

In and out of Strobl: a memory canvas

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Dedicated to the memory of Herbert Gottweis (Feb. 8th, 1958 - March 31st, 2014)

Somebody should have trigger warned me. In mid-summer of 1977, when I arrived in Strobl from the humble Gemeindebau I grew up in Vienna, in the heart of the lake region located to the south and east of the "sound of music" town Salzburg, to attend the Sommerhochschule der Universität Wien, I was flooded by, and drowned in its exotic landscape and international flair. Not for long I started to love the "Strobl experience." It helped that this summer was mellow on lake shores; in particular on the wooden platform which gave ample access to the greenish waters of the Wolfgangsee, and excessively hot in the cities. Afterwards, back in Vienna, I saw people exhausted from the summer heat, during which I had enjoyed some of the most pleasant periods of my life.

Alas, as it occasionally happens, pleasure turns into frustration: in the early days I sketched a letter with essentially one message: "get me out of here!" What had happened? I had met all these nice, young, sexy girls (Alina and Daniela?), and could not find any kind of access to them; although I desired it would have been so. At that time I was still undergoing psychoanalysis, with very little amorous experience so far, and thought that the world is wide open to my desires, and would grant opportunities whenever possible. In a word: little Karli was complaining.

I am afraid that, with regards to love, I cannot report of any amorous sweet story related to Strobl – my sexuality lay dormant there. Soon afterwards, at the age of 21, I met my first girlfriend, a student of the fine arts (or rather, she chose me, and I submitted). She made up, and more, for so many things I had missed before. And later, in Alpbach, my Strobl fantasies finally became true: I found temporary salvation by making love on top of a large meadow, rolling downhill like a singleton, ecstatically completing this feat at the bottom, where the meadow touched the forest – experiencing a shining facet of what Schrödinger, in reference to vedantic philosophy, called the ongoing dance of life: *Tat Tvam Asi*.

You might wonder: what has this to do with Strobl? First of all, it all started from there. And secondly, I know Herbert, who also passed through psychoanalysis, would have approved; and certainly also Schrödinger, who lived his love life to the fullest, and incidentally is buried in Alpbach's graveyard. And yet, this *Leidenschaft* ended in so much pain; as I was kicked out of it so abruptly shortly afterwards. It is amazing -- both consoling as well as disturbing -- how memories fade; appearing like a faint narrative of another person; in another life.

But coming back to Strobl in the summer of 1977: I, that is, young Karli, was not complaining for very long; because I became submerged in a plethora of sweet sublime activities: I was attending classes in contemporary Austrian history (Adam Wandruszka von Wanstetten) and literature, in "Austrian Painting from the Middle Ages" (Jörg Demus, the pianist?), history of the Soviet Union (Michael Voslenskij; "Nomenclatura"), as well as sailing (my attempts to learn tennis soon ended with my teacher's declaration that "I am also not a great talent, but you...."). Furthermore the campus was extremely well organized; the evenings offered a variety of convenient meetings, such as cultural evenings (sometimes quite boring yet conveniently time consuming), and barbecues. There were field trips to lots of places; mostly cultural such as Lambach monastery, some touristic.

I still remember climbing up the Schafberg from St. Wolfgang on a brilliant summer Sunday, and committing myself to one or two beers on its top. After that I must have blacked out in a semi-controlled manner – somehow I made it into that steam train downhill, and into our room. I was sharing this dormitory with a bearded Canadian who turned out to be quite cheerful and funny – upon realizing my condition he must have spontaneously grabbed a blinking signal from a street construction site nearby and put it into the window, so that I woke up with this blinking orange light in the early evening. I faintly remember that this may have occurred in my second term in 1979; and that he played the violin (take note of this, as I will come back to it later).

Back then every attendee was offered two to three complementary tickets to the Salzburg Festival. Additionally there were even some last minute leftovers which could be taken on short notice. I attended performances of the “Jedermann”, as well as of operas and concerts in the Mozarteum and the Felsenreitschule.

Coming from a Gemeindebau in the Viennese borough Brigittenau, an Austrian hillbilly, this was all very new and very exciting to me. I had spent many summers in the outskirts of Graz, Styria with my mother’s relatives, with a lack of swimmable waters like in the rest of Styria; yet I never had realized what people long ago branded “Sommerfrische” (improperly translated by summer retreat): the tendency of the aristocracy and later the bourgeoisie to spend life on the countryside as long as it is warm enough to enjoy nature. But I got into this *Sommerfrische* feeling very fast!

Whereas the Austrian aristocracy gravitated around Bad Ischl where the Kaiser resided in summer and was hunting like mad in ridiculous ways – such as forcing deer to trespass water so that the Kaiser could kill more animals – the Kaiservilla is full of his hollow trophies from such hilarious occasions; as hollow as his entire *Reich* (which Reich is not?) -- I believe that only "Teddy" Roosevelt, as well as Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator of Soviet (dis)grace, later beat Emperor Franz Joseph in that respect.

Incidentally, Bad Ischl, home of the Villa Schratt, is also witness of another typicality: the capacity of Catholics to look the other way when it comes to extra-marital sex whenever convenient, such as within its own clergy. Franz Joseph, as so many other catholic princes and cardinals, would easily qualify as poly-amorous nowadays; although the official moral sounded quite differently. This reminds me of an orthodox church celebration in Kiev in 2011 where they collected coins from the paupers while a fleet of Mercedes cars was waiting for the clergy at the church’s back door.

The bourgeoisie settled more around the Attersee, with the paintings of Klimt and the photos in which the rather voluminous artist wore long dresses created by his long-time lover Flöge (Flöge looks much nicer in her creations, but that cannot be blamed on her – Klimt was just too fat to look good in a dress).

The lake Wolfgangsee, Strobl and, in particular, the Bürglgut, on its south-east shore, was ideally located for immersion in all kinds of water activities. Swimming, of course, was my favorite; sailing was another. The summer University had a sailboat which was free to use for the attendees; and I used it a lot. The wind conditions were sometimes negotiable. I still remember only very narrowly missing dinner when, after sailing to St. Wolfgang, the wind ceased entirely – I had to paddle all the way back to the boat house in Strobl. So sweet almost-catastrophes!

But it was not only the clearness of the water that was so seductive and – I cannot depict it

otherwise – sensational; awesome: it was the interplay between the water and the light! I could go on hours without end to praise the light in the Salzkammergut! In particular on sunny afternoons on the wooden swim deck one could watch the glittering reflections of the summer sun on the small ripples of water. This particular form of glitter comes about only on smaller lakes, as the waves tend to be very limited in size and more frequent, thus bending the light into a never ending fabric of emerging beauty. It was this glittering light which founded a lifelong obsession – a desire for beauty in abundance. And natural abundance there was everywhere: the dark blue skies, the lush green hills, the water, the sun. I am quite sure that Klimt felt the same when he painted his water pictures - although the water in the Attersee appears quite differently; more light bluish rather than blue-greenish as with the Wolfgangsee. And as of today I have encountered, and dived into, many waters; but still the glittering light of the Salzkammergut lakes contributed to some of my most deeply gratifying natural impressions. But then again, maybe I know very little? All those exoplanets surrounding the estimated 200.000.000.000.000.000.000.000 suns of the observable universe surely offer plentiful, magnificent vistas!

And yet, I believe that for the human eye the Salzkammergut experience can be one of the most gratifying available; at least on this planet. If only the weather was good enough! In 1977 and 1979 I spent two summers in Strobl: one magnificent, the other just wet, wet, (W)wetter. This may be one of the reasons why the region divides people into two disjoint categories: those who settle quasi-permanently (by buying some accommodation and hoping for fine spells of the solar cycle as well as for little volcanic activity), and those who never come back again. So the Salzkammergut is constantly losing lots of people because of the weather – Gustav Mahler surely was one of them. And yet this brain drain gets compensated by stubborn people like me willing to bear the odd weather which could last for almost ever.

My feeling also was that, back then, some professors took the opportunity to offer their family a nice and cheap couple of weeks in Strobl. In particular the German instructors summoned all their kids, who would mingle with the students. I still remember one Styrian from Graz by her name – Roberta. Speaking of German, I recall an anecdote when one of the British fellow students told me, “Karl, your mother tongue can’t be German.” I only shortly was proud that he would say that my English was so good (what a projection -- by no accounts it has been; ever), alas he continued, “because you speak so slowly in that language.” This was on the ascent to the Eisriesenwelt; and it crushed my narcissism quite a bit.

Speaking about students in the first term: one girl was related to the Landeshauptmann of Salzburg somehow; another boy profited from his father’s firm which installed floor carpets in Vienna’s UNO-city; still another one – maybe his name was Robert? – used to decorate the back windows of his car with advertisements for the conservative party; and the most handsome of them all, a fair haired son of wealthy farmers in lower Austria – attended the priest seminar in Vienna. He already had a car and was the dream and darling of the girls at the time; I envied him quite a lot!

What more did I experience and learn in Strobl? Demus’ account of painting of the middle ages, with the purple coloured zigzag style of cloth folding, morphed nicely into the afternoon glitter of the lake nearby. New German literature was never so vividly experienced as in this Strobl lectures by a professor from Salzburg. And Russian history – but what kind of history? There exist so many narratives; and what “actually” happened reminds me of Tucholsky’s description of women (in Schloss Gripsholm): they appear like onions. Since my adolescence I try to peel off layers after layers, only to find another important one underneath – like a Russian doll of never-ending depth!

So let us contemplate some unconfirmed narratives: Strobl, I was told at the time, emerged from a summer camp of children of officers of the US occupation forces after WWII. And was the Bürglgut, site of the Sommerhochschule, confiscated Jewish property? I heard rumours about it.

The 2016 exhibition did not mention any of these with even a single sentence. Who knows which narrative is a fake and disinformation? This type of *Geschichtsschreibung* may actually be typical for Austria's post-war historical science, which often indulges in political correct sentimental subjects (such as the Viennese Circle and its exorcism by the Nazis), but remains silent whenever it is more convenient to do so. I would thus call it "history by convenience;" and this can be observed on all scales, in Austria and everywhere globally. Herbert was a master of this; and I am convinced this capacity to conform to the orthodox consent was one major criterion for his scientific success in Harvard and in Vienna.

Strobl, in a sense, might have (although not in its own understanding) figured as the undergraduate version of Alpbach. Just a year ago there were multiple celebrations of "Hochschulwochen" Alpbach anniversaries; none of them cared to mention that this institution has been co-founded by an Austrofaschist and an OSS (the prequel of CIA) spy; and only God knows if and how the CIA, that "Mighty Wurlitzer," played Alpbach over the years.

After WWII the US policy goal has been to contain the Soviets, and nowadays Russia – a noble goal, given the terror Lenin, Stalin and their successors exerted over their dominions and satellite colonies; with 20 million plus corpses due to the *Gulag* alone. I am quite thankful to the US for the opportunities and the sweet consumerism which they nurtured in their colonies like Austria, and for their protective shield; although they did not do it for our sake, but because of geopolitics – a monopoly game of sorts. As the Italians can testify, their *Gladio* stay behinds, in applying *la strategia della tensione*, not always have been ginger in their methods; not to speak of the more direct regime change operations in Persia, Guatemala and elsewhere.

And a few years after Strobl it dawned on me what would actually be possible with a false flag "dirty bomb" covert operation: our republics might actually get rid of all the barriers and restrictions the founding fathers like Jefferson, Madison and Washington put up to safeguard against future *coup d'états* – Jefferson had it right when he allegedly alleged "a republic, if you can keep it!" For constitutional reasons the US governments always had problems to wage wars; or at least to enter them; and a lot of excuses and outright lies had to be engaged for the sake of getting the military into action. Let us see what comes next.

Strobl being Strobl, we never have been taught these kind of revisionist narratives, but were nurtured with other ones, negotiably more revolting and abhorrent: Voslenskij's historic account of soviet history had a deep, permanent impact on me. One personal anecdote he mentioned in his lectures came from his youth: sometime around 1932/33 he went with his mother by train through the Ukraine to the Krim peninsula. The windows of the carriages had been thoroughly planked with wood; but the young Voslenskij managed to peek through a tiny slit formed by adjacent planks. What he saw was humans so marcid they could barely walk; the type of Muselmanen later observed in Nazi concentration camps. This was the first time somebody mentioned to me the term *Holomodor*, a man-made famine in Ukraine which had killed an estimated 5 million Ukrainians, mostly small farmers ("kulaks") resisting the Soviets: they cordoned off the huge fertile agricultural plains which even nowadays present geopolitical battlefields, and in a succession of waves

confiscated and pulled out anything faintly edible. Then the apparatchiks just waited for those inside to die. The entire rest of the world just pretended to look the other way. I believe that one cannot understand the self-hatred, denial, as well as suppressed grievance, currently present in these Ur-Russian territories without acknowledging the horrors of the past.

I am deeply indebted to Strobl to have been able to learn of such horrors; but conversely I am deeply angry about the Austrian school system, which has wasted so much of my time to teach me so little! Nowadays these omissions and lost occasions are called opportunity costs. When I read Zweig's "Die Welt von Gestern" I realise that not much has changed in secondary education from imperial time – the sort of *Kadettenakademie* as depicted in Musil's "Thörless;" schooling appears to be a permanent source of crippling and weakening of our societies – at ever increasing costs. Alas my generation did little to alleviate the situation; and I personally must blame myself as much as anybody else for these ongoing disasters.

In 1979, my second term in Strobl, it rained a lot; really a lot: *Dauerregen, Schnürlregen*. The glitter was dormant. There existed sublime experiences if you forced or rather seduced yourself to take a swim in the chilly waters nevertheless: drizzles around you, on your head; greyishness everywhere. You might be the only mortal swimming these waters at the time (although, who knows?). And yet how good this feels! So good I could not resist gliding naked into the dark waters during this year's anniversary celebration ceremonies, while others were watching a performance of folklore *Schuhplattler*. Feels so good!

The rain caused us to concentrate on the great indoors. Almost compulsory Herbert Gottweis, a Viennese from an "upper (echelon) district" – Gersthof to be precise – and I became acquainted. Herbert was a fair haired, cheerful intellectual; a student of political science; motivated to come to Strobl by his long-term mentor Gehrlich. He was an impressive person; in particular, he had so many qualities and abilities I was lacking: whereas I was black haired and could have easily staged as Zappa (unfortunately I never made use of this; as this might have resolved my problems with girls entirely), Herbert was fair haired and could have easily posed as *Blasengerl*. But foremost, Herbert had a natural way of moving in bourgeois and academic environments. Bourdieu's theory of distinction gets corroborated by Herbert. He seemed to be born for academia: always moderate yet sublime; and knowledgeable in culture and the manners. Herbert just knew that the Szolti recording with the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra of Brahms's "Deutsches Requiem" was reference; as well as Rilling's Gärchinger Kantorei performance of Bach's "Matthäus Passion" and the Klemperer-Wunderlich-Ludwig-(New) Philharmonia Orchestra recording of Mahler's "Song of the Earth." (The latter piece, in particular its last song "The Farewell," became my bitter company after the Alpbach experience.) Herbert had comprehended Mahler fully, whereas I just had gotten hooked to Visconti's citation of the Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth in "Death in Venice!" And yet, Herbert's conformism got him into troubles: because it is a bitter truth that social conformity comes with personal uneasiness.

Anyway, the summer of 1979 was wet, and, in particular, Herbert and I missed little time to indulge ourselves in a lot of indoor practices of almost prophetic proportions. One dull afternoon, for instance, we convinced a poor fellow US student that his country had just invaded Obervolta (Upper Volta). At that occasion we might have re-invented brainwashing.

Another key experience was a memorable social evening arranged for student performances, when said bearded violinist was playing – rather fighting while playing – with an adversary violinist, a German professor who was almost deaf; and yet, as often happens in such cases, refused any

hearing aid. I never had listened to such a delightful cacophony; only to be surpassed by the Second Viennese School of Twelve-tone compositions! – Albeit my suspicion always has been that Schönberg's musical capacities ceased after completion of the "Gurrelieder;" and yet a conversation with his daughter (married to Nono, so not totally neutral to atonality) convinced me that Schönberg himself was of the opinion that his later compositions were quite similar continuations of his early romantic pieces – what an utter misconception!

During that evening Herbert and I performed Handke's "Publikumsbeschimpfung" (in German). There was almost no reaction from the large audience of venerable professors and (English speaking) students. But we were prepared to escalate: we started reciting the Viennese phone book; at that time a rather voluminous Wälzer of very compressed text, at an arbitrary page – I believe we started with some *Pospischil*. We went on and on and on and on. There still was no reaction from the audience: they patiently listened to pages after pages ... they surely could not all have fallen asleep!

I am convinced that radical conceptual artists would have continued by reading through the entire night. Alas, with us being the two academics we later became, we stopped totally exhausted (also by mere lack of voice training) after seven densely printed pages. Actually, we might have become famous for not quitting! But we simply stood up and left the stage; quite frustrated. The applause was scarce but sympathetic.

From this experience Strobl has taught me another rather bitter lesson of open source education: I became convinced that one can tease and torture the *Bildungsbürger* (members of the educated classes) almost unlimitedly as long as one convinces them that they are consuming art and culture. Contemporary "art" and Andersen's tale of the "Emperor's New Clothes" have proved me right beyond doubt. It is not totally unreasonable to extend this forsaken willingness to submit to self-inflicting conformity even to politics. Sadly, as Goethe once remarked: no one is more a slave than he who thinks he is free whilst he is not. Herbert himself always remained a *Bildungsbürger* deep in his heart, a condition of mysterious bliss I have never accomplished.

Coming from the East coast, Herbert later visited me in Berkeley. At that time I lived in a tiny room in UCB's *Ihouse* with direct views toward the Golden Gate. I just crammed in an abandoned extra bed which I had found on a nearby floor. Nobody cared. On his second day in the Bay Area Herbert was engaged by an amazing Californian girl, partly of Caucasian, partly of Japanese descent, on the platform of BART, direction San Francisco. She was pretty and extremely resource- and cheerful. Herbert, as always the *Bildungsbürger*, had brought some music: I still vividly remember listening to Glass' *Photographer* as we were approaching the Golden Gate Bridge southbound (toward SF city) in the late afternoon sun!

Herbert, upon returning to the east coast, throughout and after his first marriage, made a psychoanalysis. After that he went to Salzburg and craved for returning to Vienna, at last, to take a professorship which was first created (in an exchange with a professorship for a relative of Kreisky) for some prominent conservative representative of parliament, who consecutively decided not to accept. These were those days of direct control of the universities by the ministry; today the situation seems to be much the same; yet the means appear to be more subtle and indirect.

Herbert would have been the ideal provost for Strobl; a successor to Gehrlich. And who knows; maybe he would have invited me to present some lectures there as well? Alas, quite

understandably, his later wife refused this offer – she came from a wealthy local family not far from the Attersee, and wanted to enjoy summer life undisturbed from the hassles of student's desires, and from socializing *a la professore*.

His nephew became my fifth, very successful lawyer in my seven year divorce battle. He was the first to realize some motoric issues of Herbert, and later was the one who delivered to me the sad news about Herbert's brain tumor. At that time I was spending a sabbatical in Sardegna's Cagliari, and was just riding the bus following a stretch of the *golfo de los Angeles*. I gasped and had to get out of the bus; just staring in despair at the deep blue sky and the glow of the late afternoon sun reflected by the houses and the sea.

Herbert, together with his wife, still managed to continue traveling sections of the silk road; to Samarkand and beyond; alas they have been unable to complete their endeavor because of his deteriorating health. Herbert's last concern, just days before his much too early death, was the completion of this journey, as well as the erotic relationships of dog owners: he mentioned not without concern that, according to a recent statistics, about one third of dogs sleep in the same bed with their "Frauerl." Let us, in the honor of Herbert, and as a kind of solace, quote Mong-Kao-Yen, Bethge and Mahler: „*Die müden Menschen geh'n heimwärts, Um im Schlaf vergess'nes Glück, Und Jugend neu zu lernen!*“ The rest is silence.

As for me, I have continued to spend my summers in the Salzkammergut, a short drive away from Strobl at the Irrsee's eastern shore, directed toward the afternoon sun; at first abundant with family; nowadays austere and lonely – lately dressed up in skirts and dresses -- I always liked to do this but still experience it as a malady modern medicine is unable to cure -- even worse, for its obvious inability to cope with this situation, psychoanalysis has belittled these aberrations by declaring (wo)man to be polymorph perverse; thereby suppressing the subject by effectively sweeping it under the carpet.

And I continue to enjoy the glitter of the afternoon sun on the ever changing fabric of water ripples first encountered in Strobl. So, in this and many other ways, Strobl has been a determining experience for me; and I am deeply thankful for all of them.