

## Minnie Saltzman-Stevens (1873-1950)

The story of Minnie Saltzman-Stevens is a Cinderella story of the musical arts. She rose from a choir singer in Bloomington to become a Wagnerian soprano singer of European fame. While her star burned brightly, it burned out far too quickly. After just six years, a throat ailment (combined with the outbreak of the First World War) put an end to a brilliant musical career.

Minnie was born in March 1873 to John and Minnie (Benecke) Saltzman in Bloomington, Illinois. Her parents were first-generation immigrants who spent most of their lives in Bloomington. Her mother, Minnie immigrated to the United States from Kliengartz, Germany (located near Berlin) when she was only twelve years old.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the U.S. Civil War, Minnie married French immigrant John. M Saltzman. John served as chief bugler in the 94<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry (known as the McLean County Regiment), and continued to carry his love for music after the war had ended.<sup>2</sup> He was known to have a fine singing voice, but was never able to pursue any sort of musical career.<sup>3</sup> In Bloomington, John served as the city's health officer, and later as a janitor at the Market Street School.<sup>4</sup> Together the Saltzmans had five children, all of whom survived to adulthood: Rudolph, Henry, Lillian, Louise, and the youngest, Minnie.

Even from a young age, Minnie expressed a deep interest in music. According to an interview with *The Daily Bulletin*, Minnie's first childhood memory was listening to her father sing as she sat on his lap. He would often sing "Silver Threads Among the Gold," a popular love ballad at the time. Minnie's father had great pride in her voice, but unfortunately passed away on November 11, 1878 before he could see his daughter's great success.<sup>5</sup>

After graduating from Jefferson School at the age of fourteen, Minnie Saltzman soon began to work around Bloomington to help her widowed mother.<sup>6</sup> She held several jobs over the years, including employment at the law firm of Sylvan Kupfer, and in the binding department of the Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Company.

Saltzman enjoyed singing, and although she was not able to afford professional voice lessons, she often sang in the Sunday choir of her church, Second Presbyterian Church. *The Daily Bulletin* in 1913 wrote:

*The natural beauty of her voice attracted the interest of her pastor, Rev. W.P. Kane, who urged her to take lessons. She replied that the price was prohibitive and that she was acting as a salesgirl in a store to help support her family. The kindly clergyman urged her to accept a loan which he told her she could afterwards repay. After a bitter struggle between her love of independence and her love for music, the latter prevailed.*<sup>7</sup>

With this loan from Reverend William Kane, Saltzman was finally able to afford to explore her vocal talents. According to an autograph book signed by Saltzman, she began taking voice lessons under Ms. Farie Stevick Skinner on November 20, 1895.<sup>8</sup> From there she studied piano

---

<sup>1</sup> "Mrs. M. Saltzman Dies Suddenly," *The Pantagraph*, April 11, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "From Shop Girl to Prima Donna," *The Daily Bulletin*, March 7, 1913.

<sup>4</sup> "Mr. Michael Saltzman," *The Pantagraph*, November 13, 1878.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Earlier Life of Mme. Saltzman-Stevens," *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1910.

<sup>7</sup> "From Shop Girl to Prima Donna."

<sup>8</sup> Autograph book (ca. 1890-1899), *Minnie Saltzman-Stevens Collection*, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

under Lydia Sherman and continued vocal training under Stevick-Skinner. For a few winters she traveled to Chicago to be trained by a Mr. Eurrett.<sup>9</sup> It also appears she received training at the Illinois Wesleyan University College of Music, as she was featured in several advertisements for public recitals in *The Pantagraph*.<sup>10</sup> It was not long before Saltzman became a soloist for choirs at both Second Presbyterian Church and the Unitarian Church.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, from 1899 to 1900, Saltzman was a member of the Amateur Musical Club (AMC). Founded in 1893, the AMC served a crucial role in developing and expanding Bloomington's music scene. The club accomplished this primarily through cultivating local musical talent and hosting performances for local musicians. Later, as the club grew, it began booking national and internationally known musicians to perform in Bloomington as another way to introduce residents to a variety of musical experiences.<sup>12</sup> This exposure to music and culture would have a lasting impact on Saltzman, most likely inspiring her musical career aspirations.

After paying off her loan to Rev. Kane, Saltzman became his personal stenographer. Near the turn of the century, Kane became the president of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana and brought Saltzman with him to continue as his stenographer.<sup>13</sup>

However, it was when she met and married Alexander Stevens on August 23, 1899, that her musical career truly began. Stevens was a druggist who owned a pharmacy on the corner of Douglas and Prairie streets in Bloomington.<sup>14</sup> He was also the foster father of Marie Johnson, a long-time childhood friend of Saltzman-Stevens.<sup>15</sup> This is presumably how Minnie and Alexander came to know each other and later marry, as he was twelve years older than her.<sup>16</sup>

Saltzman-Stevens continued to show promising improvement in honing her vocal talent, soon realizing that she needed to explore outside of Bloomington to further her progress. In April 1903, she was the featured alto in the Handel Oratorio Society's rendition of *The Messiah* at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. According to the Moline *Dispatch* newspaper, Saltzman-Stevens's voice was "not very big, but very sympathetic and clear" during her performance of the aria "He was Despised."<sup>17</sup> In 1904, Saltzman-Stevens returned to Augustana to sing *The Messiah*, this time as a contralto and with "golden opinions from the press for her singing."<sup>18</sup>

Alexander Stevens recognized his wife's potential and encouraged her in her vocal studies, having once said, "Go abroad and see if there is anyone over there who will understand your voice and recognize what to do with it."<sup>19</sup> Not long after that suggestion, Saltzman-Stevens left for Paris to study with M. Koenig, the teacher who instructed Madame Helen Von Schoick (a

<sup>9</sup> "Earlier Life of Mme. Saltzman-Stevens."

<sup>10</sup> "College of Music Recital," *The Pantagraph*, April 29, 1897; "The Wesleyan College of Music," *Pantagraph*, January 20, 1898.

<sup>11</sup> "Sunday Services: Miscellaneous," *The Pantagraph*, May 2, 1896; "Church Notes," *The Pantagraph*, May 7, 1900; "Address on Manhood," *The Pantagraph*, March 18, 1901; "Earlier Life of Mme. Saltzman-Stevens."

<sup>12</sup> Emily Brandicon Snow, "Memories of Past Achievements of Amateur Musical Club," in *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois, 1900-1950 in Five Volumes* vol. 5, compiled by Clara Louise Kessler (Bloomington: 1950), 1.

<sup>13</sup> "Earlier Life of Mme. Saltzman-Stevens."

<sup>14</sup> "Death Summons Dr. A.N. Stevens," *Pantagraph*, May 26, 1921.

<sup>15</sup> "Earlier Life of Mme. Saltzman-Stevens."

<sup>16</sup> "Marriage License Record," *Pantagraph*, August 24, 1899.

<sup>17</sup> "Rendition of Messiah is a Notable Success," *The Dispatch (Moline, Illinois)*, April 28, 1903.

<sup>18</sup> "Grand Messiah Concert," *The Dispatch (Moline, Illinois)*, April 25, 1904.

<sup>19</sup> "Madame Stevens, Opera Star, Dies," *Pantagraph*, January 26, 1950.

well-known voice teacher in Bloomington-Normal). Unfortunately for Saltzman-Stevens, Koenig passed away just before her arrival to Europe.<sup>20</sup>

On July 5, 1904, Saltzman-Stevens went to Paris, France and began studying under Jean de Reszke. De Reszke was an acclaimed operatic tenor who, before his retirement in 1899, was featured in operas in Venice, London, Paris, and New York.<sup>21</sup> In a 1910 interview published in *The Pantagraph*, Saltzman-Stevens recalled that, “when M. Jean de Reszke retired from the operatic stage, his intention was to retire from the musical field. He found it impossible however, to give up the glorious work of his life-time ... His wife suggested that he find a few good voices and teach them in his little theater his wonderful art of singing. Fortunately for me he acted upon her suggestion.”<sup>22</sup>

According to an interview with Saltzman-Stevens in the *Kansas City Star* newspaper, when de Reszke met his new pupil, he was all but impressed with her. Saltzman-Stevens recalled that after listening to her sing, he declared, “You know nothing about singing. You do everything wrong.” In her reply to him, Saltzman-Stevens admitted that she knew that, and stated, “That is why I have come to you.”<sup>23</sup>

Before beginning her studies with her new French instructor, Saltzman-Stevens had primarily sung as a contralto. De Reszke told her that she was not a contralto at all; that she was instead a dramatic soprano. “Trust me,” he told her. “Trust me and my work.”<sup>24</sup> De Reszke and his wife worked with her for hours on end, pushing her to improve her range.<sup>25</sup> She improved her repertoire by mastering selections from French and Italian operas, but she could “put no life, no heart into them.” She had developed an impressive range and could now sing virtuosic roles written for sopranos. In an attempt to discover the “Genius and fire that was lacking in her beautiful voice,” de Reszke gave Saltzman-Stevens an excerpt from “Brumhilde’s Aria” from Richard Wagner’s *Twilight of the Gods*. Singing as the character “Brunhilde”, Saltzman-Stevens reportedly found herself immersed in the music as “all the generations of German spirit and German tradition came forward.”<sup>26</sup> She recalled that, “I felt a change come over me. I felt that some shackles had fallen off me and that I had come into my kingdom.” Thus, began four years of hard work—of which she stated, “I threw my whole soul into my efforts.”<sup>27</sup>

Although she was a prima donna in the making, no one in Europe knew of her talent. “Her work was done quietly but faithfully. There was no stir about her, no one knew about her, she was without influential friends. No one believed in her but herself and her master, and at some times even he was in doubt.”<sup>28</sup> This would all change in 1908. That year, Saltzman-Stevens made her public debut and was selected to perform as “Brunhilde” at the Royal Opera Covent Garden in London in the production *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, or simply known as *The Ring*. Dr. Hans Richter, a seasoned orchestral director from London, received word from colleagues in Paris about a potential rising star. He agreed to entertain their plea to meet the soprano and invited Saltzman-Stevens up to England to audition. Dr. Richter worked at the famous Covent Garden, a once bustling flower market that became a theater for some of the greatest productions of opera

<sup>20</sup> “Earlier Life of Mme. Saltzman-Stevens.”

<sup>21</sup> “Man Who ‘Discovered’ Saltzman-Stevens,” *The Pantagraph*, November 19, 1910.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “Success out of Failure,” *The Kansas City Star*, July 10, 1910.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “Mme. Saltzman-Stevens Concert on Nov. 14,” *The Pantagraph*, October 19, 1910.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Mrs. Stevens Talks of Her Musical Work,” *The Pantagraph*, February 8, 1909.

<sup>28</sup> “Mme. Saltzman-Stevens Concert on Nov. 14.”

in London in 1781.<sup>29</sup> He was so impressed by Saltzman-Stevens mastery of German arias that he gave her a four-year contract to perform as “Brunhilde”.<sup>30</sup>

Many were skeptical of the decision as she was an American that had never been on the stage, much less one as highly regarded as the Covent Garden. However, her performance was astounding, captivating, and authentic, despite the unconventional performance in English. “Madame Saltzman-Stevens” soon became a household name throughout England. Through her exceptional performances at the Covent Garden, she quickly earned the title of the “perfect Brunhilde.”<sup>31</sup>

Her husband, Alexander, and her friend, Marie Johnson, sailed overseas to celebrate her successes. They were ecstatic after watching Saltzman-Stevens perform, with Johnson writing, “I do not see how she can help but feel flattered at securing such a contract as she has, and better still to know that she got it on real merit.”<sup>32</sup>

Soon opera houses around Europe were urging Saltzman-Stevens to perform in their productions of *The Ring*. She had no difficulty bringing the role of “Brunhilde” to life wherever she went; singing in French while in Lisbon, and in German while in Berlin and during her second tour in London.<sup>33</sup> Her praises were sung all over Europe and it was noted that “... in spite of her rapid rise to fame, she was already regarded abroad as the greatest of Wagnerian singers and the ideal vocalist in Wagnerian roles ... and all the great German newspapers were filled with comment[s] of the phenomenal rise of the hitherto unknown American singer.”<sup>34</sup> In the summer of 1909, Saltzman-Stevens returned to Paris to work with de Reszke on Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. Once she perfected her interpretation of “Isolde,” she traveled to Brussels to showcase her new operatic role.<sup>35</sup>

By 1910, Saltzman-Stevens had established herself as one of the best Wagnerian opera singers in Europe. Word of her fame spread back to the United States, in particular amongst her friends and family in Bloomington. Back home in Bloomington, the Amateur Musical Club began planning a concert to bring Saltzman-Stevens home to perform and showcase her talent. In what was called the “Homecoming Concert,” this exclusive two-night performance (which was Saltzman-Stevens’s only public appearance in the United States that year) was dubbed the “greatest musical event of the season.”<sup>36</sup> The committee of the AMC in charge of planning the event began negotiations nearly a year prior. The concert was held at the Chatterton Opera House in downtown Bloomington at 8:15 p.m. on November 14 and 15, 1910. Committee members Annie May Christian (president of the club), Florence Fifer-Bohrer (who was one of Saltzman-Stevens’s closest friends), May Capen, and Harriet Thomas worked hard to secure what would be two sold-out shows.<sup>37</sup> On opening night, the Chatterton Opera House was brimming with excitement to hear Saltzman-Stevens sing a catalogue of songs ranging from sweet lullabies to the dramatic German arias she was known for. The eager audience was also treated to a surprise, with an unannounced singing of “Home Sweet Home” at the start the show.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Has Won New Successes,” *The Pantagraph*, July 16, 1908.

<sup>33</sup> “Has Won New Successes.”

<sup>34</sup> “Concerts Mark New Musical Epoch,” *Pantagraph*, November 16, 1910.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Concerts Mark New Musical Epoch;” “Homecoming Concert by Minnie Saltzman-Stevens” November 14-15, 1910 program, Minnie Saltzman-Stevens vertical file, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

<sup>37</sup> “Mme. Saltzman-Stevens in a Brilliant Concert,” *Pantagraph*, November 15, 1910.

According to a review from *The Pantagraph*, “Bloomington audiences are not desperately enthusiastic very often. They do not cry ‘Bravo!’ and throw up their hats, but after the ‘Walkure Cry’ the big house rose to its feet and waved its handkerchief and clapped, until the singer came back a dozen times to receive its homage.”<sup>38</sup> The return of a local talent who had found such success made the event one to remember.

From just two nights of concerts, Saltzman-Stevens earned over \$3,500 (which equates to around \$92,000 today).<sup>39</sup> She repaid the people of Bloomington’s enthusiasm by donating back \$100 of the receipts received from the concert to start a fund, which eventually allowed the AMC to purchase a concert grand piano in 1912.<sup>40</sup> Following the concerts, the Young People’s Society of the Second Presbyterian Church (the church Saltzman-Stevens was previously a member of), hosted a reception. The guest of honor was Mrs. Jeanette Thompson Kane, wife of the former pastor of the church who took great interest in Saltzman-Stevens’s voice at a young age. Reverend Kane had passed away two years before her concert.<sup>41</sup>

After her brief visit to Bloomington, Saltzman-Stevens returned to Europe for a short time. While there she performed in Madrid, Spain and Bayreuth, Germany performing as “Sieglinde” in *Die Walkure* and “Kundry” in *Parisfal*.<sup>42</sup> While performing with the Covent Garden in London in August 1911, Andrea Dippel, manager of the Chicago Grand Opera Company, heard her impressive Wagnerian voice.<sup>43</sup> Soon after, Dippel signed Saltzman-Stevens to a three-year contract and publicly announced that the young prima donna would be coming to Chicago for the upcoming winter season.<sup>44</sup>

Saltzman-Stevens made her official American debut in *Die Walkure* as none other than “Brunhilde” with the Chicago Grand Opera Company on December 21 and received rave reviews. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the audience declared her the heroine of the performance, and that her voice was beautiful, “not only in its youthful freshness but in its power, its range, and its sympathetic quality.” She proved herself a worthy associate of other more seasoned performers of the same show.<sup>45</sup>

Many of Saltzman-Stevens’s fans from Bloomington attended her performances in Chicago to show support for their hometown star. And, Saltzman-Stevens was grateful for that support. She wrote a letter to *The Pantagraph* to express her gratitude to the many Bloomington fans that attended her debut with the Chicago Grand Opera Company:

*I wish to extend to you and all the dear friends who joined with you in giving me such loyal welcome, my very sincere appreciation and thanks. Also for the beautiful flowers, some of which are still daily reminding me of the sweet regard*

---

<sup>38</sup> “Mme. Saltzman-Stevens in a Brilliant Concert,” *The Pantagraph*, November 15, 1910.

<sup>39</sup> “Concerts Mark New Musical Epoch;” Consumer Price Index Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Estimated Dollars of 2018,

<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2018.pdf>, Date Accessed November 15, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> “Amateur Musical Club on Good Basis,” *The Pantagraph*, May 13, 1912.

<sup>41</sup> “Social Honors for Mme. Saltzman-Stevens,” *The Pantagraph*, November 10, 1910.

<sup>42</sup> “Two Chicago Girls are Grand Opera Stars,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 12, 1911.

<sup>43</sup> “Signs Young Opera Singer,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1911.

<sup>44</sup> “Engages Opera Singer,” *Washington Herald*, August 19, 1911; “Music and the Drama: Illinois Singer to Open Season,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 26, 1911.

<sup>45</sup> “News of the Operas and Theater: Wagnerian Opera Has Imposing Introduction,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 22, 1911.

*and love you dear Blomingtonians have for one of your own, whose desire is that much of her glory shall reflect on blessed Bloomington.*<sup>46</sup>

As the reviews of her performances began pouring in, opera lovers from all over the United States began flocking to the venues that hosted Saltzman-Stevens's performances. By 1914, she had performed in places such as: the Nixon Theater of Pittsburgh (February 1912), the Auditorium in Los Angeles, California (March 1913), the Orpheum Theatre of Portland, Oregon (March 1914), and the Convention Hall of Kansas City, Missouri (April 1914).<sup>47</sup> While performing in San Francisco in March 1913, she once again took on the role of "Isolde" in *Tristan and Isolde*. Saltzman-Stevens's Isolde was highly praised for her "inexpressible tenderness and passion." According to Walter Anthony of the *San Francisco Call*,

*Minnie Saltzman-Stevens was Isolde and mingled imperiousness with femininity, authority with tenderness, strength with weakness, until, under the influence of the Wagner poem and the Wagner music, one might easily imagine her the type that ... has ruled, irrespective of a vote, since the world began to turn.*<sup>48</sup>

In December of the same year, Saltzman-Stevens performed in Indianapolis in the role of "Sieglinde" in place of Madame Jane-Osborn Hannah in *Die Walkure*. "This change in cast," wrote the *Indianapolis Star*, "means that Indianapolis music lovers will be given the opportunity to hear one of the greatest Wagnerian sopranos of the present day." The article continued by claiming, "She is a soprano of remarkable range and is the only singer in the world today who is able to appear both in the contralto role of Brunhilde, and the soprano role of Sieglinde."<sup>49</sup>

During the summer of 1914, while Saltzman-Stevens was performing in Los Angeles, she had the unique opportunity to sing for Hellen Keller (an American educator and activist who became both deaf and blind at an early age). According to newspaper accounts, the theater was crowded with intrigued patrons and reporters who wished to see this unconventional performance. *The Oakland Tribune* printed an account of the spectacular event, stating that when "Mme. Stevens started to sing, Miss Keller placed her fingers upon the singer's lips. The opera was 'Die Walküre.' The audience was trembling with the very novelty of the thing, when suddenly Miss Keller cried, 'I hear. I hear – I hear the high notes.'"<sup>50</sup> When interviewed about the unique experience, Keller pronounced that she "firmly believed she at last heard a sound" when Saltzman-Stevens hit a high note.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, Saltzman-Stevens blossoming career was abruptly cut short. In April 1914, she had announced plans to travel to Italy to learn the Italian language (which was most likely to help expand her performance repertoire).<sup>52</sup> However, by September of that year, anti-German sentiment began spreading throughout Europe due to the outbreak and escalation of the First World War. This ended the staging of German opera, leaving Saltzman-Stevens little opportunity

<sup>46</sup> "Saltzman-Stevens Sends Greeting," *The Pantagraph*, December 28, 1911.

<sup>47</sup> "Herbert's New Opera is to be on the Program," *Pittsburgh Press*, January 21, 1912. "Operatic Galaxy to Appear Here in Four Star Performances," *Oregon Daily Journal*, March 22, 1914. "From Shop Girl to Prima Donna;" "Season Tickets for Chicago Grand Opera Company," *Kansas City Star*, March 14, 1914; "Minnie Saltzman-Stevens Will Sing Role of Brunnhilde in City's First Presentation of 'Die Walkure,'" *Los Angeles Express*, March 7, 1913.

<sup>48</sup> "Opera 'Tristan and Isolde' Wins Crowd's Plaudits," *San Francisco Call*, March 23, 1913.

<sup>49</sup> "Cast Improved for 'Die Walkure,'" *Indianapolis Star*, December 4, 1913.

<sup>50</sup> "Wily Press Agent Fool Scientists," *Oakland Tribune*, February 27, 1916.

<sup>51</sup> "Helen Keller, the deaf and blind woman," *The Baptist and Reflector (Nashville)*, October 15, 1914; "Helen Keller Hears Song," *The Brattleboro Reformer*, July 24, 1914.

<sup>52</sup> "News of Chicago Clubs and Society World," *Chicago Tribune*, April 28, 1914.

to perform. She quickly found a place in Florence, Italy where she could safely continue to study in January 1915. According to *The Pantagraph*, Saltzman-Stevens “could not have selected a better place (to live) than Florence, as it is rather quiet, safe from harm, and she has gone right on with her work.”<sup>53</sup>

Although Florence, Italy was intended to be a temporary home as she waited out the war, Saltzman-Stevens remained there for the rest of her life. Along with the difficulty of leaving the country during the war, Saltzman-Stevens struggled with returning home after suffering from illness. Sometime during the early years of the war, it is believed that Saltzman-Stevens was afflicted with a throat ailment that damaged her world-renowned voice. This not only concluded her life as a professional opera singer, but also deeply affected her confidence and self-image. In a 1948 letter, her attorney Joseph Bohrer (son of Saltzman-Stevens’s close friend Florence Fifer Bohrer) wrote about the unfortunate end of her short career:

*I am satisfied that some throat ailment about 1914 developed which put an end to a brilliant musical career. Mrs. Stevens has stayed over there (Italy) hoping against hope that her voice would return, fearing to face her family and friends with her voice gone ... She always writes of her impending return home but she never seems to take the actual step. She has never intimated to me that her voice has failed or that these are the reasons for her continued absence, but I am personally convinced that such is the case.*<sup>54</sup>

On May 25, 1921, Dr. Alexander Stevens passed away in the home of Saltzman-Stevens’s mother in Bloomington. Saltzman-Stevens was messaged by telegram about the death of her husband of two decades. He had been suffering from strokes of paralysis for over two years.<sup>55</sup> His property was given to Saltzman-Stevens, although she continued to live in Italy.<sup>56</sup> A few years later, her mother, Minnie Saltzman, was hospitalized for fourteen weeks after falling and breaking her hip.<sup>57</sup> Her condition worsened over the next few years and on April 11, 1925, she died of apoplexy (stroke). Again, Saltzman-Stevens was notified via telegram.<sup>58</sup>

Saltzman-Stevens continued to reside in her little Florence apartment, living off the money she made from her tours and investments. Joseph Bohrer became her attorney and they wrote to each other quite frequently. Bohrer would send her money from her investments and savings, and kept her up to date on the happenings in Bloomington. She missed her old hometown dearly, but “many times ... circumstances prevented the trip.”<sup>59</sup> Communication became difficult as Italy and the rest of Europe entered the Second World War. The only way Saltzman-Stevens and Bohrer could correspond was through the American Red Cross, whose messages had a twenty-five-word limit. Money sent by Bohrer had to be wired through the Swiss Consul or other neutral countries.<sup>60</sup>

Saltzman-Stevens and Bohrer had both a close personal and professional relationship. In a letter written to him, she described a conversation she had with some friends:

---

<sup>53</sup> “Mme. Stevens in Florence,” *Pantagraph*, January 8, 1915.

<sup>54</sup> Correspondence between Joseph F. Bohrer and Scott W. Lucas, October 26, 1948.

<sup>55</sup> “Death Summons Dr. A.N. Stevens,” *Pantagraph*, May 26, 1921.

<sup>56</sup> “The Stevens Estate,” *Pantagraph*, September 7, 1921.

<sup>57</sup> “Mrs. Saltzman Injured,” *Pantagraph*, June 20, 1923.

<sup>58</sup> “Mrs. M. Saltzman Dies Suddenly,” *Pantagraph*, April 11, 1925.

<sup>59</sup> “Madame Stevens, Opera Star, Dies” *Pantagraph*, January 26, 1950.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph F. Bohrer to Ira S. Kolb, March 31, 1943; Minnie Saltzman-Stevens to Joseph F. Bohrer, October 30, 1941

“I said recently, I know absolutely nothing as to my financial status – all was in the hands of my attorney. They gasped, ‘I trust him? Etc.’ I said, ‘Yes, as I do my God.’ Needless to say, they were not Americans and they of course do not know Joe Bohrer.”<sup>61</sup>

Bohrer also showed a similar affection to his mother’s dear friend. He took pride in handling her investments and accounts, and greatly appreciated her interest in his family and their well-being. In a letter responding to a draft of Saltzman-Stevens’s will, he wrote “I deeply appreciate the confidence you have always shown in my handling of your affairs, and I sincerely hope that your Will, will not become effective for at least 50 more years.”<sup>62</sup>

Florence and her son Joseph had the unfortunate duty to inform Saltzman-Stevens of her sister Louise’s death on February 5, 1946. Saltzman-Stevens was devastated when she received the news, yet thankful that she was always taken care of by her friends in Bloomington. She described Louise as a “restless soul” who was “like Cain thinking everyone’s hand was against her.” Saltzman-Stevens always felt guilty that she was not able to return home and take care of her sister, saying in her letter to Florence Bohrer:

*Dearest, try to understand me – I have never belonged to myself. Heaven knows how I looked forward to going home to be with her even for a short time. It was not meant to be ... all my life I have felt deep pity and compassion for her – I always wanted to the extent I could make up to her what she never had in health by material help and pleasure and this brings me to what I want to say – the one thing she wanted was to have me at home.*<sup>63</sup>

Louise had been residing in Saltzman-Stevens’s house in Bloomington, located at 1010 N. Evans Street. A few months after Louise’s death, Saltzman-Stevens began renting out the home to Roy E. Potts.<sup>64</sup>

In 1948, Minnie Saltzman-Stevens pursued legal action against Columbia Pictures. She requested compensation for a photograph of her taken during her opera career that was included in an unknown movie without her knowledge. *Saltzman-Stevens vs. Columbia* was an arduous process. Attorneys from Columbia Pictures intended to take the case to court, and since Saltzman-Stevens was not in the United States, it was unlikely that the jury would act in her favor if she was not present. Saltzman-Stevens’s attorneys urged her to travel back to the U.S., but she was never able to. Eventually, Columbia Pictures offered \$750 as settlement (about \$7,800 today), but this was not nearly the amount she had hoped for.<sup>65</sup>

Two years later, on January 25, 1950, Minnie Saltzman-Stevens died quietly in her sleep at her apartment in Milan, Italy.<sup>66</sup> The official report from the American Foreign Service lists the cause of death as pulmonary oedema and cardiac attack.<sup>67</sup> Joseph Bohrer was the first person in Bloomington to receive word of her death.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Minnie Saltzman-Stevens to Joseph F. Bohrer, August 31, 1945.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph F. Bohrer to Minnie Saltzman-Stevens, December 1, 1948.

<sup>63</sup> Minnie Saltzman-Stevens to Florence Bohrer, February 27, 1946.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph F. Bohrer to Roy E. Potts, June 22, 1948.

<sup>65</sup> Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Estimated Dollars of 2018, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2018.pdf>, Date Accessed December 6, 2020; George Link Jr. to Minnie Saltzman-Stevens, April 29, 1949.

<sup>66</sup> “Madame Stevens, Opera Star, Dies,” *The Pantagraph*, January 26, 1950.

<sup>67</sup> “Report of the Death of an American Citizen,” American Foreign Service, February 8, 1950.

<sup>68</sup> “Madame Stevens, Opera Star, Dies” *The Pantagraph*, January 26, 1950.



In her will, a substantial proportion of her estate was promised to Arthur Stevens Taylor, the son of her business manager during her career.<sup>69</sup> Since Saltzman-Stevens had no children or surviving family members, many of her belongings and stock-holdings went to friends and neighbors. Her remains was transported by the ship *Excalibur* from Genova, Italy to New York.<sup>70</sup> From there, her remains were returned to Bloomington by train. On February 27, 1950, Minnie Saltzman-Stevens was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Her dear friend, Florence Fifer Bohrer, held a memorial service for Saltzman-Stevens later that afternoon at Fifer Bohrer's home located at 909 McLean Street in Bloomington.<sup>71</sup>

By: Edward Donathan, 2020

---

<sup>69</sup> State of California, County of Los Angeles to Florence Black, March 10, 1951.

<sup>70</sup> "Report of the Death of an American Citizen."

<sup>71</sup> "Funeral Notice Madame Minnie Saltzman Stevens," *The Pantagraph*, February 26, 1950.