

PHILOSOPHY AND THE ARTS

So far my story has been of a descriptive nature. I shall try in this chapter to say something about the developments of my thoughts and in particular how school work influenced my thinking.

I have mentioned briefly that in the last two years at school we took philosophy. Lessons were twice a week. It was not a Matura subject. In the first year we were introduced to philosophers and their systems. In the second year it was mainly psychology. To start with we were introduced to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Kant, Nietzsche and others. Naturally we were taught more about German than other thinkers. We learned the meaning of logic, ethics, aesthetics; the problem of free will v. determinism and other concepts discussed by philosophers for hundreds of years. Logic was an interesting subject with practical applications as it helped to develop an argument rigorously and to arrive at a valid conclusion. Some contests were held amongst us pupils and attention was paid to classical rhetorics. Sophistry was exposed. To be able to conduct a logical argument was regarded a desirable attribute. I remember once challenging mother to a logical dispute which she won.

Psychology started with such basic concepts as the five senses, how they convey a view of the world outside us and how the mind "processes" sense conceptions to obtain a view. We discussed outside experience v. inherited qualities; the individual in society; freedom and the state; obedience v. rebellion. These were topical subjects in the political climate in which we lived. Should education serve to develop the individual or should it be subservient to the needs of the state or even a dictator?

Our own views started to form and as we read the philosophers, we related their teachings to the events and experience around us. I had deeply read about the Russian revolution and familiarised myself not only with its history and leaders but also with the underlying philosophies. Marx and Engels were read and discussed.

I found it difficult to understand some of the philosophical writings such as Kant and Hegel. I decided that I had to acquire a mental apparatus to absorb critically and to understand what I read. I started off with Descartes' "Discourse de la Methode" and strove - like him - to acquire "true" knowledge. He had demolished one apparent truth after the

other until he came to the undeniable core truth "cogito ergo sum". This does not really say anything else than "I exist". Existence is a difficult philosophical concept. Emulating Descartes, I chopped away at the views I held which is not easy and I managed to do it only inadequately. I then read Plato's "Republic" and other writers, struggled with Kant, whom I found particularly unintelligible; read Schopenhauer (in parts) and Spinoza (in parts) in both of whom I found echoes of some of my own ideas. Henry Brompton (alias Buxbaum, now in Los Angeles) was my principal discussion partner. He was well read, had a sharp analytical mind and spoke lucidly. No wonder he became Professor of Political Philosophy in the USA. Peter was not very interested but I had some useful discussion with some older friends and adults too.

At the time when I was involved with Descartes, I also changed my handwriting as part of my self imposed discipline to make a new start. It took me some time to accomplish this. As a child I wrote in German Gothic script, but when we started to learn Latin, French and Slovak I changed to Roman script which was rather unreadable. The way I write now I acquired when I was about 17.

I pursued my "philosophical studies" later in Prague but only in a casual manner. Phenomenology was then all the rage amongst contemporary philosophers. Oskar Kraus and Franz Brentano were the great leaders. Brentano (1838-1917) and his followers were unquestioning Cartesians. One of the very few books I brought with me to England is his "Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis" (Origins of ethical knowledge).

My interest in philosophy spread to the philosophy of history and of the arts and on to "cultural studies" in general. I read Spengler's "Decline of the West" and Gibbons' "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" and also the Swiss Burckhardt's "Renaissance". Much later in England I read Collingwood, Mumford and Croce. My interest in the philosophy of history was a sort of preparation to later spirited discussions with my future bride.

Art figured large in the writings of these authors: the development of form from the primitive to the most sophisticated; the function of art in society; the appreciation of art - in fact the history of art. I eagerly read about art, visited museums in Vienna, Bern, in Dresden and wherever I could find any. Mother was very interested in paintings and had several books of reproductions. I became particularly interested in architectural styles which was helped by what I learned in my religious tuition classes at school.

When I was 17 or 18 we were expected to give a talk about a subject of our choice. I chose "Renaissance Architecture in Florence". I studied the palazzi, the famous sculptors and painters, their different styles etc. We had at school a collection of pictures and prints and I used these as well as postcards to illustrate my lecture. The talk was quite a success. When I visited Florence with Peter Lax in 1936 I knew what to expect and I was greatly impressed seeing all these wonderful buildings, statues, museums and gardens which were the subject of my talk.

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I must digress to report on another talk I gave at school. In 1926 Umberto Nobile, an Italian air force officer, flew with Amundsen over the North Pole in an air ship. In 1928 he led another air ship flight over the pole from Spitsbergen to Alaska. Unfortunately the airship was wrecked by a storm after Nobile had passed the North pole. Nobile and other survivors were rescued by a Swedish aircraft and a Russian icebreaker after having spent many horrible weeks on ice floes and after several failed rescue attempts. Six men died on these rescue operations including Amundsen. The newspapers were full of these events for weeks when I was nearly 12 years old. I kept all the newspaper cuttings and these came very handy when I gave my talk. I had prepared for it a large wall map which showed the flight of the airship and the routes of the rescue operations in different colours.

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So much did I get interested in the history of art that I wanted to study it for a degree. This was a bombshell for my parents. It had been tacitly understood that one day I would follow father on the farm and that I would study a subject that would prepare me for this such as agriculture or bio-chemistry. But by 1935 doubts had arisen about our future in Czechoslovakia with the political clouds gathering over Hitler Germany. If we had to emigrate, I thought, history of art was as good a subject for survival as any other. Father, by nature, was always tolerant and did not want to force me into farming especially as by then farming was a losing business. Mother was in a great dilemma. At heart she fully approved of my choice but argued that chemistry was a fast developing subject, recognised the world over and that in the event that I had to emigrate it would be easier to earn my living with chemistry than with art history. Arguments went on for weeks. Dr. Fanto, the only chemical engineer we knew, visited us several times and extolled life in the chemical industry and told me about all the progress it was bound to make in the future. Ever since, he had taken an interest in my career, first in London later from wherever he was, from

Israel, from New York. I learned a great deal from him and am grateful for the trouble he had taken. I haven't heard from him for years and take it that he had died in New York.

In the end, mother persuaded me to study industrial chemistry in Prague. It must have been a little sad for her to make me change my mind to drop history of art, in which she herself was so interested. But I am most grateful to her.

I never gave up my interest in the history of art and attended some useful lectures at Prague University on the subject. It was indeed a pleasure when Laura chose this subject.

Music was never one of my strong points. I read a little about its theory, history and about composers. Spengler considered music the highest form of art, an amalgam of pure pleasure, communion with the Highest, expression of one's deepest and best emotions and so forth. As most of the best known composers were then Germans/Austrians, he concluded that the German nation possessed the highest culture the world has ever seen and therefore the Germans are the finest people in the world - in fact the natural Herrenvolk. I tried, but could never bring myself to believe that music is THE all-embracing highest form of art - if one can categorise arts at all.

I took piano lessons for years but made little progress. My teacher was the organist of the German Lutheran church and did his best with me. He had long hair, which was unusual then, except for artists. His hair constantly dropped into his face. He was agile, striding with long steps and wore a broad rimmed musicians' black hat. I heard him play his church organ and he was certainly a wonderful performer. He once let me use it. Touching one key lightly and instantly hearing the whole church being filled with the sound of the pipe is an almost frightening experience for the uninitiated.

We had an old fashioned gramophone which one had to wind by hand and which had a large funnel shaped loud speaker. I liked several records. One was a recording by the violonist Jan Kubelik whose son Rafael later was conductor in the west. Also a record by the tenor Richard Tauber. Occasionally I did go to a concert but did not have much opportunity until I got to Prague. I preferred opera and ballet. I also enjoyed light operettas by Strauss, Kalman etc. Plays like "Countess Maritza", "The Csardas Princess" and "weisses Rössl" (which Laura once saw in Paris) I enjoyed and still do.