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Berlin Childhood around 1900

Final Version
[p.344]

> O brown-baked column of victory,
> With winter sugar of childhood days.

In 1932, when I was abroad,[1] it began to be clear to me that I would soon have to bid a long, perhaps lasting fare well to the city of my birth.

Several times in my inner life, I had already experienced the process of inoculation as something salutary. In this situation, too, I resolved to follow suit, and I deliberately called to mind those images which, in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood. My assumption was that the feeling of longing would no more gain mastery over my spirit than a vaccine does over a healthy body. I sought to limit its effect through insight into the irretrievability — not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability — of the past.

This has meant that certain biographical features, which stand out more readily in the continuity of experience than in its depths, altogether recede in the present undertaking. And with them go the physiognomies those of my family and comrades alike. On the other hand, I have made an effort to get hold of the *images* in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class.

I believe it possible that a fate expressly theirs is held in reserve for such images. No customary forms await them yet, like those that, over the course of centuries, and in obedience to a feeling for nature, answer to remembrances of a childhood spent in the country. But, then, the images of my metropolitan childhood perhaps are capable, at their core, of preforming later historical experience. I hope they will at least suggest how thoroughly the person spoken of here would later dispense with the security allotted his childhood.
[p.345]

Loggias

For a long time, life deals with the still-tender memory of childhood like a mother who lays her newborn on her breast without waking it. Nothing has fortified my own memory so profoundly as gazing into courtyards, one of whose dark loggias, shaded by blinds in the summer, was for me the cradle in which the city laid its new citizen. The caryatids that supported the loggia on the floor above ours may have slipped away from their post for a moment to sing a lullaby beside that cradle — a song containing little of what later awaited me, but nonetheless sounding the theme through which the air of the court yards has forever remained intoxicating to me. I believe that a whiff of this air was still present in the vineyards of Capri where I held my beloved in my arms; and it is precisely this air that sustains the images and allegories which preside over my thinking, just as the caryatids, from the heights of their loggias, preside over the court yards of Berlin's West End.[2]

The rhythm of the metropolitan railway and of carpet beating rocked me to sleep. It was the mold in which my dreams took shape -first the unformed ones, traversed perhaps by the sound of running water or the smell of milk, then the long-spun ones: travel dreams and dreams of rain. Here, spring called up the first shoots of green be fore the gray façade of a house in back; and when, later in the year, a dusty canopy of leaves brushed up against the wall of the house a thousand times a day, the rustling of the branches initiated me into a knowledge to which I was not yet equal. For everything in the court yard became a sign or hint to me. Many were the messages embedded in the skirmishing of the green roller blinds drawn up high, and many the ominous dispatches that I prudently left unopened in the rattling of the roll up shutters that came thundering down at dusk. What occupied me most of all in the courtyard was the spot where the tree stood. This spot was set off by paving stones into which a large iron ring was sunk. Metal bars were mounted on it, in such away as to fence in the bare earth. Not for nothing, it seemed to me, was it thus enclosed; from time to time. I would brood over what went on within the black pit from which the trunk came. Later, I extended these speculations to hackney-carriage stands. There, the trees were similarly rooted, and similarly fenced in. Coachmen were accustomed to hanging their capes on the railing while they watered their horses, first clearing away the last remnants of hay and oats in the trough by drawing water from the pump that rose up out of the pavement. To me, these waiting-stations, whose peace was seldom disturbed by the coming and going of carriages, were distant provinces of my backyard.

Clotheslines ran from one wall of the loggia to an other; the palm tree looked homeless-all the more so as it had long

been understood that not [p.346] the dark soil but the adjacent drawing room was its proper abode. So decreed the law of the place, around which the dreams of its in habitants had once played. Before this place fell prey to oblivion, art had occasionally undertaken to transfigure it. Now a hanging lamp, now a bronze, now a china vase would steal into its confines. And although these antiquities rarely did the place much honor, they suited its own antique character. The Pompeian red that ran in a wide band along its wall was the appointed background of the hours that piled up in such seclusion. Time grew old in those shadowy little rooms which looked out on the courtyards. And that was why the morning, whenever I encountered it on our loggia, had already been morning for so long that it seemed more itself there than at any other spot. Never did I have the chance to wait for morning on the loggia; every time, it was already waiting for me. It had long since arrived – was effectively out of fashion – when I finally came upon it.

Later, from the perspective of the railroad embankment, I rediscovered the courtyards. When, on sultry afternoons, I gazed down on them from my compartment, the summer appeared to have parted from the landscape and locked itself into those yards. And the red geraniums that were peeping from their boxes accorded less well with summer than the red feather mattresses that were hung over the windowsills each morning to air. Iron garden chairs, made in imitation of winding branches or of wickerwork, comprised the seating arrangements of the loggia. We drew them close together when, at dusk, our reading circle would gather there. Gaslight shone down, from a red- and green-flamed calyx, on the pages of the paperback classic. Romeo's last sigh flitted through our back yard in search of the echo that Juliet's vault held ready for it.[3]

In the years since I was a child, the loggias have changed less than other places. This is not the only reason they stay with me. It is much more on account of the solace that lies in their uninhabitability for one who himself no longer has a proper abode. They mark the outer limit of the Berliner's lodging. Berlin – the city god itself – begins in them. The god remains such a presence there that nothing transitory can hold its ground beside him. In his safekeeping, space and time come into their own and find each other. Both of them lie at his feet here. The child who was once their confederate, however, dwells in his loggia, encompassed by this group, as in a mausoleum long intended just for him.

Imperial Panorama[4]

One of the great attractions of the travel scenes found in the Imperial Panorama was that it did not matter where you began the cycle. Because the viewing screen, with places to sit before it, was circular, each picture would pass through all the stations; from these you looked, each time, through a [p.347] double window into the faintly tinted depth of the image. There was always a seat available. And especially toward the end of my childhood, when fashion was already turning its back on the Imperial Panorama, one got used to taking the tour in a half-empty room.

There was no music in the Imperial Panorama—in contrast to films, where music makes traveling so soporific. But there was a small, genuinely disturbing effect that seemed to me superior. This was the ringing of a little bell that sounded a few seconds before each picture moved off with a jolt, in order to make way first for an empty space and then for the next image. And every time it rang, the mountains with their humble foothills, the cities with their mirror-bright windows, the railroad stations with their clouds of dirty yellow smoke, the vineyards down to the smallest leaf, was suffused with the ache of departure. I formed the conviction that it was impossible to exhaust the splendors of the scene at just one sitting. Hence my intention (which I never realized) of coming by again the following day. Before I could make up my mind, however, the entire apparatus, from which I was separated by a wooden railing, would begin to tremble; the picture would sway within its little frame and then immediately trundle off to the left, as I looked on.

The art forms that survived here all died with the coming of the twentieth century. At its inception, they found their last audience in children. Distant worlds were not always strange to these arts. And it so happened that the longing such worlds aroused spoke more to the home than to anything unknown. Thus it was that, one after noon, while seated before a transparency of the little town of Aix, I tried to persuade myself that, once upon a time, I must have played on the patch of pavement that is guarded by the old plane trees of the Cours Mirabeau. When it rained, there was no pausing out front to survey the list of fifty pictures. I went inside and found in fjords and under coconut palms the same light that illuminated my desk in the evening when I did my school work. It may have been a defect in the lighting system that suddenly caused the landscape to lose its color. But there it lay, quite silent under its ashen sky. It was as though I could have heard even wind and church bells if only I had been more attentive.

Victory Column

It stood on the wide square like a red-letter date on the calendar. With the coming of the anniversary of Sedan, the calendar page was supposed to be torn off.5 When I was little, it was impossible to imagine a year without Sedan Day. After the Battle of Sedan, there were only military parades. So when Uncle Kruger6 came riding down Tauentzienstrasse in a carriage in 1902, after the Boer War had been lost, I stood with my governess in the [p.348] crowd to gaze in astonishment at a man in a top hat who reclined on cushions and had "led an army" (as people said). This sounded magnificent to me, but not entirely satisfactory as though the man might have "led" a rhinoceros or a dromedary and won

his fame doing that. What could possibly come after Sedan anyway? With the defeat of the French, world history seemed to be safely interred in its glorious grave, and this column was the funerary stele.

As a schoolboy, I would climb the broad steps that led to the rulers of Victory Lane. In doing so, I was concerned only with the two vassals who, on both sides, crowned the rear wall of the marble decor. They were lower down than their sovereigns, and easier to look at. Best of all, I loved the [p.349] bishop holding a cathedral in his gloved right hand; I could build larger churches with my building blocks. Since that time, I have met with no Saint Catherine without looking around for her wheel, with no Saint Barbara without hoping to see her tower.[7]

Someone had explained to me where the decorations for the Victory Column came from. But I was still rather confused about the cannon barrels included among them. Had the French gone to war with golden cannons, or had we first taken the gold from them and then used it to cast cannons!' A portico ran around the base of the column, concealing it from view. I never entered this space, which was filled with a dim light reflected off the gold of the frescoes. I was afraid of finding effigies that might have reminded me of pictures in a book I had once come across in the drawing room of an old aunt a deluxe edition of Dante's Inferno. To me, the heroes whose exploits glimmered in the portico were, secretly, quite as infamous as the multitudes forced to do penance while being lashed by whirlwinds, encased in bloody tree stumps, or sealed in blocks of ice. Accordingly, this portico was itself the Inferno, the opposite of the sphere of grace that encircled the radiant Victory overhead. On many days, people would be standing there up above. Against the sky they appeared to me outlined in black, like the little figures in paste-on picture sheets. Once I had the buildings in place, didn't I take up scissors and glue-pot to distribute mannikins like these at door ways, niches, and windowsills? The people up there in the light were creatures of such blissful caprice.8 Eternal Sunday surrounded them. Or was it an eternal Sedan Day?

The Telephone

Whether because of the structure of the apparatus or because of the structure of memory, it is certain that the noises of the first telephone conversations echo differently in my ear from those of today. They were nocturnal noises. No muse announces them. The night from which they came was the one that precedes every true birth. And the voice that slumbered in those instruments was a newborn voice. Each day and every hour, the telephone was my win brother. I was an intimate observer of the way it rose above the humiliations of its early years. For once the chandelier, fire screen, potted palm, console table, gueridon, and alcove balustrade – all formerly on display in the front rooms – had finally faded and died a natural death, the apparatus, like a legendary hero once exposed to die in a mountain gorge, left the dark hallway in the back of the house to make its regal entry into the cleaner and brighter rooms that now were inhabited by a younger generation. For the latter, it became a consolation for their loneliness. To the despondent who wanted to leave this wicked world, it shone with the light [p.350] of a last hope. With the forsaken, it shared its bed. Now, when everything depended on its call, the strident voice it had acquired in exile was grown softer.

Not many of those who use the apparatus know what devastation it once wreaked in family circles. The sound with which it rang between two and four in the after noon, when a schoolfriend wished to speak to me, was an alarm signal that menaced not only my parents' midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta. Disagreements with switchboard operators were the rule, to say nothing of the threats and curses uttered by my father when he had the complaints department on the line. But his real orgies were reserved for cranking the handle, to which he gave himself up for minutes at a time, nearly forgetting himself in the process. His hand, on these occasions, was a dervish over come by frenzy. My heart would pound; I was certain that the employee on the other end was in danger of a stroke, as punishment for her negligence.

At that time, the telephone still hung – an outcast settled carelessly between the dirty-linen hamper and the gasometer – in a corner of the back hallway, where its ringing served to multiply the terrors of the Berlin household. When, having mastered my senses with great effort, I arrived to quell the uproar after prolonged fumbling through the gloomy corridor, I tore off the two receivers, which were heavy as dumbbells, thrust my head between them, and was inexorably delivered over to the voice that now sounded. There was nothing to allay the violence with which it pierced me. Powerless, I suffered, seeing that it obliterated my consciousness of time, my firm resolve, my sense of duty. And just as the medium obeys the voice that takes possession of him from beyond the grave, I submitted to the first proposal that came my way through the telephone.

Butterfly Hunt

Apart from occasional trips during the summer months, we stayed, each year before school resumed for me, in various residences in the environs of Berlin. I was reminded of these, for a long time afterwards, by the spacious cabinet on the wall of my boyhood room containing the beginings of a butterfly collection, whose oldest specimens had been captured in the garden of the Brauhausberg.[9] Cabbage butterflies with ruffled edging, brimstone butterflies with superbright wings, vividly brought back the ardors of the hunt, which so often had lured me away from the well-kept garden paths into a wilderness, where I stood powerless before the conspiring elements – wind and scents, foliage and sun – that were bound

to govern the flight of the butterflies.

They would flutter towards a blossom, hover over it. My butterfly net [p.351] upraised, I stood waiting only for the spell that the flowers seemed to cast on the pair of wings to have finished its work, when all of a sudden the delicate body would glide off sideways with a gentle buffeting of the air, to cast its shadow motionless as before over another flower, which just as suddenly it would leave without touching. When in this way a vanessa or sphinx moth (which I should have been able to overtake easily) made a fool of me through its hesitations, vacillations, and delays, I would gladly have been dissolved into light and air, merely in order to approach my prey unnoticed and be able to subdue it. And so close to fulfillment was this desire of mine, that every quiver or palpitation of the wings I burned for grazed me with its puff or ripple. Between us, now, the old law of the hunt took hold: the more I strove to conform, in all the fibers of my be ing, to the animal the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition; and in the end, it was as if its capture was the price I had to pay to regain my human existence. Once this was achieved, however, it was a laborious way back from the theater of my successes in the field to the campsite, where ether, cotton wadding, pins with colored heads, and tweezers lay ready in my specimen box. And what a state the hunting ground was in when I left! Grass was flattened. flowers tramnled Underfoot: the hunter himself, holding his own body cheap, had flung it heedlessly after his butterfly net. And borne aloft – over so much destruction, clumsiness, and violence-in a fold of this net, trembling and yet full of charm, was the terrified butterfly. On that laborious way back, the spirit of the doomed creature entered into the hunter. From the foreign language in which the butterfly and the flowers had come to an understanding before his eyes, he now derived some precepts. His lust for blood had diminished; his confidence was grown all the greater.

The air in which this butterfly once hovered is today wholly imbued with a word – one that has not reached my ears or crossed my lips for decades. This word has retained that unfathomable reserve which childhood names possess for the adult. Long-kept silence, long conceal inent, has transfigured them. Thus, through air teeming with butterflies vibrates the word "Bratihatisberg," which is to say, "Brewery Hill." It was on the Brauhausberg, near Potsdam, that we had our summer residence. But the name has lost all heaviness, contains nothing more of any brewery, and is, at most, a bluernisted hill that rose up every summer to give lodging to my parents and me. And that is why the Potsdam of my childhood lies in air so blue, as though all its butterflies – its mourning cloaks and admirals, peacocks and auroras – were scattered over one of those glistening Limoges enamels, on which the ramparts and battlements of Jerusalem stand out against a dark blue ground.[10]
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Tiergarten

Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley. This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blot ting papers in my school notebooks. No, not the first, for there was one earlier that has outlasted the others. The way into this labyrinth, which was not without its Ariadne, led over the Bendler Bridge, whose gentle arch became my first hillside." Not far from its foot lay the goal: FriedrichWilhelm and Queen Luise. On their round pedestals they towered up from the flowerbeds, as though transfixed by the magic curves that a stream was describing in the sand before them. But it was not so much the rulers as their pedestals to which I turned, since what took place upon these stone foundations, though unclear in context, was nearer in space. That there was some thing special about this maze I could always deduce from the broad and banal esplanade, which gave no hint of the fact that here, just a few steps from the corso of cabs and carriages, sleeps the strangest part of the park.[12]

I got a sign of this quite early on. Here, in fact, or not far away, must have lain the couch of that Ariadne in whose proximity I first experienced what only later I had a word for: love. Unfortunately, the "Fraulein"[13] intervenes at its earliest budding to overspread her icy shadow. And so this park, which, unlike every other, seemed open to children, was for me, as a rule, distorted by difficulties and impracticalities. How rarely I distinguished the fish in its pond. How much was promised by the name "Court Hunters' Lane," and how little it held. How often I searched in vain among the hushes, which somewhere hid a kiosk built in the style of my toy blocks, with tur rets colored red, white, and blue. How hopelessly, each spring, I lost my heart to Prince Louis Ferdinand, at whose feet the earliest crocuses and daffodils bloomed.[14] A watercourse, which separated me from them, made them as untouchable as though they were covered by a bell jar. Thus, coldly, the princely had to rest upon the beautiful; and I understood why Luise von Landau, who belonged to my circle of schoolf riends until she died, had to dwell on the Lutzowufer, opposite the little wilderness which nourished its flowers with the waters of the canal.[15]

Later, I discovered other corners, and I heard of still more. But no girl, no experience, no book could tell me anything new about these things. And so, thirty years later, when an expert guide, a Berlin peasant,[16] joined forces with me to

return to the city after an extended, shared absence from its borders, his trail cut furrows through this garden, in which he sowed the seeds of silence. He led the way along these paths, and each, for him, became [p.353] precipitous. They led downward, if not to the Mothers of all being," then certainly to those of this garden. In the asphalt over which he passed, his steps awakened an echo. The gas lamp, shining across our strip of pavement, cast an ambiguous light on this ground. The short flights of steps, the pillared porticoes, the friezes and architraves of the Tiergarten villas for the first time, we took them at their word. But above all, there were the stairwells, which, with their stained-glass windows, were the same as in the old days, though much had changed on the inside, where people lived. I still know the verses that filled the intervals between my heart beats when, after school, I paused while climbing the stairs. They glimmered toward me from the colored pane where a woman, floating ethereally like the Sistine Madonna, a crown in her hands, stepped forth from the niche. Slipping my thumbs beneath the shoulder straps of my satchel, I would study the lines: "Work is the bur gher's ornament, / Blessedness the reward of toil."[18] The house door below swung shut with a sigh, like a ghost sinking back into the grave. Outside it was raining, per haps. One of the stained-glass windows was opened, and I went on climbing the stairs in time with the patter of raindrops.

Among the caryatids and atlantes, the putti and pomonas, which in those days looked on tne, I stood closest to those dust-shrouded specimens of the race of thresh old dwellers those who guard the entrance to life, or to a house. For they are versed in waiting. Hence, it was all the same to them whether they waited for a stranger, for the return of the ancient gods, or for the child that, thirty years ago, slipped past them with his schoolboy's satchel. Under their tutelage, the Old West district became the West of antiquity source of the west winds that aid the mariners who sail their craft, freighted with the apples of the Hesperides, slowly up the Landwehr Canal, to dock by the Hercules Bridge.19 And once again, as in my child hood, the Hydra and the Nemean Lion had their place in the wilderness that surrounds the Great Star.20

Tardy Arrival

The clock in the schoolyard wore an injured look be cause of my offense. It read "tardy." And in the hall, through the classroom doors I brushed by, murmurs of secret deliberations reached my ears. Teachers and students were friends, behind those doors. Or else all was quite still, as though someone were expected. Quietly, I took hold of the door handle. Sunshine flooded the spot where I stood. Then I defiled my pristine day by enter ing. No one seemed to know me, or even to see me. Just as the devil takes the shadow of Peter Schlemihl,21 the teacher had taken my name at the beginning of the hour. I could no longer get my turn on the list. I worked noiselessly with the others until the bell sounded. But no blessedness crowned the toil.
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Boys' Books

My favorites came from the school library. They were distributed in the lower classes. The teacher would call my name, the book then made its way from bench to bench; one boy passed it on to another, or else it traveled over the heads until it came to rest with me, the stu dent who had raised his hand. Its pages bore traces of the fingers that had turned them. The hit of corded fabric that finished off the binding, and that stuck out above and below, was dirty. But it was the spine, above all, that had had things to endure-so much so, that the two halves of the cover slid out of place by themselves, and the edge of the volume formed ridges and terraces. Hang ing on its pages, however, like Indian summer on the branches of the trees, were sometimes fragile threads of a net in which I had once become tangled when learning to read.

The book lay on the table that was much too high. While reading, I would cover my ears. Hadn't I already listened to stories in silence like this? Not those told by my father, of course. But sometimes in winter, when I stood by the window in the warm little room, the snow storm outside told me stories no less mutely. What it told, to be sure, I could never quite grasp, for always something new and unremittingly dense was breaking through the familiar. Hardly had I allied myself, as inti mately as possible, to one band of snowflakes, than I real ized they had been obliged to yield rne tip to another, which had suddenly entered their midst. But now the moment had come to follow, in the flurry of letters, the stories that had eluded me at the window. The dis-tant lands I encountered in these stories played familiarly among themselves, like the snowflakes. And be cause distance, when it snows, leads no longer out into the world but rather within, so Baghdad and Babylon, Acre and Alaska, Tromsi; and Transvaal were places within me. The mild air of light holiday literature which permeated those places tinged them so irresistibly with blood and adventure that my heart has forever kept faith with the well-thumbed volumes.

Or is it with older, irrecoverable volumes that my heart has kept faith? With those marvelous ones, that is, which were given me to revisit only once, in a dream? What were they called? I knew only that it was those long-vanished volumes that I had never been able to find again. They were located, however, in a cabinet which, as I perforce realized on waking, I had never met with be fore. In the dream, it appeared to me old and familiar. The books did not stand upright in it; they lay flat, and, indeed, in its 'weather corner.[22] In these books there were stormy goings-on. To open one would have landed ine in the lap of the storm, in the very womb, where a brooding and changeable text – a text pregnant with colors formed a cloud. The colors were seething and evanes cent, but they always shaded into a violet that seemed to come from

the entrails of a slaughtered animal. As ineffable [p.357] and full of meaning as this forbidden violet were the titles, each of which appeared to me stranger and more familiar than the last. But before I could assure my self of the one that came first, I was awake, without so much as having touched, in my dream, the boys' books of old.

Winter Morning

The fairy in whose presence we are granted a wish is there for each of us. But few of us know how to remember the wish we have made; and so, few of us recognize its fulfillment later in our lives. I know the wish of mine that was fulfilled, and I will not say that it was any more clever than the wishes children make in fairy tales. It took shape in me with the approach of the lamp, which, early on a winter morning, at half past six, would cast the shadow of my nursemaid on the covers of my bed. In the stove a fire was lighted. Soon the flame – as though shut up in a drawer that was much too small, where it barely had room to move because of the coal – was peeping out at me. Smaller even than I was, it nevertheless was something mighty that began to establish itself there, at my very elbow – something to which the maid had to stoop down even lower than to me. When it was ready, she would put an apple in the little oven to bake. Before long, the grating of the burner door was outlined in a red flickering on the floor. And it seemed, to my weariness, that this image was enough for one day. It was always so at this hour; only the voice of my nursemaid disturbed the solemnity with which the winter morning used to give me into the keeping of the things in my room. The shutters were not yet open as I slid aside the bolt of the oven door for the first time, to examine the apple cooking inside. Sometimes, its aroma would scarcely have changed. And then I would wait patiently until I thought I could detect the fine bubbly fragrance that came from a deeper and more secretive cell of the winter's day than even the fragrance of the fir tree on Christmas eve. There lay the apple, the dark, warm fruit that – familiar and yet transformed, like a good friend back from a journey through the dark land of the oven's heat, from which it had extracted the aromas of all the things the day held in store for me. So it was not surprising that, whenever I warmed my hands on its shining cheeks, I would always hesitate to bite in. I sensed that the fugitive knowledge conveyed in its smell could all too easily escape me on the way to my tongue. That knowledge which sometimes was so heartening that it stayed to comfort me on my trek to school. Of course, no sooner than I had arrived than, at the touch of my bench, all the weariness that at first seemed dispelled returned with a vengeance. And with it this wish: to be able to sleep my fill. I must have made that wish a thousand times, and later it actually came true. But it was a long time before I recognized its [p.358] fulfillment in the fact that all my cherished hopes for a position and proper livelihood had been in vain.

At the Corner of Steglitzer and Genthiner

In those days, every childhood was still overshadowed by the aunts who no longer left their house – who always, when we arrived on a visit with our mother, had been ex pecting us; always, from under the same black bonnet, and in the same silk dress, from the same armchair and the same bay window, would bid us welcome. Like fair ies who cast their spell over an entire valley without once descending into it, they ruled over whole rows of streets without ever setting foot in them. Among these beings was Auntie Lehmann. Her good North-German name secured her the right to occupy, over the course of a generation, the alcove that overlooked the intersection of Steglitzer Strasse and Genthiner Strasse. This street corner was one of those least touched by the changes of the past thirty years. Only, the veil which for me, as a child, once covered it has meanwhile fallen away. For back then, as far as I was concerned, it was not yet named after Steglitz.[23] It was the Stieglitz, the goldfinch, that gave it its name. And didn't my good aunt live in her cage like a talking bird? Whenever I got there, it was filled with the twittering of this small, black bird, who had flown far above and beyond all the nests and farms of the Mark Brandenhurg[24] (where, scattered here and there, her forebears had once dwelt), and who preserved in her memory both sets of names those of the villages and those of the relatives which so often proved to be ex actly the same. My aunt knew the relationships by mar riage, the various places of residence, the joys and the sorrows of all the Schönfliesses, Rawitschers, Landsbergs, Lindenheims, and Stargards who formerly inhabited the territories of Brandenburg and Mecklenburg as cattle deal ers or grain merchants. But now her sons, and perhaps even her grandsons, were at home here in the districts of the Old West, in streets that bore the names of Prussian generals and, sometimes also, of the little towns they had left behind. Often, in later years, when my express train hurtled past such out-of-the-way spots, I would look down from the railway embankment on cottages, farmyards, barns, and gables, and ask myself: Aren't these perhaps the very places whose shadow the parents of that little old woman whom I used to visit as a small boy, had left behind in times past?

On my arrival, a voice fragile and brittle as glass would wish me good day. But no voice anywhere was so finespun, or so fine-tuned to that which awaited me, as Tante Lehmann's. Hardly had I entered, in fact, than she saw to it that someone set before. me the large glass cube containing a complete working mine, in which miniature miners, stonecutters, and mine inspectors, with tiny wheelbarrows, hammers, and lanterns, performed their [p.356] movements precisely in time to a clockwork. This toy – if one can call it that – dates from an era that did not yet begrudge even the child of a wealthy bourgeois household a view of workplaces and machines. And among them all, the mine took precedence from time Immemorial, for nm only did it show the treasures which hard work wrested from it, but it also showed that gleam of silver in its veins which-as we can see from the work of Jean Paul, Novalis, Tieck, and Werner-had dazzled the

Biedermeier.[25]

This apartment with its window alcove was doubly secured, as was fitting for places that were catted on to shelter such precious things. A tittle beyond the main entrance, to the left in the hallway, was the dark door to the apartment, with Its little bell. When it opened before me, I saw leadmg upward, breathtakingly steep, a staircase such as later I would find only in farmhouses. In the dim radiance of the gaslight, which came from above, stood an old maidservant, under whose protection I would immediately afterward cross the second threshold, which led to the vestibule of that gloomy apartment. I would never have been able to imagine it without the presence of one of those old servants. Because they shared a treasure with their mistress (albeit only a treasure of secret memories), they not only knew how to read her every word and gesture, but they also were able to represent her before any stranger With the utmost propriety. And before no one more easily than me, whom they often understood better than their mistress did. I, in turn, rel!;arded them with admiration. They were generatty more massive than their mistresses, and, as it happened, the drawing room within, despite the mine and the chocolate, had less to say to me than the vestibule where the old servant woman, when I arrived, would take my coat from me as if it were a burden and, on my departure, press my cap back down on my forehead as though to bless me.

Two Enigmas

Among the picture postcards in my collection, there were some whose written message is fixed more clearly in my memory than their illustration. They bear the beautiful clear signature: Helene Pufahl. That was the name of my teacher. The "p" at the beginning was the "p" of perseverance, of punctuality, of prizewinning performance; "f" stood for faithful, fruitful, free of errors; and as for the "l" at the end, it was the figure of lamb-like piety and love of learning. Had this signature comprised consonants alone, like some Semitic text, it would have been, as you see, not only the seat of calligraphic perfection bur the root of all virtues.

Boys and girls from the better families of the bourgeois West took part in Fräulein Pufahl's circle. In certain cases one was not too particular, so that into this domain of the bourgeoisie a little girl of the nobility also might stray. She was called Luise von Landau, and the name soon had me under [p.357] soon had me under its spell. Even today, it has remained alive in my memory, though there is another reason for that. It was the first among those of my age group on which I heard fall the accent of death. This was after I had already outgrown our little circle and become a pupil in the middle school. When I now passed by the banks of the Lützow, I would always cast my eyes in the direction of her house. It lay, by chance, opposite a little garden that overhung the water on the other bank. And this garden plot I gradually wove together so intimately with the beloved name that I finally came to the conclusion that the flowerbed on the riverbank, so resplendent and inviolable. was the cenotaph of the departed child.

Fraulein Pufahl was succeeded by Herr Knoche. I was then in grammar school. What went on in his classroom for the most part repelled me. Nevertheless, it is not in the course of one of his chastisements that my memory lights on Herr Knoche, but rather in his capacity as a seer prophesying thc futurc. It was dunng a singing lesson. We were practicing the Cavalier's Song from *Wallenstein*: "To horse then, comrades, to horse and away! / And into the field where freedom awaits us. / In the field of battle, man still has his worth, ! And the heart is still weighed in the balance." Herr Knoche wanted the class to tell him what the meaning of the last line might be. Naturally, no one could do so. That seemed not unfitting to Herr Knoche, and he declared: "You will understand this when you are grown up."

[p.358-413 missing]

- The Sewing Box
- The Moon
- Two Brass Bands
- The Little Hunchback
- The Carousel
- Sexual Awakening