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PART I

PART I

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER I

IN THE BEGINNING

There are turning points in everyone's life. Family, friends, political and historical events, a task accomplished, a career chosen, the emotional bent of a critical moment--all are essential elements to a turning point. We may not realize how important they are until we look back and try to decide how we got to where we are.

How did it all begin and what are some of the turning points which have led to my being an engineer, a manager, and a university student at the age of fifty-two?

I was born in Vienna, Austria, on May 29, 1921. The aftermath of World War I was still in the air. Without swaddling clothes from the American Red Cross and baby food from family friends in Switzerland I might not have lived to write this paper.

My father, Eduard Franz DeWath, was a contractor in Vienna. He was a gregarious man who made friends easily, but he ran his business, his wife, three children, and his household with stern justice. He was one of a family of thirteen children and as a consequence had little formal education. But he had entrepreneurial spirit and a strong drive for achievement.

Father was a Catholic, like most Austrians, and could not conceive of anyone being different. He did not see any necessity for going to church with regularity, as he was pretty sure that, being a Catholic, he had the keys of heaven already in his hands.

Mother converted to Catholicism in order to marry my father. The priest who instructed her in preparation for marriage and the church, became very fond of her but seemed to have some mental reservations about the success of his conversion. His parting words to her were to the effect that he was not sure that she would ever make a good Catholic, but that he hoped that she would make a good wife and mother.

He was right. My mother became a devoted wife and a most loving, patient, and understanding mother. She did not always agree with father on matters of child rearing, education, manners, and political philosophy. However, like most European wives, she was obedient, and put up with her gruff and simple husband.

She always insisted that I was a quiet, easily managed child with an intense curiosity about the world around me. But she was no less surprised than my father when, at the age of four, I learned to read and write on my own.

This constituted a turning point in my life. When I went to kindergarten, I preferred reading books to singing nursery rhymes and playing games. I discovered the local public library and became the youngest member there.

Father was mystified by such interests, but found some reassurance in the fact that my brother and sister had turned out more normal.

When I started grammar school, there was little new for me to learn and I was bored with classes. I read more on my own and studied less. I discovered a fancy for music and was allowed to take violin and singing lessons at the Vienna Music Conservatory.

I sang with the Vienna Boys Choir and played the violin in public. Father did not really approve of all this nonsense. He thought it was utterly foolish for a boy to want to read more than two books a day and did not see how my musical interests would prepare me to take over his business some day.

What kind of a son would want to be a school teacher? A proper son would learn something practical, such as the trade of a bicycle mechanic or something else useful.

My mother, Otilde Maria DeWath, understood more than she let on. She understood her precocious older son, who seemed such a dreamer. She not only understood me, but encouraged my interest in education. She did so slyly, because no proper Austrian wife would think of chancing the wrath of a good husband and provider by directing their oldest son in any but her husband's way.

The relative tranquility of our life was soon to be upset by the storms of political change which began to sweep

over Europe. Fascism was on the rise and was soon to engulf most of Europe.

The rantings of Il Duce in Italy were soon followed by the thumping noises of Hilter in Germany and the world took notice.

In 1934, a semi-fascist regime under Engelbert Dollfuss took power in Austria and wrought changes which brought about another turning point in my life.

The drama of civil war unfolded in front of my eyes. I watched the barricades being erected by militant groups of workers and saw the militia pour out of ambulances and take over the positions by mowing down the defenders with a hail of bullets.

The rumblings of artillery fire used against the workers in the nearby public housing project made me aware of problems and conditions which I, as a thirteen-year old, could not as yet understand. But the spectacle of human beings killed by bullets in front of my home has left an indelible impression on my mind.

The new regime did away with all vestiges of democracy and parliamentary procedures. The press was censored and blank spots on the pages of the daily newspapers made me wonder why a government should be afraid of free expression. Church attendance became mandatory for students and what had up to now been an infrequent, but pleasurable, experience became a contemptible practice for me. A rebel was born.

When Hitler "liberated" Austria in 1938, I found out he replaced a repressive regime with a different, but more repressive one. When friends of mine in Vienna started disappearing and I saw synagogues being set on fire deliberately, I thought about going to some other country where books were not burned and where I might find the kind of personal freedom I had read about.

I was close to matriculation and the prospect of having to serve in the "Arbeitsdienst" (German Labor Corps) and thereafter in the German Army only reinforced my determination to get away from a situation I had learned to detest. The Munich agreement and the subsequent occupation of Czechoslovakia confirmed my belief that war was just around the corner.

My decision to leave my country was hastened by the example of some of my fellow students, who like myself had become critical of the turn of events and had voiced their opposition. With the help of the Council of Women of Great Britain, I obtained a visa to go to England for the study of agriculture. This was to enable me to immigrate to Australia.

Anything to get out of Germany. On May 13, 1939, I crossed the German border.

None too soon, for three days later the Nazis came to look for me at my home in Vienna. I had reached another turning point in my life.