The *New York Times* hailing Konrad Bercovici as "a master romancer future generations will rank with Chekhov and Maupassant"; famed short story editor Edward J. O'Brien calling him "America's master of the short story"; John Reed, who wrote the introduction to grandpa's first book, *Crimes of Charity*, declaring his "literary power of absolute conviction."

At first, I tried hard to resist reading the manuscripts themselves. If you started, you just couldn't put them down and ended up reading instead of filing or organizing. But then again, that is how I discovered the unpublished work. A romantic novel set against the gentrification of Greenwich Village in the 1950s. Memoir stories about a circle that

included Chaplin, Hemingway, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Einstein—so many luminaries who called him friend, collaborator, mentor and, at times, brutally honest critic. And, ultimately, *The Algonquin Round Table*, an insider's view of the legendary place many of these luminaries thought of as their home away from home.

I remember when grandpa would go to the Algonquin for lunch. Usually in a suit, sometimes with a Gypsy-red shirt under the jacket. Always with a smile so big, even that mustache couldn't hide it. Reading *The Algonquin Round Table*, I feel as if I am lunching there with him and that golden era's incredible Who's Who of fellow guests. Reading the family papers—"The Konrad Bercovici Story"—I realize how closely the romance and adventure of his life and work are intertwined.

As the *New York Times* headlined, on the loss of one of their own, "Journalist, film writer, author . . . the romanticism of his career was reflected in his work . . . Konrad Bercovici was a writer of great gusto. A world traveler who enriched his writing talent in the tradition of the determined journeyman of life." And what a journey it was!

The Konrad Bercovici Story

Konrad Bercovici (1881–1961) was born on a boat on the Bosphorus, not far from the Danube, and raised in the Romanian port town of Braila. His father was an agriculturist and horse breeder. His mother, a talented singer, violinist, and storyteller, encouraged her son's love of music and writing. He spent much of his early years in Gypsy camps and caravans, playing violin in their bands and wandering from fair to fair. By the time he reached his teens, there were few European countries Konrad Bercovici didn't know, as one can only truly know a land or a people: on foot. He spoke many of their languages, too, including Gypsy Calo, Greek, Romanian, French, German, Italian, Turkish, and Yiddish.

Originally intending to be a musician, he eventually made his way to Paris to study with Albert Schweitzer's teacher, organist and composer Charles Maria Widor, at The Madeleine. While in Paris, he became associated with the Montparnasse literary group led by Anatole France and developed friendships with fellow countryman Brâncuși and his assistant, Modigliani, whose sketch of Bercovici is in MoMA's permanent collection. He also fell in love and eloped with artist Naomi LiBrescu, who would become the mother of his four children and creative soul mate for more than sixty years.

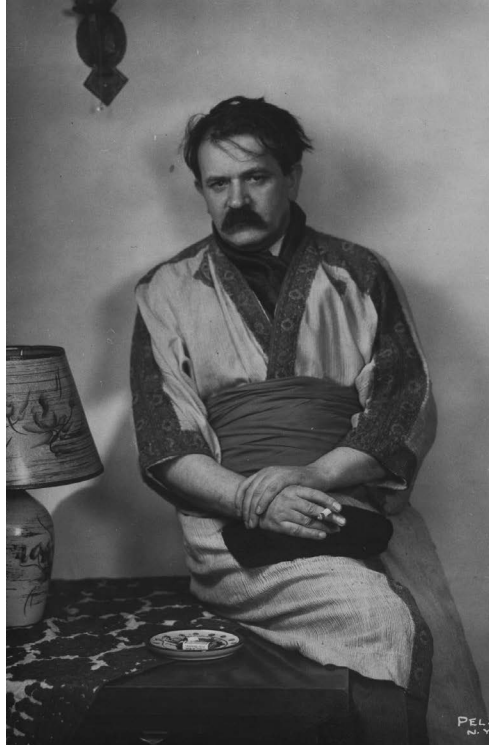


Figure 3. Konrad Bercovici in Gypsy attire. Source: Mirana Comstock.

Emigrating to New York's lower East Side in 1904, Konrad Bercovici found a city bustling with exciting people and new ideas. But not a lot of jobs for musicians. He barely supported his young family as a manual laborer, charity investigator, and piano player at a nickelodeon. His expertise in music eventually led to a job as music critic for the *New York Sun*. He also began writing colorful stories for the Sunday edition about the vibrant ethnic neighborhoods of his new home and the Gypsy camps of his old one, splitting the ten-dollar payment with illustrators George Bellows and John Sloan. His first book, *Crimes of Charity*, a bitter indictment of the indifference of the organizations he had investigated, was published in 1917.

Work for *The Nation* and the *New York Times* followed, then a job as a reporter for *The World*. Continuing to write stories for magazines, as well as newspapers, Bercovici's name was soon heralded simultaneously on the covers of multiple editions of such popular publications as *Esquire*,

Harper's, *The Dial*, *Century*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Collier's*, *Liberty*, *McCall's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, and the *Ladies' Home Journal* at newsstands across the country.

This unique combination of romantic storyteller and hard-nosed journalist caught the eye of legendary publisher Horace Liveright, who subsequently published many of Konrad Bercovici's early books. After starting the enormously popular Modern Library series to bring great literature to the masses—the paperbacks of their day—Liveright had founded a publishing house with the foresight to discover and help launch the careers of, in addition to Bercovici, such authors as Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, and, after Bercovici introduced them, Ernest Hemingway. Even after their careers took them in different directions, this elite group still sought each other out for camaraderie, intellectual stimulation, a chance to be themselves away from the limelight.

Konrad Bercovici went on to publish more than forty critically acclaimed books for other top publishers, including best-selling novels, biographies, and still-quoted historical and sociological works on everything from *The Crusades* to *The Story of the Gypsies*. Considered a primary reference work on the subject to this day, the *New York Times* wrote in its review of the latter, "Konrad Bercovici is to be taken as authority on a subject so elusive that he stands practically alone, a monopolist of learning . . . Bercovici has written a book for future reference as well as immediate pleasure."

During the golden age of the genre, Konrad Bercovici also continued to write and publish hundreds of short stories, including more multi-starred selections in O'Brien's famed *Best Short Stories of the World* collection than any other author. The critics were equally laudatory—even the dubious ones. "I couldn't help resenting Edward J. O'Brien's statement that Konrad Bercovici was America's master of the short story," wrote Ring Lardner. "However, resentment lessened a great deal as I read the stories in Mr. Bercovici's *Iliana* . . . They are all beautifully written . . . I like *Iliana* a lot."

The Nation hailed *Ghitza and Other Romances of Gypsy Blood* as "superb gypsy tales . . . the psychology of his characters is both subtle and convincing. Truth and nature are married to legend and beauty and the result is one of the most charming and stirring of all recent books." And the *New York Times* wrote of his story collection *Murdo*, "Poetry, romance and passion form its very essence." One of the stories from that

collection, “The Death of Murdo,” was culled from more than 10,000 stories to make the final list for 1999’s Updike-edited *Best American Short Stories of the Century*. According to the book’s introduction, the Romania-based story was only eliminated due to a space-saving cut of those not taking place in America.

As a playwright and, when Hollywood came calling, a screenwriter, Bercovici also worked with Cecil B. DeMille, Edwin Carewe, and Victor Fleming, as well as penning the original script for *The Great Dictator* for Charlie Chaplin. The subject of a celebrated plagiarism suit, with noted attorney Louis Nizer successfully representing plaintiff Bercovici, it was covered extensively by news media around the world.

In an early book dedication to Chaplin, Bercovici had written: “Dear Charlie, the last part of this book was written in your studio. A good many things in it I told you while we were trying to reveal ourselves to each other, tearing the masks away which we present to those to whom we refuse ourselves. In wishing *Murdo* godspeed, I cannot help thinking of you as one of the fraternity that serenades at empty windows. Love from your Konrad.”

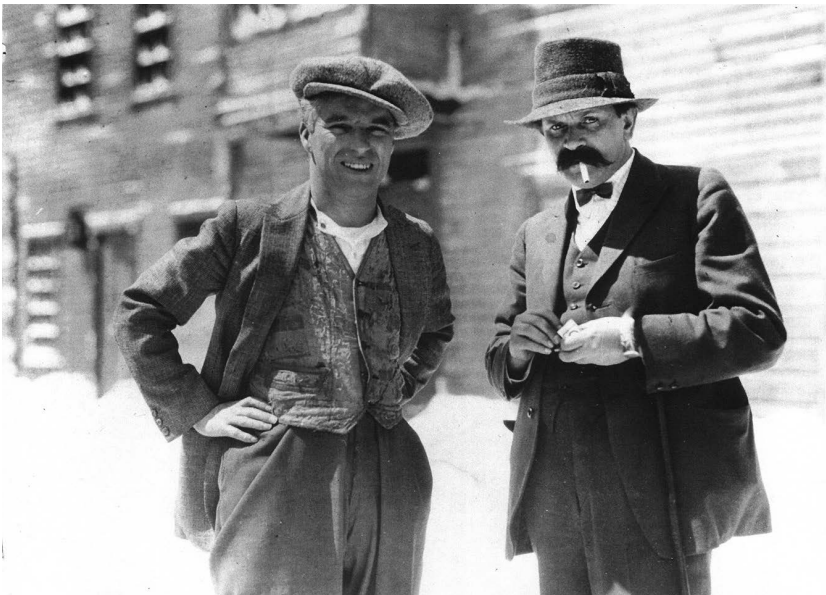


Figure 4. Charlie Chaplin and Bercovici on the set of *The Gold Rush*. Source: Mirana Comstock.

My mother had typed the original treatment for the film. Family friend Melvyn Douglas had witnessed Bercovici acting out the story for Chaplin at his Pebble Beach home. Chaplin was even my aunt's godfather, changing her given name from Revolte to Rada on her sixteenth birthday. The betrayal of such a close personal and professional relationship came as a terrible shock to the entire family. But with a world once more on the brink of war, there were other things to think about.

From the wit of *The Great Dictator* to incisive reporting on corruption in Romania that led to a savage beating by the Iron Guard, Bercovici had never turned his back on journalism or politics. And with some sort of uncanny news sense—Gypsy intuition?—he always seemed to be there when stories were unfolding: Lindbergh's landing in Paris; revolution in Austria; the king's abdication during the Spanish Civil War. And now, as the *Herald Tribune* observed, Bercovici "was one of the first writers to spot the trend of Hitler and Nazism and the peril to democracy and Western civilization."

After interviewing Goebbels and Goering and witnessing the horror of Hitler's public spectacles at the Sportspalast, Bercovici could not go back and write the romantic stories his publisher and readers were clamoring for. Instead, he continued to investigate and write about the rise of fascism, including an account of the growing Nazi Bund movement in America, *Undercover*, written under a pseudonym to protect his sources—and his life. And, when World War II broke out, he joined the war department's orientation bureau, lecturing thousands of soldiers across the country about the threat both here and abroad.

Later, when escaping Jews from Germany sought to enter Palestine and were turned back by the British, he became a leader of the free Palestine movement, cofounding *The Answer* magazine and serving on its editorial board alongside Albert Einstein. Settling his plagiarism suit against Chaplin—after seven years of delays—in order to have the financial means to buy ammunition and medicine, he joined the Irgun in Israel, alongside Moshe Dayan and Menachem Begin, who became lifelong friends. "Konrad Bercovici, the great writer, supported the fight for liberation of our people with unsurpassed civil courage. I cherish his memory with all my heart," Begin wrote, after his death.

In subsequent years, Konrad Bercovici continued to publish such well-received works as *Savage Prodigal*, a biography of the poet Verlaine, and the biblically themed Book-of-the-Month-Club selection *The Exodus*. "Konrad Bercovici's kaleidoscopic narrative, *The Exodus*, is written in the

cadences of the Old Testament, presented as a series of colorful, stylized scenes in which the effect is almost that of ideograms carved on a tower or on a temple wall, picturing the story of an old adventure,” the *New York Times* wrote. “These accounts are sufficiently expanded to bring increased humanity to individuals. Throughout, the author has kept in mind the parallel between this early story and conditions today. Anti-Semitism in Egypt of the fifteenth century B.C. has all the passion and illogic that it has in the twentieth century A.D.”

As he moved into his seventies, many of Bercovici’s earlier books continued to be translated and widely published around the world, as were his stories, appearing in numerous anthologies and “best of” collections here and abroad. He had a syndicated newspaper column and sat on the board of *Prevent World War III* magazine, spoke at numerous public events, and appeared on television panels alongside such authors as Norman Mailer. A member of the famed Algonquin Round Table since the days of Heywood Broun, Dorothy Parker, and Franklin P. Adams, he lunched there daily. And, prolific as always, he continued to write . . . and write . . . and write.

In December 1961, as news spread around the world of Konrad Bercovici’s passing, crowds gathered in New York, and the streets around the funeral home had to be closed to traffic. The famous came, but so did the readers, some clutching well-worn copies of his books and stories that had continued to resonate with them through the years.

“All of us, and that includes thousands of people throughout the world, have suffered the most painful and irreplaceable loss,” Louis Nizer wrote. “I have met a number of great men and Konrad was, of course, a great man, but never did I meet such a rare man. He was rare in the extraordinary accumulation of knowledge in so many variegated fields of life that it stunned the imagination to contemplate it. We all sat at his feet to learn and marvel . . . If I have to count the blessings of my life, high upon the list, if not indeed first, would be the privilege of being with him for perhaps a quarter of a century at daily luncheons.”

Back at the family apartment on Riverside Drive, a tall gentleman with piercing black eyes appeared, violin in hand. He entered, without saying a word, then proceeded to play the most beautiful, heart-wrenching Gypsy music. An hour later, he stopped, wiped the tears from his eyes, and left, just as suddenly and mysteriously as he had arrived. But the music still hung in the air. And continues to, waiting for new readers to hear it through the work of master storyteller Konrad Bercovici.