

FIRST SCHOOL LESSONS. FIRST COMMUNION. HARVEST TIME. FIRST TRIP ABROAD.  
I AM GROWING VERY FAT. 1923 - 1924

Compulsory school age started *in* the autumn after the 6th birthday. Private tuition was allowed but state school exams had to be passed at the end of the school year. One day - I think I was not yet 6 - Mother made me sit at the big dining table. It was covered by a heavy rug when not used for meals. She took a bowl of walnuts from the side board and started to introduce me to the rudimentary secrets of arithmetics. I was fascinated and I think I made reasonable progress at this first formal lesson and at subsequent ones. After the end of the first lesson mother looked particularly serious and thoughtful, though pleased with my keenness to learn. Had she then thought that this was the beginning of her son's career which one day will take me away from her ?

Later I was given a black slate board with a wooden frame and chalks. As I always spoke German at home I learned the German Gothic script which was then generally used for writing and printing. This is rather spiky and consists of thick down and thin up strokes for which chalk is ideal. For instance m is *M*. The first exercise consisted of rows of thin up strokes *///* and the second of thick down strokes *|||*.

When I was six I had a proper teacher. She was - at least in my eyes - quite elderly. She was tall, slim, of upright bearing, her head crowned with a complicated but untidy coiffure, wearing blouses with frills and a white choker. In my memory her apparel was of a general yellow appearance. She had been teaching in many places and she told me once a gruesome story but which fortunately had a happy ending. She was in Istanbul where at certain times of the year a strong Adriatic wind, the scirocco, is blowing. For the convenience and safety of pedestrians, cords are strung along the main streets to hold onto. There was a sudden gust and she lost grip of the cord and felt herself floating upwards into the direction of the wind-lashed *Mar mara* sea à la Mary Poppins. Fortunately a powerfully built Turk, noticing her float by, grabbed her round the legs and brought her safely down to earth. Whether *Fräulein Rauter* - that was the name of my levitating teacher - was an unsuitable paedagogue or whether there were other reasons, she was soon exchanged for a Mr. Feiner who taught at a nearby Jewish school. Whereas *Fräulein Rauter* had all the social graces of the time and could hold her own against anybody, Mr. Feiner was so deferential to my parents and even to me that it was quite irritating. He was a short man, wore dark suits and

a hat and moved noiselessly like a cat. Though he sported no beard, he constantly caressed his chin with his hand in a shy manner. He also smelled but he was a good teacher.

At the end of the school year I had to sit for my first exam. There was no suitable German school in Piešťany and we were directed to take the exam in Brno, capital of Moravia. So in June 1924 mother and I travelled there by train. I have absolutely no recollection of the hotel or any other details. On the morning after our arrival we went to the appointed school. The day was quite an ordeal for me. First of all to be dressed in clean things, secondly to meet the form master who fortunately turned out to be jovial and friendly, thirdly to be taken into the class room which appeared enormous to me, fourthly to be stared at by many pairs of eyes, fifthly to be left without mother amongst a class of totally strange brats and lastly to go through the tribulations of the exam itself, which I passed.

The next year Mr. Feiner continued to teach me and Anni too.

There was a subject called HEIMATKUNDE or knowledge of one's country and included a little national history. Masaryk was President then. In fact he became President for life. When Mr. Feiner mentioned his name his voice became even more deferential <sup>than</sup> usual and somewhat adulatory, almost like mentioning Jehova. He lowered his voice, almost to a whisper as if talking about an intimate friend with whom he was on familiar terms. It impressed me no end to have such an apparent good friend of the President as my teacher.

At the end of the second school year, mother, Anni and I travelled to Brno again. We had the same school, the same form master and all went well for Anni and me.

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I must have been about 7 when I took my first communion, because I could already write. I was prepared by a priest, but can't remember his name nor what he looked like. The day of the communion was an other ordeal. I had a white garment on and a white silk ribbon tied to my left arm in a bow. I carried a candle and clasped a piece of paper onto which I had written all my sins. I had worked on this for days. I also put down how often I had perpetrated each of my sins. I could'nt think of any worthwhile big sin to confess and that worried me. Another worry was that one is not allowed to eat or drink from midnight on communion day, until after the communion. Not to have breakfast was not the worry but could I possibly avoid swallowing water when cleaning my teeth? Yet another worry is that it is forbidden to chew the consecrated wafer with one's teeth. I practiced picking up morsels of bread and propel them with my tongue into the throat without using my teeth. I had also asked forgiveness from my parents and others, against whom I had sinned as was prescribed for

pious penitents.

At last I was in church. It was thronged with first communicants in white and their parents, mostly peasants in colourful Sunday bests, an aura of garlic and sweat hanging over the congregation and mingling with the incense from the burners. It was my turn to kneel in the confessional and read out my innumerable sins, followed by a declaration of true repentance. I was left off lightly with two or three "Our Fathers" and an equal number of "Ave Marias". Holy communion went off better than anticipated and without the teeth touching the wafer. Afterwards at home I was the centre of attention from well-wishers. I think I was given a little coloured picture of Jesus by the priest who prepared me as a memento.

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When I was 7 or 8 father took me often by car to Madunice where I spent hours in the stables, walking in the fields and at harvest time watching the threshing machine. My description of Madunice and the farm in chapter 9 is based largely on my impressions and observations of those years.

I have mentioned already that for the harvest 50 - 60 hands were hired from the poorer hill regions. In the spring the foreman of the labour gang came south to negotiate deals with the farmers. He was told the acreage to be harvested and other relevant details and a price was agreed. In addition we provided accommodation in a stable or barn, cooking facilities and fuel, washing facilities and lavatories, basic food [stuffs such as meat, flour, lard, sugar, salt. If rain delayed harvesting the gang did not suffer. It was left to the foreman how many people he wanted to bring along. It included women, some of whom worked in the fields while others did the cooking and house [keeping. Scythes, sickles, bone-stones, binder twine and pitch forks we provided as well as the larger machinery and traction animals.

Harvest generally started on or about the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul which is on June 29th. This was also the day when schools broke up for the summer vacations. First oats (of which we grew but little), then barley and finally wheat was cut. If we had some rye that was usually the last one to be cut.

There was a charming tradition at the beginning of the harvest. Father and I always left the car at the farm [yard and drove with the bailiff in a horse-drawn carriage to the fields, Karol, the coachman, sitting high in front and proud of his charge. There was plenty of time for the workers to watch our approach. When we stepped out of the carriage two of the prettiest girls dressed saucily in colourful finery with [ribbons on their bodices and in their hair, met us and tied to our left arms a bunch of wheat/barley ears, poppies, corn-flowers and other flowers with a colourful ribbon, wishing us the blessings of

God and a good harvest. Father replied and gave them a banknote or two. A much more elaborate ceremony was held at the end of the harvest which I am describing in chapter 16.

On fine days work started at about 5 am and went on until sunset. Workers took it in turns, some sleeping a few hours during the midday heat. All arrangements were left to the foreman in consultation with our bailiff.

10 - 15 men formed a staggered line, each cutting a swath of wheat or barley. I can still remember the sound of the swish of scythes and the rustling of the falling straw. Behind each man was a woman whose task it was to pick up with her sickle the cut straw and tie a binder twine round it forming a sheaf. This was either left lying or several sheaves were formed into upright stooks. This was a back-breaking job for the women.

High-sided wagons drawn by two oxen were used to load the sheaves on. For harvest work the sides of the wagons were broad ladders. They could be exchanged with boards when carting potatoes or sugarbeet. About 20 of these wagons were used to collect the sheaves and cart them to a threshing machine. Village boys handled the oxen. The wagons, their wooden wheels and iron loops, the yokes, ladders etc. were maintained by us in our smithy and workshop during the winter months. The sheaves were pitched high onto the wagons and carted at snail's pace to a corner of the field and lifted directly into the threshing machine. The threshing site was chosen to be as far as possible from the farm and <sup>yard</sup> village in case the straw caught fire. The threshing tackle consisted of a steam engine which provided the power via a long leather belt approximately 5" wide; the actual thresher and the elevator which lifted the threshed straw onto a rick. The elevator was driven by a short leather belt from the thresher. The height of the elevator was adjustable and was gradually lifted as the rick grew taller. The steam engine could not propel itself. It needed three pairs of horses to move it. The thresher needed two or three pairs and the elevator one pair of horses. It took about two days to move the whole tackle from one site to another and to get it into working condition again. Coal had to be carted to the engine and there were generally two wooden barrel-shaped water tanks mounted each on four wheels and drawn each by a pair of oxen to serve one engine with water. Such a wooden tank is discernible in photo 58. One tank was placed next to the engine to feed the boiler. It had a small tap to fill enamel-lined buckets. A young man or woman walked continuously amongst the workers and gave them water in a mug to quench their thirst or they poured water over their heads and arms to cool them down. The other wooden tank wagon replaced the first one when empty and also served as stand-by in case of a fire when

the water could be pumped out through a rubber hose.

Feeding the sheaves into the machine was a highly skilled and somewhat dangerous job and only a few of the men could do it. First the binder twine was cut with a short sharp knife by a man behind the feeder-man and the cut twine was thrown unto a heap as it would cause damage to the machine if it got into it. The feeder-man's job was to introduce the sheaves in regular measured amounts into the drum below as any sudden surge of feed would cause the drum to stall which could throw off the belt which was highly dangerous. The feeder-man's job was the dustiest and most tiring and noisy and any one man could do it only for short periods before being relieved. It was dangerous because if the foot slipped it could get caught in the fast rotating drum. There were other hazards such as large stones or a forgotten hone-stone or sickle which could damage the drum, cause it to stop and throw off the belt. Any damage to the drum meant cleaning the machine by hand and carrying out the necessary repairs. We had always 2 - 3 of our skilled mechanics on the job to see that all was working smoothly and to carry out any running repairs. Normally they carried out routine jobs such as watching the pressure gauge on the boiler and for ever carrying a long necked oil can to squirt oil into where ver it was needed. In an emergency they worked hard, often well into night with the help of large carbide lights.

The wheat/barley poured out from chutes at one end of the threshing machine.

3 or even 4 women were kept busy to hook jute sacks underneath the chutes. When full, the sacks were unhooked, weighed, tied up with string and loaded by a man onto a waiting horse drawn cart. As soon as a cart was full of sacks it drove off and another empty cart took its place.

Very light and damaged grains came out of a chute on the side and weed seeds and chaff from a third chute.

Breakfast was taken by the workers in the field. Women carried coffee, smoked chunks of white lard and bread which they had baked themselves, to them.

Loaves were circular, perhaps 10 - 12 " in diameter. All work stopped at noon, the signal being a whistle blown by our foreman, who at that time was <sup>V</sup>ZIZKA (pronounced Zhishka). More about him below. Women or children

carried lunch in enamelled pots of which generally 3 were stacked in a container with a handle on top. They also had brought bread and sometimes fruit or tomatoes or cucumbers in a linen bundle which also served as table cloth. Soup (lentil, bean, potato) followed by goulash or stew or dump-



lings with potatoes and/or vegetables, all nicely hot were typical menus. The workers rested in the shade of trees and then fell asleep. Absolute silence reigned for a while, particularly marked and welcome after the hum of the threshing machine. The sun blazed down and the air quivered in the heat.

After one hour the whistle went and the machine started up again, shattering the silence.

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To return to <sup>v</sup> Zizka who for many years <sup>was</sup> our resident foreman. He ~~was~~ native of Hadunice. I don't know whether this was his real name or whether he was so called because he resembled the belligerent medieval leader of the Hussites of that name. Our man, about 55 - 60, had a massive body with a gigantic paunch protruding in a fine arc above the belt holding up his trousers. He had a large bushy moustache drooping at both ends and a greasy hat on his round skull. Zizka was a commanding sight, much respected by the men and by father. In discussing the work, a proper line of command was observed. Father talked to the bailiff whose responsibility it was to pass on the word via our foreman to the workers or if the hired harvest workers were concerned than via their foreman. Father spoke, however, directly to the chief mechanic. Conversation was in Slovak.

Smoking was strictly forbidden. The sparks from the tall chimney of the engine were an unavoidable risk and any fire caused occasionally was quickly put out with water from the wooden tanks. On one occasion father and I approached a threshing site on foot and Zizka came to meet us with his slow and ponderous gait when one of the women shouted "Uncle Zizka you're on fire". Indeed we saw smoke coming out of his pocket. He quickly retrieved a long stemmed pipe over which a mugful of water was poured by a quick-witted woman. Nothing was said about it at the time but no doubt the bailiff reprimanded Zizka severely after our departure.

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Up to about then I had never ventured out of the house alone. I was perhaps 7 when I was sent on an errand to a nearby shop by Mariška. I remember being a little frightened but after a few times out in the street alone I became bolder and didn't mind any longer.

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My first trip abroad was in the summer of 1923. We went to Swinemünde on the Baltic Sea. This is the spot where today the border starts between West and East Germany. Swinemünde is about halfway between Kiel and Danzig (now Gdansk in Poland). It took two nights for Mother, Anni, nanny and I to travel via Prague and Berlin to reach our destination. Jean did not come with us, presumably she was considered too young. We were away for two or three weeks, father joining us for the last days as it was in the middle of harvest time. We stayed in a small hotel or guest house in a street near the beach. There was an enormous stretch of white clean sand and a gently shelving beach, safe for children. This was my first experience of the sea. I can't remember many details except for a general feeling of sand, sea and pleasure. Both men and women had to

wear black swimsuits which covered the body except for the arms and the legs below the knee. One day people ran to a spot near the water and there was great commotion. I have never discovered why but think that either someone had drowned, or nearly drowned or that someone's shoulder-strap had come loose. Another occasion I remember was when father took me to an open air café. Mother and Anni were not with us. I ate an enormous portion of strawberries with whipped cream. When we finished father paid the waitress which astonished me no end. It had'nt occurred to me until then that it was necessary to pay in restaurants. I also remember that at the place where we stayed they served from time to time cold German soups such as cherry soup.

On the way back we stopped for a night in a Berlin hotel. The only thing I remember clearly was an enormous elephant in the zoo. I was familiar with cattle and horses but never dreamt that an animal could be quite so huge.

The trip had been undertaken to provide healthy, fresh air, sea water and sunshine and also fun and pleasure. It had a curious effect on me: my body started to swell. At first it was thought to be a good thing to put on a little extra weight. But weeks after our return home my girth continued to expand and quite rapidly at that. It was thought that I was suffering from some glandular malfunctioning, possibly induced by the iodine or other sea element. Noone knew, however, whether there was any connection between my stay in Swinemünde and my developing obesity. It had a debilitating effect on me for years.

After I started to attend school, I was physically handicapped at PE and was teased by my fellow pupils. I was taken to several doctors including to Professor Biedl, a well known endocrinologist, in Vienna. Dieting and exercises were only palliatives. I could already cycle. Any exercise caused me to sweat profusely. Exhibit 49 was taken in Dec 23 after our return from Swinemunde. It shows how fat I got in comparison with exhibit 46. It appears that I wore the same suit in both photos but it almost burst at the seams in 49.

I forget the year when mother took me to the Weisser Hirsch in the vicinity of Dresden but I must have been 13 or 14. This was a health sanatorium where I was treated to reduce weight. I was on a strict diet, did lots of exercises and every morning underwent a water treatment. This consisted of powerful hot and cold water jets being alternatively directed from a hose onto my naked and aching body as a sort of massage.

It gave Mother and me the opportunity to explore Dresden: the cathedral, the Zwinger with its wonderful collection of paintings, including Raffael's famous Mary and Child and the old streets and squares which were virtually destroyed by bombing in the last war.

My obesity was a great worry to my parents and I certainly suffered from its debilitating effect. I don't think it was ever discovered what was wrong with me.

It was not until I was about 17 years old that I regained more or less my former shape. I have, however, retained a somewhat oversized paunch ever since.





49. Taken in December 1923. I was  $6\frac{1}{2}$ ,  
Anni  $5\frac{1}{2}$  and Jean just over 3 years  
old. Note how fat I am.

50. Bratislava from the right bank of the Danube. I received  
this card in 1906. The view is almost exactly as I remember  
it. Since then the castle has been repaired and roofed over  
and a new bridge built and a road from the bridge running  
on the left of the cathedral spire and along the shoulder  
of the castle hill.

## BRATISLAVA PRIMARY SCHOOL MY FIRST SKIING HOLIDAY 1925 - 1927

In the late summer of 1925 the family moved to Bratislava. The principal reason for the move was the schooling of our children. Private tuition has its disadvantages of which one is lack of contact with other children. Piestany had no German schools and my parents preferred us to have a German education. The German language was far more important for ones future job chances and for general cultural reasons than Slovak or Hungarian. Bratislava had not only German primary schools but also a good real-gymnasium. Other families also moved into the Slovak capital. The Frank case to L. ... near the Lichtenstein case and lived almost next



50. Bratislava from the right bank of the Danube. I received this card in 1966. The view is almost exactly as I remember it. Since then the castle has been repaired and roofed over and a new bridge built and a road from the bridge running on the left of the cathedral spire and along the shoulder of the castle hill.

The houses were mostly new and of the then fashionable "Modern" design. Our flat was spacious and comfortable and had central heating. Its plan is shown in exhibit 51.