

HITLER BECOMES MORE AGGRESSIVE ITALY STUDENT POLITICS SKIING IN
BOHEMIA 1936 - 1937

January 1936 saw me back in Prague which greeted me like an old friend and I slipped readily into the routine of student life. It was the beginning of the semester when I had to work hard to catch up.

On March 7 (ex-President Masaryk's birthday) Hitler occupied the Rhineland. This was a neutral zone of Germany established after the First World War as a military no-man's-land to protect France from aggression. Immediately after the war it was governed by the Allies but over the years its administration was gradually handed back to the German Government. The intention was that eventually it should be fully integrated with Germany. Hitler's occupation was nevertheless an infringement of the peace treaty. No action was taken by the Western Allies.

This was the green light for Mussolini to annex Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) which occurred two days later. Italy had invaded the country in October 1935 despite protests from the League of Nations and had waged a ferocious war there. The negus (Emperor) Haile Selassie was forced into exile in England. The Duce meant to enlarge Italy's overseas Empire. The coastal area of Libya had been annexed in 1911, the Turks having been driven out and the military conquest was completed in 1931. This is the reason why Libya became a battlefield in the Second World War.

At long last the Western Allies woke up to the danger of the aggressive aspirations of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. But it was not only military aggression that worried the Allies but the threat to a democratic Europe. Yet in England and France there were voices which hailed Fascism as a counterweight to Russia and to Communism inside the European states. This showed an ignorance of the much greater danger from fascist dictatorships. At the time of Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 Anthony Eden (later the first Earl of Avon) was Minister without portfolio for the League of Nations of Baldwin's National (Conservative) Government in Britain. He was an outspoken critic of the German and Italian dictators and resolutely opposed Ethiopia's annexation by Italy in Geneva. He was admired for this in Czechoslovakia. I was one of his keen admirers. Prime Minister Baldwin had, however, very different ideas on foreign policy. Not only was Mussolini's aggression condoned but Baldwin's successor, Neville Chamberlain (who became Prime Minister in May 1937),^{4th} proposed an Anglo-Italian pact. Eden had become Foreign Secretary under Chamberlain. He tried to do his best to steer British foreign policy against the dictators and to re-arm the country. The final clash came in February 1938 - just before the Austrian Anschluss - and he resigned from the Government.

I had not yet been to Italy and an opportunity to go there came soon.

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I was to return home in June after the end of the semester and I decided to fly there. Student air tickets were at half price. I phoned Mother to tell her that I was coming home that day, but did not inform her of the mode of transport. She expected me late in the evening and to her great surprise I knocked at the house barely 3 hours after I had phoned her. The plane was an old (even then) two-engined Junker. The fuselage was not built on aerodynamic lines but consisted of a rectangular box-shaped cabin made of corrugated iron. In the corners the sheets of corrugated iron did not touch properly and through a slit I could see the landscape below. One sat on benches in two rows facing each other with very little space between them, knees almost touching. The noise was atrocious. There were no seat belts, no stewardesses and the cabin was not pressurised. We flew at a low altitude and it was fascinating seeing the countryside from this angle.

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Anni was just taking her Matura and I can't remember what she and Jean did that summer.

Anni's class-mate Peter Lax was looking for a companion for his Matura trip. He toyed with the idea of seeing Italy. This suited me well and we went together. Once again I travelled on the Semmering line, past somewhere near Murau where a huge swastika appeared on a curtain and got to Venice in the morning. We shared our compartment with two Viennese ladies, at least 10 years older than us. They headed for Santa Margherita and invited us to join them later.

I will not describe our stay in detail nor our sightseeing in Venice. It made a deep impression on me and I thoroughly enjoyed exploring the town's architectural, artistic and culinary offerings. Anni (now Reimann) happened to be staying in the most luxurious hotel on the Lido with her mother. We visited them a couple of times and bathed in the Adriatic from the private hotel beach, reached by a tunnel underneath the road. One evening the four of us took a gondola and let ourselves rowed through the narrow canals, the moon reflecting its face in the water.

Our next stop was Padova which once belonged to the Republic of Venice and later to Austria. There are many attractive buildings including St. Anthony's basilica which houses the saint's tomb. Padova has one of the oldest universities, founded in 1222 (about 10 years after Oxford). Europe's

oldest University is in Bologna which was our next stop. The study of anatomy on dead bodies was started in this university in the 14th century and we visited the world's oldest anatomy theatre.

Florence was our next stop. Having given a lecture at school about its renaissance architecture it was almost like visiting an old friend. Its palazzi, churches, statues and art galleries were a great pleasure and I spent much time in their detailed study. One evening we spent in Fiesole from where there is a splendid view of Florence and the surrounding countryside. Peter Lax was a quiet and somewhat taciturn companion but had a keen sense of humour and was prone to outbursts of giggles. We lived very frugally and stayed in cheap hotels but one evening we decided to have a big dinner in a posh restaurant on the main square. We fancied a juicy cut of roast beef from the silver trolley. The head waiter ceremoniously sharpened a long silver-handled carving knife on a hone-stone, handling both instruments with the virtuosity of a juggler, clanking one against the other right in front of us. Peter's face reddened and he burst out into uncontrolled chuckles, shaking all over and nearly choking. Watching him in convulsions I became infected and laughed at the top of my voice. I don't know what the head waiter/juggler thought of us. It took a few minutes for us to calm down and we thoroughly enjoyed the meal without further mishaps.

Up to then we had seen relatively little of the Duce's new Italy. But in Milan, our next stop, we received our fill. There was an exhibition on to celebrate the conquest of Abyssinia. Posters announcing the exhibition and flags were everywhere and also fasces about ten feet tall. The name fascist comes from these bundles of rods with an axe, formerly borne before an ancient Roman magistrate. Fasces were the Italian counterpart to the German swastika. Quotations from the Duce's speeches in huge letters were on hoardings such as: "Miglior vivere un giorno di leone che un anno di pecora". I am not sure of my spelling but it means "Better to live one day as a lion than one year as cattle". A revelation of the Duce's megalomania and predatory instincts. At the exhibition, carabinieri in their theatrical uniforms with green cock plumes on their helmets acted as guards and guides. We saw enlarged photos of heroic deeds by Italian soldiers and of defenceless Abyssinians being killed: the glory of the lion devouring his prey. Primitive utensils of the Abyssinians were on show as a justification of the civilising crusade the Duce in his great benevolence condescended to unleash on a backward population. The exhibition reeked of self-congratulation and horror. The carabinieri grinned at us - the way I imagined lunatics in an asylum grinned at casual visitors who could

get out again.

We visited the Duomo and Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" fresco. We attended an open air performance of an opera in the Castello Sforza. One afternoon we went to the trotting races. Very light two-wheeled gigs, on which sat little men in coloured silk blouses, were pulled round and round an arena by nimble-footed horses, frothing at their mouths.

After all that intensive sightseeing we decided to accept the invitation of the ladies whom we had met in the train on the first day. Santa Margherita was a pleasant seaside resort. At that time there were only a few hotels and guest houses, open-air cafés and restaurants. There was a marina and plenty of palms and flowers. We lazed on the beach and soaked in the sun. It is only a short distance to Genova but not as short as we thought when by mistake we alighted in a station which was not Genova's central station but Genova East or something like that. The only accommodation we could find was a miserable albergo which turned out to be the sort of hotel where couples would come after dark and hire a room by the hour. It didn't bother us and we embarked straight away on our sightseeing: the Duomo, Columbus's alleged birthplace, the cemetery, the harbour, the main piazza and narrow streets. We tasted the local sea food in little restaurants.

Our last stop in Italy was in Riva on the north end of lake Garda. Whereas the land around the southern part of the lake is flat, up in the north the lake forms a narrow wedge surrounded by mountains which are almost sheer in the west. A road passes high above the lake through several galleries which give lovely views of the azure water. From Riva we travelled further north into the Alps via Bolzano and Brunico (where Joan, Steven, William and I spent one night on our way to Veronika in Yugoslavia) into Austria. Peter returned home but I went to Bad Gastein (which we passed when we motored back from Yugoslavia) where I joined Mother who had been on holiday there. There was much to talk about.

Exh. 104 shows Mother on the bridge in Bad Gastein, but I am not sure whether it was taken when I visited her. 105 is also in Bad Gastein and was taken on 19th August 1933. I don't know when and where 106 was taken but I think also in Bad Gastein. It is one of the few photos where Mother is laughing.

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The rest of the summer I spent on the farm and in October I went to Prague. We had no students' union in the English sense though there was a students' association. I forget both its name and functions. It was of more importance to students living in kolejs than to me as the association had some responsibility for running the kolejs. It didn't seem to have much of an



104. Mother in Bad Gastein,
year unknown

105. Mother in Gastein,
19th August 1933

106. Probably also in
Gastein. One of the
very few photos where
Mother smiles

income nor any expenditure and didn't have premises. The principal events were the annual elections to the committee. The associations were organised on a faculty basis. I did not take much interest in its activities, though I had joined as soon as I came up. However, as politics became more important in all walks of life I was sucked into the association's affairs. I felt it my duty to support its democratic wing.

Already in October 1934 Konrad Henlein, then 35 years old and head of the German Gymnastic Federation of Czechoslovakia (in fact a cover organisation for fostering Nazi ideas) had formed a new party called the Deutsche Heimatfront (German patriotic front) which had tacitly declared death to liberalism and democracy and was extolling Nazism and Fascism. In the national elections of 1935 he used totalitarian methods of propaganda and intimidation with the active help from German Nazis. His party received 62 % of the German electorate's vote of 1,249,000 and secured 44 seats in the Prague parliament; all other German parties secured 28 seats. The leaders of the German Democratic Party were Wenzel Jaksch and Gustav Hacker. It was remarkable that so many Germans still resisted Nazism despite intimidation at the hustings. (Jaksch later fled to England and I believe Hacker too.) After months of wrangling Prime Minister Hodža with the support of Jaksch and Hacker arrived at an agreement with Henlein, making concessions on a number of issues. That was on February 18th 1937. But it gave the Government only a breathing space and soon after Henlein demanded further concessions which were tantamount to a separate state within Czechoslovakia - a Nazi carbuncle on a democratic body. This was unacceptable to the Government and the people - including the democratic and communist German parties.

Against this backcloth the students' association held its annual elections for the committee. I can't remember when this took place precisely. Lobbying was intense before the meeting which was in one of the large auditoria in Dejvice. There was a small extreme right wing group with Czech fascist tendencies. Amongst them was the rich farmer's son whom I had befriended and on whose farm I had spent a weekend. I think he looked at me as a nouveau-rich would look at an old-established squire in England and expected me to be sufficiently anti-communist so as to prefer fascism. The smart Bulgarian from Plovdiv was also in that group. Most of the Czech students supported Government policy, neither supporting fascism nor communism. Above all they wanted to preserve the Czechoslovak nation for which their fathers had fought less than 20 years before, The extreme left were the communists, the best organised group, well versed

in political argument and in virtual control of the meeting. What few Jews there were sided with the communists. There was no other place for me to be than on the left. I spoke Czech with a German accent and although no one thought of me a supporter of Henlein, I was certainly not a Czech national. I had befriended a tall, dark-haired Czech who lived in the kolej and was on the kolej's student committee. He was an excellent draughtsman and did some drawings for me for the engineering classes for which I used to give him a little money. Our political ideas were similar. One of the Yugoslav colleagues - a short fair-haired, blue-eyed, lively chap - and my kolej friend were my mentors in these student politics. I sat with them at the meeting on the left, the others sat across the aisle on the right. From the first moment the meeting was a shambles. Speaker after speaker was shouted down, pushed off the platform, the audience breaking out into bursts of derisory laughter or noisy bawling. At one moment some students sitting on the right tried to pull me physically across the aisle. My mentors pulled me back. Tempers rose, hardly anyone listened to what was being said on the platform. On one or two occasions fights would have broken out but for the intervention of some moderates. After hours of interminable speechifying and debating it came to the elections which we on the left won with the support of the moderates - as we had expected all the time. Sadly, after this meeting the students remained split into two camps.

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Christmas I spent at home. I am not sure, but I think we went skiing in the High Tatras.

Back in Prague I started a visitors' book in our digs. The entries show many of my friends: Franz Munk, Katka first with her maiden name, later as Mrs. Schönbaum; Leslie who in a second entry signed "as soldier" as he was serving his stint; Feri Schulz; Henry (then Buxbaum), Anni Schluderpacher and others. Father visited me on 24th May 1937 and entered "found everything in good order, I hope". Mother signed on 6th January 1939. I continued using the same visitors' book to the end of my stay in Prague. The last entry is by Katka and her husband, shortly before they and I left Czechoslovakia. She wrote: "MY motto: next year here again (and then again no sandwiches being offered)".

We had some contacts with locals through Katka's husband and Andrew's Edith. We also went to 2 or 3 German students' balls to meet younger people. These were splendid occasions on a far greater scale than we had in Bratislava. One was a costume ball: girls wore Austrian dirndls and the like and men summer sports wear. Usually it was evening jackets and long



107. With Franz Munk at the Alcron hotel, Prague, drinking a sherry -cobbler before a ball, winter 1936/37



108. Card I sent to Father in Velky Lapas on 26th January 1936



109. Skiing with Franz
late in March



110. The so-called ski-lift. I am 5th from left,
Franz in plus-fours stands in front of me

addresses. Exhibit 107 shows Franz Munk and me in the Alcron, Prague's poshest hotel, having a pre-ball drink (winter 1936/37). We are drinking a sherry-cobbler, now out of fashion. It is composed of sherry, lemon, sugar, ice and has fresh fruit in it.

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The summer I spent on the farm, partly helping father, partly preparing myself for the most important exam which I had yet to take to complete my first state examination: organic Chemistry.

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Masaryk, as I have already stated, died in September 1937 and the population - except the Nazis - mourned his death with real sorrow. The end of an era had arrived - the future was bleak.

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Already in the previous winter we had spent long weekends skiing in the Krkonosé (in German Riesengebirge) mountains, about 65 m north of Prague by bus. The mountain ridge was the frontier between Czechoslovakia and Germany (that part is now Poland). Geologically they are much older than the Tatras with rounded tops and gentle valleys instead of craggy peaks and big boulders and much more suitable for skiing. The highest peak is the Sněžka or Snowy Mountain, 1602 (c 5800ft) high. Here is the source of the River Labe (Elbe in German) which flows in a wide arc first in a southerly than in a north-westerly direction north of Prague to the confluence with the Vltava in Melník (where there is good white wine). It then crosses into Germany and reaches the North Sea in Hamburg. It took perhaps three hours by bus to cover the 65 m from Prague to Spindlerův Mlýn, a collection of a few hotels, guest houses and other buildings nestling against the mountain. Sometimes we remained there or we went higher up on skis to stay at one of several "Bauden". These were hostelries of various sizes and of varying degrees of discomfort. However, the skiing was excellent, the people were friendly, and logs blazed cheerfully in the stoves. When we arrived it was invariably already dark but when there was a bright moon it was fun to ski before going to bed. Snow reflects moonlight and it is not difficult to see. Here, like in the Tatras, skiing meant mainly touring. We left Sunday morning with our rucksacks, skiing more or less along the ridge, calling in at one or two Bauden for a hot drink, enjoying the views down the valleys into both Czechoslovakia and Germany and the peace of the mountains. In the whole area was only one short cable railway and only one ski lift of a sort. In fact it was a sledge which consisted of a timber platform and two wooden runners. About a dozen skiers stood

on it holding their skis. A steel rope was attached to the contraption and
 one was slowly and gently pulled up the side of the hill. Peter, Franz and
 Leslie were my usual companions on these outings. They were invigorating
 weekends and I learned more about the geography of the country.
 Exhibits 108 - 110 are all about skiing in the Krkonose.



111 Prague mid-January 1938. From left: Magda,
 Katka's sister, Gyuri Engel, cousin of
 Magda and Teri, Katka, Franz Munk, Medi
 Szamak, Katka's future sister-in-law,
 I and Judy Preč. Note typical Prague
 mosaic pavement.