

"For the complete life, the perfect pattern includes old age as well as youth and maturity"

W. Somerset Maugham "The Summing up" 1938 p.73

NINE

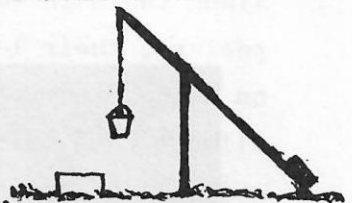
MADUNICE ANNI AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA ARE BORN 1917 - 1918

After my birth in Vienna I was taken home to Madunice. This was then a village of perhaps 50 houses, strung along the main road running from north to south. Barely a mile away to the east and flowing parallel with the road is the river Vah. Along its banks was mainly pasture land which was inundated in the spring. Also about a mile, to the west of the road, was the important dual track railway line, going south to Bratislava and beyond to Vienna and to the north to the eastern parts of Slovakia and to Poland. Only slow trains stopped. The road was dusty in the summer and muddy in the winter. The houses stood a little distance away from the road leaving a broad band of open ground, also dusty or muddy according to the time of the year. A few acacia and other trees were planted here and provided a little shade on a hot day to cart-oxen resting here chewing their cud pensively. In about the middle of the village stood an unpretentious Catholic church. Anni and I were christened here. Around the church the houses were set further back. This area lent itself to a variety of open air activities including church processions. The priest's house was on the west of the road more or less opposite the church. Bubnič was the incumbent who christened Anni and me. Later he became bishop and was involved in my parents' divorce proceedings. There were a few shops, an inn, a post office and the house of the gendarmes, the country police. The traditional house was of adobe and thatched but there was an increasing number of brick built houses with tiled roofs. There were no bare

walls. All were plastered and whitewashed or painted in pastel blues, pinks, yellows and greens every spring. Immediately behind the dwelling house was a stable, a store or granary and other farm buildings or sheds. Behind these was a narrow strip of land used mainly for growing vegetables and, if long enough, for wheat, potatoes or maize. Some of the peasants had additional small fields elsewhere. Small front gardens looked colourful in the summer with tall sunflowers, nasturtiums, geraniums and other flowers.

The peasants were largely self-sufficient though if there were too many mouths to feed in a family or if a family was impoverished, one or more members of the family worked on the road, the railway or for father but they all lived at home. Father employed perhaps 30 - 40, mainly men, all the year round and more in the summer. As there were not enough hands in the village for the harvest, labour was hired from the poorer villages in the hilly north 50 to 100 miles away. These were called "hornaks" which means highlanders and indeed they played a sort of small bagpipe.

There was no electricity until much later but we had a telephone ever since I remember. Water came from pumps erected over artesian wells, though there were still some wells over which there was a tall beam on top of which a cross beam was fixed on a hinge. At one end was a bucket which was let down into the well and the crossbeam allowed the full bucket to be lifted without physical effort. There was no sewerage.



Our farm was at the southern end of the village, west of the road. We had a few fields on the east of the road but immediately opposite the farm was the cemetery. One entered our farm yard between two big tall columns which were whitewashed annually. Atop each column were sculptured sheep. (See exhibit 30.) We had no sheep in Madunice but there could have been some earlier. There was no gate and the yard was thus always wide open. Beyond the entrance will be seen a large quadrangle completely surrounded by whitewashed buildings except at the opposite side where there was a gap through which one entered a second quadrangle. The ground was of compacted earth and gravel which was dusty or muddy according to the seasons. On the left, as one entered from the road, was a narrow strip of garden in front of our house. Shrubs, roses and other flowers served as a barrier against the dust. It also attracted greedy cattle with a taste for tender leaves, much to Mother's annoyance. Our house was L-shaped. The shorter bar faced the road and the longer one formed part of the quadrangle.

Inside the corner of the L was more garden and a gravelled area on which stood a polygonal summer house. Its sides were made entirely of green-painted lattice work, to let through a cool breeze. It was large enough to accommodate a large table and several chairs. Here one had meals on hot days. A part of the summer house is seen in exhibit 31. It was taken when I was 2 - 3 years old and Anni on her potty perhaps 1½.

The living and bed rooms were in front behind the narrow garden and the kitchen, larder, laundry and servants' rooms in the long bar of the L. Adjoining the house were stables which continued half way round the quadrangle. On the opposite side and on the right of the gate in exhibit 30 were father's office, the bailiff's house and granaries which occupied most of the right side of the yard. The second yard had stables too, including *one* for draft horses, a barn, sheds for agricultural machinery, a large smithy and work[shop] and tall sheds for drying corn cobs. The smithy/workshop employed 5 - 8 hands all the year round and more in harvest time.

Next to the house and *by* the farm [yard] ran an unpaved private road to the railway halt. We had our own sidings there for loading fattened cattle, sugar beet and potatoes and for receiving machinery and other goods. Along the main road and starting in the front garden was a row of tall poplars, their leaves rustling melancholically in the breeze. Further on, on both sides of the road, were fruit trees of which two or three were allocated to every family in the village. Father used to take Mother for walks along this avenue of poplars when she was expecting me. It must have been rather cold.

The earth in Madunice was very fertile, very fine river alluvium. It was almost black and difficult to work when wet. In places it was about 3 ft deep and there were no large stones. The land was absolutely flat all round but hills could be seen in the east beyond the Vah. There are no hedges or other wind breaks and on rare occasions spring winds caused tender barley or maize plants to be obliterated with fine earth and had to be resown.

Wheat was the main crop. Rye, barley and a little oats were grown too.

Sugar beet and potatoes were important crops. All crops were grown on a four-year rotation system and heavily treated with farm manure. Maiz & cobs were dried in narrow **roofed sheds, approximately 2 yards wide and 12 yards high, made** of timber lattices which let the wind through the sides.

The peasants grew a variety of vegetables <sup>and fruit</sup> mainly for their own use.

They sold the surplus in the town such as n-arby Hlohovec. Favourite crops were tomatoes, radishes, ridge cucumbers, lettuces, marrows, beans, peas, spinach, cabbage, brussel sprouts, cauliflowers, onions, shallots,





30. Entrance gate to farm yard in Madunice taken 1930s. Our house on left, granaries on right of quadrangle; Tatra car on left, second yard left back ground



31. I on left, Anni on potty. Latticed summer house in back in Madunice.

leeks, chives, parsley, water melons, soft fruit, plums (the favourite jam was made from plums and was thick and black and could almost be cut with a knife; it was used as a filling for dumplings, pies and other puddings), cherries, peaches, apricots, wall nuts, hazelnuts etc. Everything was eaten according to season. One looked forward from one year to the other for the first radishes, the first lettuce, the first tomatoes. During the winter it was mainly pickled cabbage, often in the form of Sauerkraut, red cabbage, pickled cucumbers and some winter vegetables.

---  
There is no particular significance in me being born in a Vienna hospital. It was the best in the area and most other hospitals must have been filled with war-wounded. I don't know whether father accompanied mother but I am reasonably sure that he would not have let mother undertake the journey alone in winter and under the conditions of war.

In March 1917 Boris and Micka came for three weeks to stay in Madunice with my parents. I have a description by Micka about that visit in a letter of 30th December 1959 which reveals her humour. I translate from it: "The centre of the family was the four weeks old Matyko. Everyone was full of admiration, nobody was allowed to get near him and nobody was allowed even to kiss his little legs in case a bacillus fell on him. In the window were tulip bulbs and every evening Boriska played the **Moonlight Sonata** by candle light in the unheated study (in Hungarian the word is *uri szoba* which literally means the master's room). I have often heard this gorgeous sonata played by well-known pianists but never had it such a profound effect on me than Boriska's sustained use of the loud pedal, hitting wrong notes on the untuned piano. I looked out across the road. The crosses in the cemetery silhouetted against the full moon. I shall never forget this mood".

Micka adds in the same letter that where our house stood and the farm yards were, there are now new buildings, that Madunice is twice its original size and that the only recognisable feature remaining is the cemetery.

---  
As Boris played the **Moonlight Sonata** under such idyllic conditions an event occurred hundreds of miles away which changed the world. In St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) strikes and riots had broken out on 8th March, the troops siding with the rioters two days later. On 12th March the Duma, a council appointed by the Czar, chose a provisional Government against the wishes of the Czar who abdicated the following day. (This is called the February revolution in the USSR as their calendar is 11 days behind ours.) Kerensky

was a member of the new Government. By May he was war minister (earlier he had been known as a pacifist) and on 27th July he became Prime Minister. But the Bolsheviki were determined to topple the provisional Government. This was helped by the arrival of Lenin whom the Germans delivered in a sealed cattle truck from Switzerland. On 7th November 1917 Kerensky's Government fell. Lenin established the "All-Russian Congress of Soviets". (This is called the October revolution). Kerensky fled and died in the 1970s in the USA. His son Oleg was 12 years old (born 1905) then and fled with his father. He settled in England <sup>and</sup> gave a lecture about these events to the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institute on 28th February 1984. He died recently.

To my parents and the middleclass in Austro-Hungary these events must have generated mixed feelings. Russia was out of the war and a separate peace treaty was signed later in Brest Litovsk. Yet communism in Russia could prove infectious to other Slavs and other countries. The last thing my parents wanted was the establishment of a communist régime at home.

---

Exhibit 32 shows Father, Mother and me at about that time. Note mother's long hair.

---

My sister Anni was born on 22nd May 1918, 15 months after me, in a Bratislava hospital. She was christened Anna Terezia. Both Anni and I had wet nurses. We also had a German nanny called Klärchen. She stayed several years with us and later looked after George Polgar.

1918 was also the year that Boris got married and exhibit 33 shows her as a bride. Exhibit 34 shows Mother in the same year.

---

1918 was a fateful year for the Central Powers with their <sup>military</sup> fronts collapsing. Hungry and angry soldiers in rags, emaciated and suffering from illnesses and injuries returned and law and order broke down. Politically events moved fast. A month after Anni was born, on June 19th, Masaryk was received by President Wilson in Washington. On September 3rd the USA formally recognised the Czechoslovaks as belligerents and the National Council became the Czechoslovak Government in Exile. There was panic in Vienna. On October 17th the Emperor Karl, forced by circumstances, tried to save the Empire and published a manifesto providing for four federal states: a German, a Czech, an Ukrainian and a Yugoslav but time was running out. On the next day the Czechoslovak Government appointed Masaryk Prime





32. Father, mother and I about end 1917



32A. I about same time  
as in 32



33. Boris as bride in 1918.  
Note characteristic Mona Lisa smile.





34. Mother in 1918

Minister, Beneš Foreign Minister and Štefanik War Minister; diplomatic representatives were appointed by the provisional Government to the Allied capitals. By now events were going at breakneck speed and on October 28th 1918 the Republic was proclaimed in Prague - a fortnight before the official end of the First World War on 11th November. Masaryk arrived in London from the USA on 27th November and made a triumphal entry into Prague on December 1st. Already on 29th October the Slovak National Council had held in Turčiansky Sv. Martin, in northern Slovakia, a decisive meeting and as a result the Slovaks made common cause with the Czechs. Štefanik, an air force officer, was still busily organising Czech and Slovak armed forces in Italy. He didn't fly back to Bratislava until May 1919. A vast crowd awaited him at the airport. In sight of the airport and waiting crowd he was killed when his aircraft crashed. This event, coupled with his delayed return had given rise to rumour that he was shot down deliberately but evidence had not been produced to support this view. Thus the Slovaks were deprived of a representative in the Prague cabinet. A larger than life-sized statue of his was later erected on a square near the Danube in Bratislava. This was destroyed when the Communists came to power.

---  
Emperor Karl, who had abdicated in 1918, died in exile in 1921. His wife Zita, an Italian princess, lived in exile, mostly in Italy and died recently. They had 8 children. Otto, the oldest was born in 1911. They were all exiled too. Otto is currently living in Munich and is an MP for the European Parliament.

It was an unhappy family: one committed suicide, one was murdered in Sarajevo, Franz Josef's wife Elisabeth was murdered in Geneva. There is a fine life-sized statue of her in a little well-kept garden on the shore of the lake in Montreux.

---  
The world had collapsed for my parents and the old middleclass to which they belonged. Law and order crumbled as Hungarian gendarmes and officials fled to Hungary, causing a vacuum before the Prague Government could restore order. "In the interval" (writes R.W. Seton-Watson in his book "A history of the Czechs and Slovaks", 1943, p. 322) "there was a certain amount of anti-semitic looting in the small towns of the Vah valley". I don't think that the motive was specifically anti-semitic nor was rioting restricted to the Vah valley. As the Jews were amongst the rich who lived in large houses and represented the largest part of the middleclass loyal to the old

régime, it was only natural that they were the main target of the infuriated returning soldiers. This little revolution by marauding and looting gangs was known as the rabovička which can be best translated as the "looting spree".

The earliest recollection I have is of the rabovička in Madunice. It must have been in the autumn of 1918. I remember travelling in the dark of night with mother, baby Anni and Klärchen the nanny in the horse-drawn carriage. Father, I think was not with us. The horizon glowed pink from fires of burning property. Something had gone wrong with the pole between the horses but we sped on regardless. We went presumably to the grandparents in Hlohovec.

I have another <sup>early</sup> recollection but cannot date it. We were travelling in a train and I was eating a hard-boiled egg which bore black marks from my fingers. Mother was rather concerned about this lack of hygiene.





35. Taken spring 1919. I was about 2 and am nursed by Klärchen.  
Anni barely 1, nursed by cousin Bözsi.



36. Piěstany 1919 about 2½



37. Piěstany 1919 about 2½