

At the beginning of chapter 12 I said that at the time when we moved to Bratislava several other families and their children, with whom we were befriended, also moved to Bratislava. I also got to know other children who lived in the same area. Most of us went to the same primary and later secondary schools which were located nearby. Our district was middle class. Some of the houses were of older vintage but many were quite new and rarely had more than three stories. I thus became a member of a large and loose group of likeminded friends. A few became close friends, the contact with the others was rather casual. We all shared in similar experiences like going to school, to dancing classes, rowing, ice skating, bathing, going to the theatre and cinéma and to student balls. In the previous chapter I referred to "us" by which I meant members of our group and I must now explain their significance in my life. Several of these friends now live in the west.

The first thing I must say is that there was no conflict between my being with them and my family. The parents of many of them had social contacts with my parents, especially with mother. The second point is that we never felt that we were a clique and it never occurred to us to form a structured gang. It was the most natural thing for us to be together. Thirdly I am of a rather gregarious nature and this I shared with other members of the group. Finally I think the fact that both boys and girls were in the group made it desirable for us to be part of it as it facilitated to meet the other sex.

My closest friends were of my own age and my class mates. However, partly through my sisters, I also made friends with older and younger age groups. Anni, about 18 months younger than I, had "boy friends" who were older than I. My closest friend was Peter Valko with whom I attended primary and secondary schools. Later, in Prague, we shared digs. Katka Ruge, Steffi Doss, Mimi still in Czechoslovakia, Zsuzsi Geröfi, Klari née Erzsolt, another Catherine called Szegö, Walter Schönfeld, Laci Laufer and Henry Brompton were amongst those who were my class mates. In 1982 Henry Brompton discovered that at least three ethnic German class mates, who were expelled after 1945 from Czechoslovakia, lived in the west. ^{Chapter 12} Monsignor Rudolf* and Hofrat Havel* in Vienna and Tali Gratzner in W. Germany. A fourth one, Falb, is also apparently living in Germany. Hegyi and Myilas, both ethnic Hungarians, still

* I met them in Vienna in the autumn of 1986

live in Czechoslovakia.

amongst older friends were Jenö Rees, Judy Preč, Leslie Eggerton, Franz Munk, Henry Brandon, Jancsi Elek and others. Peter Lax and Feri Elek were classmates of Anni's. Anni Heimann, Duci Feher and Zsuzsi Stern, Jenö's first wife, were in the form below Jean's. There were many others but many of them did not survive the Holocaust.

Anni was more or less in the same crowd as I and for a year or longer went "steady" with Jenö. Jean went more her own way. For quite a while she was friendly with Tibor Forgách a nice and handsome ethnic Hungarian who went to the Hungarian school where incidentally also Feri Roth went. Her two closest girl friends were ethnic Slovaks: Tatiana Gazik, whose father was a Minister in the Prague Government and Vera Hornak. Jean spoke better Hungarian and Slovak than I. Exhibit 91 shows Jean and Tibor in the summer of 1937.

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In spite of the darkening political horizon our lives were still almost normal and enjoyable.

Lots of boys and girls went "steady". Some on an almost permanent basis others for short periods only and there was a certain amount of changing partners. Sex was virtually taboo but kissing and cuddling was in. The girls from our form never paired with us from the same form. They "used" us occasionally as go-betweens with their boy friends to carry secret and sealed missives or in other ways. For instance when a girl had been persuaded, against her better judgement, by a boy to a date and she tried to get out of it we were sent to the tryst and spin a yarn why she couldn't come.

"Stealing" a girl from another boy was against the accepted code. Chivalrous behaviour on the part of the boys was expected. Boys paid for cinémas even if the girl came from a well-to-do family. Parties were given almost exclusively by the girls and their parents. There was always plenty of food but no alcohol. We played games like Oranges and Lemons and the forfeits were kissing in an adjoining dark room.

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There existed a "corso" like in all Central European, Italian and Spanish towns. It took place in the shopping street in the old town. It was about 15 minutes walk from our house. On the way we passed near the Capucine church in exhibit 92. One then crossed a bridge over what used to be the town moat, walked through the narrow gate of the St. Michael's tower and then reached the Corso. The shopping street curved slightly to the left in the direction of the Danube. It ended in a large square. The theatre was on the left (see exhibit 66), the Carlton hotel almost opposite and the Redoute, where balls



91. Jean and Tibor Forgách, summer 1937



92. The Capucine church in Bratislava.
This card was sent by Ernst Knobloch
on 2nd November 1946.

were held, on the left. In the summer the corso continued to another square by the Danube, in the centre of which was the Stefanik statue and a large flower bed. On that square was the café Berlin and the little booking office and shelter from where the ferry crossed the Danube.

On the corso was a Konditorei which served most delicious and creamy patisserie and real ice creams. When I was 17 - 18 years old I walked the corso nearly every day, alone or with Peter. In any case one always met some friend there. The corso was between 6 and 7 pm. Evening meal at home at around 7.30 pm. We chatted with friends, perhaps looked out for a particular girl, made a mental note of "who was walking with whom", bought theatre tickets, arranged to see a film or got an invitation to a party.

Looking back, 1935 was one of my happiest years at home, certainly the last one. The approaching end of school is perhaps a somewhat sentimental period in an adolescent's life. One tends to look back and also forward. Matura is a watershed and afterwards one feels an adult. My earlier shyness, due to a large extent to my obesity, had gradually disappeared. I felt at ease with my friends and started to date girls.

School work intensified as the date of the matura approached. To pass it meant an assured place at the university. I felt it my duty to the parents and my group not to let them down. I just had to pass, the more so as the darkening political situation made it imperative to finish studies as soon as possible. The certificate one obtained after the school leaving exams was called the "Certificate of Maturity". Hence the name Matura for the exam. It had a grandiloquent sound and was to be taken seriously.

Yet there was still time for amusement and other activities. We had formed about a year earlier a little club which we called the "Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft" or German workshop. There were only about 6 members including Peter and Henry Buxbaum. We published an occasional paper called ODDA short for Organ der Deutschen Arbeitsgemeinschaft. Henry was editor-in-chief. In my bedroom we had a Gestetner duplicator, the type that required wax stencils. It was a messy job and ink splattered all over the furniture and bed cover, much to Mother's displeasure. Each issue had perhaps 8 pages. The outer cover was a bright yellow. It dealt mainly with literary subjects and I even had a poem once published in it. The magazine extolled the humanistic view of life and fervently and somewhat romantically proclaimed our belief in freedom and liberty and the brotherhood of men. After the first issues, which we sold for coppers outside the school gate, some teachers declared that it was a Communist-inspired political organ and subversive. That was the second time that I was called before the headmaster. We refuted these

allegations but what to us was the best of German tradition had in the eyes of the teachers become a deviation from the new Nazi inspired ideals. we abandoned publication, especially as we didn't want to fall foul of our teachers just before the Matura.

About 3 weeks before the Matura, large framed pictures of all Matura forms from all secondary schools, appeared in the windows of the best shops. From our school were two, as there was my A and a B form. Postcard sized photos of our heads were stuck neatly in rows on hard board, our names written below. There was also a photo of the school head and of our form master. The name of the school was written on top in caligraphy and the years "1927 - 1935". We boys had evening jackets. The photographer had collar, tie and jacket which one could borrow, but I had my own. The girls had their hair permed and done up and wore their own pretty dresses, preferably a shade off the shoulder. We walked the corso with added purposefulness, glancing at our photos in the shop windows and trying to catch comments from passers-by. The local "Grenzboten" (Frontier Messenger) paper, for which Henry Brandon wrote for a while, covered the event fully. Exhibit 93 shows my Matura photo. I have no photo of our form in the last year but exhibit 94 shows us in April 1933. I am the second from the left in the middle row. Henry Buxbaum is next to me, then Peter. Monsignor Rudolf is the fourth from left in the middle row and on his left is Tali Gratzner. On the left of the form master - also called Gratzner - is Zsuzsi Geröfi, next to her Agi Lichtner who died in England from a bone that had got stuck in her throat, next Steffi Doss, next Katka Pughe and then Mimi. Note that the six boys in my row have their arms in the defiant Napoleonesque pose.

Exhibit 95 was taken in April 1935, a few weeks before Matura. The four of us - from left I, Peter, Henry Buxbaum and Weinzetl - had for years been sitting together in the last bench and called ourselves the Kommune Partei der Letzten Bank (The community party of the rear bench). Weinzetl was an ethnic German, the son of a vinegrower and the Bratislava equivalent of a cockney. His nickname was csacsi (pronounced chachee) which means in Hungarian donkey. He suffered his nickname humorously. He was relaxed, friendly, witty and a loyal friend. Our friendship lasted right to the last day of school. I learned later that he was enrolled in the Hitler army and died at the front.

Exhibit 96 was also taken in front of the school gates in March 1935. Feri Roth is in the back. From left: Magda Spitzer, Stahler, I,



93. My Matura photo, May 1935

95. I, Peter,
Henry Weis-
baum, Wein-
sell in
front of
school
April
1935

96. Paul Roth
in back, I
in 3rd
from left;
in front of
school
March 1935



97. 1934
or
1935

94. Our form in April 1933. I am the second from left in the middle row

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95. I, Peter,
Henry Bux-
baum, Wein-
zettel in
front of
school
April
1935



96. Feri Roth
in back, I
am 3rd
from left;
in front of
school
March 1935



97. 1934
or
1935

Mimi, Peter and Anni Fleischhacker. I don't know when exhibit 97 was taken but I guess around 1934/35.

MATURA

One was assessed for Matura in all 16 compulsory subjects. Of these 11 subjects were assessed on the performance of the last two years only - though I don't know how. Matura was taken in 5 subjects. Two were compulsory: German and Latin. Latin was a written exam. The others one could choose. I took French, mathematics and zoology / botanics. These and German were oral exams. The pass grades were: very good, good and sufficient. A photostat copy of my certificate, dated 13th June 1935 is appended. (Exhib.98) Below are my marks. (M) means a Matura subject:

Religious tuition	good
German language (M)	good (based on oral exam)
Czechoslovak language	sufficient
Latin language (M)	sufficient
French language (M)	good (based on oral exam)
History	sufficient
Geography	good
Patriotic study	sufficient
Mathematics (M)	sufficient (based on oral exam)
Zoology and Botany (M)	very good (based on oral exam)
Chemistry and Mineralogy	good
Geology	good
Natural history	good
Projectional geometry	sufficient
Philosophic propedeutics	good
PE	sufficient

I had taken shorthand as optional subject and passed with Very good. Although my average marks were far from brilliant, I came 4th in the Matura subjects after Steffi Doss, Hegyi and Nyilas who were always on top of the form. I can only assume that my success was due to a certain amount of unflappability in face of the examiners.

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I did not need Latin for university as I was going to a technical faculty but it was compulsory for the Matura. It was always my worst subject and the same applied to several of my class mates. I certainly could not afford to fail the exam and lose a year. After some heart searching several of us decided to resort to subterfuge. We enlisted the aid of older friends.

We worked out a stratagem which was discussed in every detail and well rehearsed in secrecy. Of course, we were not the first who resorted to outside assistance and there existed some previous experience.

Our written Latin exam took place in the largest class room on the top floor. We each had a desk to ourselves and these were placed sufficiently far apart to make cribbing very difficult if not impossible. The school bedel (we called him Pedell; he wore a uniform and a peaked cap; he was in charge of all keys, cleaning arrangements, ringing the bell etc; his wife ran a tuck shop on the ground floor) had been stationed as Cerberus in the corridor to make sure that no one could enter or leave the area, while the exam was on. To go to the lavatory, opposite the exam room, required permission from the invigilator, our teachers taking this duty in turn.

The sealed envelope containing the exam paper was opened in the presence of the headmaster. Our Latin master wrote the Latin text onto the black board and we all had to copy it out. One of our classmates, who "happened" to sit next to a window, had a carbon paper and a second sheet of paper on which the Latin text was copied. It took perhaps an hour to write down the text. The copy prepared by our classmate was noiselessly wrapped into tissue paper and thrown out of the window, which like all the windows were wide open as it was stifling hot. Outside one of our accomplices waited on a bike and when he had picked up the paper he rang the bicycle bell as a signal that he got it. He rushed to a nearby house where other accomplices armed with dictionaries translated the text. Several "scribes" wrote out the translation into German. No two texts were identical as this would have raised the suspicion of the examiners. Another cycle bell about half an hour later heralded the arrival of the translations. The most hazardous phase was now to come. The scripts which were packed tightly in a waterproof rubber balloon had to pass Cerberus and lowered into the lavatory cistern. With the permission of the invigilator, one of our colleagues went to the lavatory. When he returned the triumphal expression on his face told us what we wanted to know. The most difficult and nerve-racking thing was to distribute the copies to all of us involved. If one of us were found out, the consequences for all would have been terrubæ, even for the innocent ones. But it was managed flawlessly. The next question was where to hide the crib, yet be able to consult it. Katka, who sat at the bench next to mine across the aisle, tucked hers underneath her suspenders where they gripped the stocking and had most of the time her skirt pulled right up. The next hour was one of high tension requiring steady nerves. At last we had finished, handed in our translations and staggered out in exhaustion.

A few days later the oral exams started. We were taken in alphabetical order about 8 or 10 a day. I was on the last day. All those who took Matura were allowed to watch proceedings which took place in the large staff room. I had not told anybody at home the day of my exam. I was quite calm when Walter Schönfeld came to pick me up at home after lunch and we walked together to the school. I learned later that mother happened to pass by the school while I was inside taking my exam. She tried to find out from some classmates, hanging about by the gate, when it was my turn and had a mild shock when she heard I was just being examined.

We sat at a long table covered with green baize, facing the windows. Two or three examiners sat opposite us, their backs to the window. Our own teachers conducted the exams but there were outside examiners from the ministry as independent judges. Those called us Mr. or Miss. Some of our classmates who already had gone through the ordeal stood behind us against the wall watching our performance.

I forget in what order I was examined. Each exam took 20 - 30 minutes.

The whole ordeal lasted about 2 hours. French was no problem thanks to my stay in Vevey. Nor Zoology and Botany as I was on best of terms with teacher Orthmann. In fact he wanted to show off a little with one of his more promising pupils. He gave me for identification a few small human bones from the wrist (carpus). There is one no larger than a pea and appropriately called pisiformis. I managed to give all their names in German and Latin and everybody was duly impressed. I got my only "very good" for this.

My worst mark was in mathematics. At least I passed instead of the prognostication by my maths teacher Bacharach that I would fail with "drums and trumpets". I had no problem with German literature.

The results came through quickly and I got the certificate a few days later. I was elated and the family and friends were pleased too. All my friends passed too. It was not the habit in the family to reward us on such occasions but I was presented with the expenses of a Matura trip abroad. I also celebrated with some friends at a Heuriger. Custom required it that one went back to the school at night and relieved oneself against one of its walls.

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To digress for a moment.

On another evening, a Saturday and under similar circumstances, I felt an all too human need but was caught in the act by the eye of the law. I was given a ticket to pay my fine next morning in the town hall, a Sunday. Our town hall was a venerable building of considerable architectural beauty and of great historical interest. It had a fine cobbled court yard, a broad

staircase leading to an arched gallery from which beautifully furnished rooms opened. It was a great tourist attraction not to be missed by visitors to Bratislava.

When I arrived there was already a queue of about 20 people waiting at a closed door. I was surprised to see so many citizens lining up to pay their fines for trespasses of the law and joined the queue. My surprise was even greater when a guide appeared, unlocked the door and started the customary patter about our town hall and I realised that I was in the wrong queue.

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The most important event in connection with the Matura was yet to come: our Matura dinner to which we have been looking forward for months. I was one of the organisers. We hired a room in the "Batzenhäusel". This was a restaurant about 2 m from town on the way to the Kamzík hill where we used to ski. There was a garden which on summer^{sun-} days was packed with walkers and hikers tucking into chunks of bread smothered in pink "körözöt" or covered with slices of salami; ^{ice} ice creams and slaking their thirst with coffee, tea, beer or soft drinks.

Our form master and a few of our favourite masters had been invited to the dinner. We ate and we drank and as far as I remember there were no speeches just a few toasts. We became more merry as the evening wore on. There was joking and laughing and teasing. We were all friends and I think we were all sorry that our school days were over. After the masters left discretely, the party continued merrily in ^{the} highest spirits. I can't remember at what time the party broke up. We started to leave in small groups mostly of one boy and one girl. We walked in complete darkness along the footpaths on/across the woods, each pair making its own way back in the warm summer night. As our steps reached the first houses of the town the sky began to light up in the East. The streets were empty bar for the odd car or reveller like us. We had breakfast in a small café and then I accompanied my partner to her home in town. I was in my bed at perhaps 8 am, tired, exhausted but happy.