

1971

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Time Was

Herr Doktor Berczeller spent Christmas Eve of 1928 in a Viennese hospital reviving a victim of an overdose of morphine who had been presumed dead and left in the morgue. Later that night the same patient miraculously survived a fall down an elevator shaft. It was the young doctor's first experience of having complete charge of the Medical Department of the Hospital of the City of Vienna.

A rare and lovely *Sachertorte* of a book, this memoir combines the ingredients of time, place, and personality into a memorable feast. The place is Vienna, the time is the twenties and thirties, and the narrator is an extraordinary doctor/writer who recalls his younger days with irresistible warmth and *brio*.

These were the years in which Dr. Berczeller was a medical student and then a doctor, years of romance and courtship, of learning from some of the most famous professors of medicine in the world, and of rural practice in a village a few kilometers but many centuries distant from Vienna. The hard work he put in becoming a specialist under the tutelage of medical giants was not at the expense of the sweeter portion of his life with certain girls of Vienna. Around the student and doctor, first in the city and then in the provincial town of Mattersdorf, the very air seemed to be full of glorious music, to dance with event and happening, and the pages of *Time Was* are alive with adventures comic, bizarre, and tragic. Richard's dramatic bout with TB; Franzl, the gamekeeper who denied paternity but then submitted to one of the first-known blood-type tests; the policeman who took the crazy old colonel into the city to the psychiatric hospital and then disappeared himself; how the author won the faith of the Jewish community by diagnosing a rabbi's one



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slight ailment—all these scenes and many more show how truth is best served by a skilled storyteller. The knowledge that in the end the Nazi storm must inevitably come adds poignance to these recollections, which in any age would be remarkable. The way of life has disappeared, but it is here distilled in the memory and life-style of an extraordinary man.

RICHARD BERZELLER, after escaping with his wife and child from Austria in the 1930s, lived in France and on the Ivory Coast before coming to America in 1940. He and his wife, Maria, now live in New York, where he practices, and their son, Peter, is on the faculty of New York University Medical School. Dr. Berzeller previously published *Displaced Doctor*, which dealt with his life subsequent to the events in *Time Was*, portions of which have appeared in *The New Yorker*.

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Dr. Berczeller in 1931 as he was licensed to drive "any vehicle with more than three wheels"



In June 1970 Dr. Berczeller was back in Austria on a surprise visit to an old friend and ex-patient

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