

*Growing up in the center of Europe  
before the Second World War*

## *Choices in War and Peace*

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THERE ARE SEVERAL REASONS for this memoir. Its first purpose is to recapture, from the point of view of an alert participant, the atmosphere and the conditions prevailing in Europe (and the United States) before, during, and after the Second World War, so as to set this most terrible of all wars in its proper place at last, as something that man did to man, rather than a country to a country or a nation to a nation, burdening entire national groups or nations with a collective guilt, as was the case with the Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor and with Austria quite recently. The second motive is a personal one, stemming from a growing feeling of being the last of the Mohicans (the father, not the son), old enough to have been a participant from beginning to end, and young enough to have retained a total recall. The final reason is my good fortune to have been born and raised in the exact center of Europe, Upper Silesia, and thus from the beginning to have obtained the geographical and historical perspective essential for achieving an unobstructed view and a clear understanding of the upheaval that followed.

Two early events shaped my childhood and influenced my life. The first represents also the first choice in my life, perhaps the most important choice, which was, however, made not by me but for me, by my father, who did not accept the decision of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) leaving Silesia with Germany, rather than awarding it to newly restored Poland. When three successive Silesian Uprisings (1919,

1920, 1921) and the plebiscite conducted under the supervision of a Franco-British-Italian Allied Commission still left our patrimony, located near the border town of Racibórz (Ratibor), on the German side of the new frontier, drawn finally and chaotically in 1922, my father, who had supported the insurrections, took his family, already then consisting of eight members (six of them children), and crossed the Odra (Oder) River into Rybnik in Poland. My grandfather's other numerous sons and daughters stayed behind, to be re-joined by my sole surviving brother, Maks, a generation later, when all of Silesia, except the Czech part, became Polish.

I have no recollection of Rybnik, my first contact with Poland at that time, because we soon moved about 20 kilometers farther southeast, but I returned there several years later to study in Polish State Gymnasium 874. Nor do I have a recollection of the fateful crossing from Germany to Poland, having barely been an infant, born literally on the eve of the crossing. But I do have a total recollection of a version of the crossing related to me in my childhood by my oldest brother, Paul, a teenage violin virtuoso blessed with a rich imagination. According to Paul, the crossing took place in the dead of night, with the German border guards (Grenzschutz) in hot pursuit. In the middle of the river my mother stumbled and dropped me, and it was Paul who dived after me and saved me and, good swimmer that he was, helped her afterwards to cross the deep areas, while my father and Maks transported the

remaining children to the safety of the Polish shore. As Paul was telling me the story, my mother, whom we always called *Mutter* and whose Polish at that time consisted of a Silesian dialect full of German borrowings, nodded in agreement, and I accepted everything I heard as gospel truth that from then on guided my life. The element of early survival endowed me with a feeling of indestructibility which, in turn, enabled me to survive other high-risk situations, of which there were many. War heroes have that feeling and, at present, unfortunately, so do the antiheroes, the terrorists.

The second event was in the nature of a national, or patriotic, awakening. It was the first "Polish Song Festival" held in our school, with several neighboring schools taking part by entering their choirs in competition. Music and singing had a strong tradition in Silesia, as in all of western Poland, and in Germany too, for that matter. One of the purposes of the festival, which became a regular spring feature thereafter, was to replace, through the medium of the children, at least some of the popular German songs that were sung predominantly at home. The Polish songs proved a match for the German. Written by famous poets from the sixteenth century onwards, set to music by famous composers, these songs had about them a certain majesty, a heartrending nostalgia, but also a devil-may-care playfulness and zest. The songs of nature were the best, and I know some of them by heart to this day, among them ones with a hidden "adult" meaning, such as the one about the young girl hunting for mushrooms, and after finding a particularly proud glory, singing a triumphant refrain:

O mushroom, mushroom, mushroom mine,  
How sweet, how *sweet* your root divine.  
[Translation mine.]

My father, besides conducting an amateur orchestra (in which Paul played first violin), was also director of a men's choir, another tradition he brought from Germany. The songs from the festival, which

he attended enthusiastically, soon found themselves in his repertoire, alongside the "Blue Danube" and other German masterpieces.

Among the teachers in charge of the festival was a newcomer from a neighboring school, an extraordinary young man by the name of Kram, whom everybody called "von Cramm" because not just in name but also in appearance and athletic ability he resembled the German tennis player Gottfried von Cramm, who was just then beginning to make his name in sports. Kram was a remarkable teacher, and in his opening speech he told us about Silesia, how from time immemorial it had been a highway for destructive nomadic hordes, Scythians, Sarmatians, and Vandals, the last of whom, known also as Silings, left behind the name of the region, Silingia, which became Silesia. How, despite the destructive raids, occurring chiefly because of the vicinity of the Moravian Gate, successive cultures flourished in Silesia, such as the Lusatian culture, and how the entire region became part of Christian Poland in 990, with the first bishopric established in Wroclaw (Breslau) in the year 1000, the year of Emperor Otto III's pilgrimage to the then capital of Poland, Gniezno. He told us not to be ashamed of the Silesian dialect, which was historically one of the four main Polish dialects, perhaps even the oldest, because the first written Polish sentence attested in the Middle Ages was in the Silesian dialect. He told us how Poland lost Silesia to Bohemia in the fourteenth century as the price of neutrality in the coming war with the Teutonic Knights, and how the region passed to the Habsburgs two centuries later and to Prussia in 1742. He told us much more, about the Mongol invasion, which was stopped at Lignica (Liegnitz) in 1241; about the Hussite ties in the fifteenth century; about King Jan Kazimierz seeking refuge in Silesia from the Swedes in 1655; about King Jan Sobieski passing through Silesia on his way to rescue Vienna from the Turks in 1683 and neglecting to claim the province as a

“price” of not mere neutrality, but salvation; and about Kutuzov dying in Silesia after chasing Napoleon from Moscow to the outermost limits of the Slavic world in 1812. He had kind things to say about the German and Polish cultures that existed side by side in Silesia for almost 1,000 years, until the Prussians started systematic Germanization, which resulted in instant hostility and bloodshed.

It was an incredible speech, way above a youngster's head, but I was fortunate in having an older brother, Henryk (Hein), an excellent note-taker and a future priest, who was still in school at that time, and his notes helped me to understand the speech properly. But I did not need notes to follow Kram's final display. He unfurled a map of Europe, and with a piece of chalk drew a line from the southern tip of Portugal to the northern tip of Russia above the Urals. The line passed through Silesia. Then he drew another line, from the northern tip of Norway to the southern tip of Greece. That line also passed through Silesia, crossing the other line. He called our attention to the fact and concluded in words scrupulously taken down by my brother Henryk:

As you can see, the lines cross in Silesia, which makes it the exact center of Europe, and because Europe is still the center of the world, then Silesia is the center of the center of the world. It is quite possible that the exact center is right where we are standing now, in the Town of Hawk.

We were astonished to hear him identify our town, known under various names as a spa (Bad Königsdorf, Jastrzębie-Zdrój [*Bad* and *Zdrój* both=spa]), with its legendary founder, the fifteenth-century knight, Hawk (Jastrząb), but this only increased our pride in it, in our school, and in Silesia, which on account of its coal was Poland's Jewel in the Crown.

That Poland should have produced excellent teachers and a superior school system by 1927 (my first exposure to it) after 123 years of partition is a testimony to the country's vitality and indestructibility. This accomplishment was not an isolated accident. A generation later, Admiral Hyman R. Rickover expressed the

same amazement about the Polish educational system's ability to rebuild itself in record time after the destruction of the Second World War when he visited his native Bialystok in the mid-1950s. True, Poland had great traditions in education, going back to the founding of the University of Cracow (Kraków) in 1364 but particularly to the Enlightenment, when the celebrated Commission of National Education, founded in 1773, was in fact the first Ministry of Education in the world. Eighteen years later (1791), the famous May 3rd Constitution (celebrated annually in prewar Poland and to this day by Polish-Americans in Chicago), alongside the American Constitution (1787) and the French (1793), one of three great documents of the Enlightenment, laid great stress on education. It is often said that the work of the Commission of National Education, which reorganized Polish education after the dissolution of the Jesuit Order by Clement XIV, and the message of the May 3rd Constitution on the eve of Poland's final partition (1795), saved Poland, letting it depart into bondage with great traditions and a strong spirit that neither Russia nor Prussia could break throughout the nineteenth century. Those of us who were entering school in the 1920s were becoming a living proof of that.

As for the teachers, Kram—probably of German origin—was not the only phenomenon. There was Dorota Mandzel, daughter of a principal of another neighboring school, a young teacher whose goldilocks beauty was matched only by her knowledge and dedication. She taught not only language arts, including writing, spelling, and calligraphy, but also singing (she had a beautiful voice, and often gave recitals with my brother Paul) and, extra-curricularly, the violin, which she played quite well. I was happy to carry her violin after class, and in exchange she would bring me books to read from her father's extensive library. My services were soon supplanted by Kram (an uneasy romance was starting between the two), but the books never ceased, until the entire li-

brary was exhausted and I had to look for other sources, as our school had only a modest library.

Reading was encouraged to an unprecedented degree in school, and teachers made their own books available to pupils, particularly the young teachers, graduates of postwar Teachers' Seminaries. Their own reading was prodigious, and so was their knowledge. It was only much later, when I began my own serious studies, that I learned about the sources of that knowledge. Despite Poland's nonexistence as a state in the nineteenth century, the nation was able not only to maintain its intellectual level, but to expand it, often with the help of assimilated foreigners. The great Polish historian Joachim Lelewel, of Baltic-German origin, was so renowned that he was able to dismiss the official Russian historiographer, Nikolai Karamzin, as not deserving the name of a historian, and say it in Russian periodicals in the 1820s. With Lelewel begins a long line of modern Polish historians leading into the twentieth century. Similarly, the Poles excelled in mathematics in the nineteenth century, starting a new tradition and establishing what is now often referred to as the "legendary school of Polish mathematics" (the late Stanislaw M. Ulam, a Polish émigré and American nuclear physicist, was a product of that school—see his *Adventures of a Mathematician* [1976]). Towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth, Poland also developed outstanding scholars in linguistics, in the history of language, and the history of culture, disciplines in which foreign names (or partially foreign), such as Baudouin de Courtenay, Lehr-Splawinski, Alexander Brückner, and Zdzislaw Stieber were the rule rather than the exception. Their books and articles were published in Austrian Poland, where there were almost no restrictions on Polish intellectual life, and later in independent Poland, and were thus freely available, and certainly accessible to students in Teachers' Seminaries, where Kram and Dorota had studied, and which must have been extraordinary normal schools if one contrasts their performance

with the dismal record of American teachers' colleges.

The above digressions would suggest that reading and learning (and singing) were the only preoccupations in Polish Silesia in the late 1920s. This was certainly not so in general, but it was in my case. After our somewhat hurried departure from Rybnik, a trip of which I have only a vague recollection, life in the Town of Hawk, our permanent residence, was like a dream, full of folk tales by my mother and gruesome tales of wartime hardships by my brother Paul, including the nightmarish crossing of the Odra River, and ending in sheer joy over our new circumstances and surroundings. My father, descending from a long line of warriors turned gunsmiths and then ordinary smiths or engineers, was put in charge of a large railway repair-shop nearby, and shortly afterwards he became the superintendent of an entire system of railway signals in our corner of Poland bordering on Germany and Czechoslovakia. With this splendid job came a spacious government house, and although three other railroading families lived on its three floors, ours was the ground floor, and our father was the administrator of the building, which meant that we also had the use of the pieces of land surrounding it, sufficient for grazing and raising hay for our livestock, and for growing all the vegetables and fruit we needed at home.

This splendid house, so self-sufficient in terms of essential foodstuffs, had another feature that rendered it secure and permanent. As if Hawk himself had erected it, it stood on a protruding triangular hill, separated from the town's villas, hotels, and pensions by a line of thorny hedges, and from the village below by a railway line. In what must be considered another of Hawk's touches (he was the king's guardian of roads in this area), the house faced on the garden side a convergence of two roads—one, leading to the railway station, which in Hawk's time must have been something else, and another, leading to the Town of Hawk. A stone staircase, consisting of twenty-seven steps, with iron rail-

ings on each side and an iron gate on each end, descended from the house to the roads below. The entire property had an air of invincibility, and it is no wonder that children from all four families began to look upon it, and to use it in war games, as a fortress defending the access to the Town of Hawk, as if foreshadowing future events.

I was a sickly child, a surviving twin, of which there were three in our family, all boys, but since the other two were growing tall and strong, there was also hope for me. It seems that mother, like Sophie in another war, also had hard choices to make. I always felt that she showered me with more than my share of her love because of that. I remember wearing a long shirt and long hair, and trudging after mother or tugging at her skirt, especially in the evening when the darkness outside made me wonder what was out there. Like the Russian literary character Oblomov, I was full of fears and clung to women, who in my case included my older sister, Maria (Mikla), a replacement for Paul as the family's baby-sitter and mother's helper when Paul became a cadet in the Army Music Conservatory. By then the family had already increased, and even the help of my other sister, Agnieszka (Agnes) was needed. As if to compensate for earlier losses, three girls were born in succession, Zofia (Zosia), Józefina (Zefka), and Anna (Anka), and the girls in our family then outnumbered the boys 5 to 4. Left to my own devices, I started teaching myself to read, using Henryk's primers and notes, which he never threw away. I was able to read at least a year before I started school, because I remember distinctly reading the headlines in my father's newspaper about Marshal Piłsudski's coup in May 1926. I remember it because the paper, a Silesian opposition paper, had entire columns blocked out in red on that day.

Having learned to read, I discovered a new world. During the following year I went through all the first- and second-grade reading materials, which my sister Agnes was bringing home from school, mostly charming fairy tales about princes

and princesses, about dwarves going into hiding at the sound of the first Christian bells, and about incredible giants, but also beautiful poems and songs, about a brother sharing an apple with his sister, about a river chained by ice, and about a father returning from a journey and saved from robbers through the prayers of his children at a roadside chapel. I was becoming so proficient that I was tutoring Agnes. When I had run out of reading materials, I would accompany my brother Maks to town, where I watched the local butcher hand him his daily mug of fresh calf's blood, intended to make him the strongest man in Poland, which was not an impossibility, since at fourteen he was already 180 centimeters tall, which was very tall in those days. When my father noticed the excursions, he started teaching me to swim, in order to overcome my fear of water. Soon I was crossing the 100-meter pond on my own. At that point my father cut my hair very short, both to facilitate my swimming and to defer to an ancient Slavic custom signifying the separation of a boy from women. The long chemise was replaced by a shirt and shorts, and after my youngest sister Anna was born in the summer of 1927, my father marched me off to school.

I have always suspected that my father "aged" me by a year or two to have me enrolled in school earlier than the obligatory age of six (six and a half, since I was born in February), doing it both to get me out of the house, now filled with girls, and so as not to have me waste time in view of my ability. If this is what really happened (one of my Polish ID cards, a railway pass which I managed to save because of its hard cover, shows the year of my birth blocked out and 1921 written above), it had long-term consequences, because premature entry allowed me to finish Gymnasium in 1939, become an officer cadet, and enter the war in uniform, which otherwise I would not have been able to do, but there were also short-term consequences that almost ended in tragedy.

The sequence of events connected with my early schooling will be summarized



here briefly. To begin with, despite my swimming and my outings with Maks and Henryk, I was still the smallest boy in school. This, in itself, would not have mattered much, except that I was almost two grades ahead of my class. The special treatment I was receiving from my teachers because of that created much animosity towards me, particularly among pupils who were held back on account of poor grades. I was never abused physically in school—I was too well chaperoned for that—but I was surrounded by an envy-inspired hostility. In my early school years I dealt with it by learning to defend myself without relying on my big brothers. The bullies who followed me after school had to race me uphill from the village, where the school was located, to my first line of defense, the railway line, whose rocks and stones provided me with deadly ammunition. The second line was the proud hill itself, whose weaponry was more sophisticated as the result of my reading Karl May's *Winnetou* stories just at that time, and included self-made bows and arrows and spears. In this way, I was not only developing into a future champion runner, but I was also developing a strong throwing arm, which in America would have made me a star pitcher in the Little League, but in Poland it produced excellent early results in the javelin and wartime expertise with the hand grenade. My lonely battles with the bullies, among whom three were chief instigators, soon brought to my side schoolmates from the Town of Hawk, and the hostility widened into a village versus town conflict, in which the "peasants" envied the "masters" who rubbed shoulders with the summer guests that flocked from all over Poland and from abroad, including even the United States, to take advantage of the cures for rheumatism for which the Town of Hawk was famed thanks to its mineral waters. The conflict at first proved very beneficial, because it provided me with much-needed exercise which, combined with the daily calisthenics in school and the frequent outings into the beautiful countryside of "Green Silesia" (as distinguished

from "black" industrial Silesia to the north and "mountain" Silesia to the south), was making me grow taller and stronger, while at the same time gaining me a group of loyal followers.

It was with this group that we watched, during the brief potato harvest vacation in the autumn of 1929, a flock of storks getting ready for the migration south. We knew one of the birds was crippled, and we wanted to see whether he was going to make it. To our sorrow, he didn't, and we tried to capture him in order to hand him over to Sister Cezarea, the "medical" Sister in the local convent. A strange man, who appeared from nowhere on the meadow, showed us how to do it without hurting the stork. In the convent later, where Sister Cezarea not only took the stork in for the winter but also helped the stranger with food and overnight lodgings, we learned that he was a Czech, a member of the famous Czech Legion, returning home from ten years of captivity in the Soviet Union. His incredible story, including his description of how the Legion almost toppled the Russian Revolution after a Xenophontian march from Vladivostok to Kazan and his high hopes as a POW when Poland defeated the Bolsheviks in 1920 (I was surprised to learn that "Bolshevik" was not just a term of abuse but the name of the ruling party in the Soviet Union), became one of the inspirations for a term paper I wrote thirty years later at Columbia University, "American Intervention in Russian Revolution" (1959). In 1929, the Czech's story became one of the ingredients, together with the story of the stork, of an essay describing the autumn season for which I won the school's prize for writing.

The prize, awarded by Dorota and Kram, was a catalyst in more ways than one. In school, I was immediately designated as the boy reciter for the following year's (1930) great anniversary celebrations and told to select the companion girl reciter myself. I selected Gretchen, the delicate and lovely younger daughter of our neighbor across the hedge, Pan Dyrda, a remarkable man who was not only my

father's superior in the state railways, but the mayor of our town, director of a mining combine, and the owner of a beautiful villa, the top floors of which he rented to summer guests. He was an early example of the new Silesian entrepreneur, as opposed to the Donnersmarks and von Plesses (Prinz von Pless), who still owned most of the coal mines and much of the land. He was also a great champion of youth and my sponsor until the war began, urging his only son, Jan (or Yanek, *not* Hans, as the German names were gradually Polonized), to follow in my footsteps.

My footsteps were at that point somewhat slowed by reading and pondering upon Kram's unexpected gift, Goethe's sentimental novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which was at that time undergoing an enormous renewed interest in Poland, to the extent that an immensely popular song, "The Last Sunday," inspired by the novel, was banned in some nightclubs, as was the book itself in some schools, as celebrating suicide. The song, incidentally, was soon replaced by another hit, "Tango Milonga," which swept Europe (but not America, where the tango never caught on) and was still popular in the Auschwitz concentration camp, where by a cruel irony the camp orchestra greeted new inmates with "Tango Milonga." I was too young in 1929 to think about the uses of songs in war and peace, but Kram's gift, which set the thoughts in motion, left me with a feeling of an ill omen and a self-fulfilling prophecy that was mitigated only at home.

At home, I also received a prize and a promise of another at Christmas. My father, who was impressed by my reading the newspaper regularly, and was often annoyed by my starting to clip it before he had a chance to read it, subscribed to one for me. It was called *Seven Groschen* (*Siedem Groszy*), which was also its price, and was a nonpolitical companion publication to our regular *Polonia*. The new paper had a feature which I have never seen in any other newspaper in the world: its serialized novel (at that time one based on the life of the seventeenth-century Sile-

sian Robin Hood, Count Jan Tadeusz Klimczok) was printed in 4-page installments, back to back, head to head, which means that it could be clipped without affecting other items and then folded and bound into a regular book. Having my own newspaper meant that I no longer needed to mutilate my father's (like the time I cut out an extensive article about the Moroccan insurrectionist Abd el-Krim), but also that I was expanding my library. By sheer accident, when I started receiving the paper, the very first issue carried a bold front-page headline about the American stock market crash of October 24, 1929. I didn't understand any of it, and when I asked my father, seeing that *Polonia* had the same headlines, he looked at me with a worried expression and said quietly: "You will understand. We will all suffer by it." After this, the word *kryzys* ("crisis") was often heard around the house, in school and on the streets, but nothing was changing critically as far as I was concerned.

The only thing that was changing was the seasons. After a still warm October with its customary evening rosary services in the church and the simultaneous ripening of the nuts on the Chestnut Avenue leading to it, came the suddenly cool November, whose name in Polish means "the falling of the leaves" (*listopad*) and which for us, the children, meant trips with a cart and sacks to the nearby woods to gather fallen leaves to be used in the enclosures of the geese, the goats, and the pigs, one of whom was soon to be slaughtered and turned into smoked hams, sausages, and bacon in the smokehouse specially erected on the now bare field. Then came the fogs, and after them the rains, turning icy and then stopping, with heavy clouds promising snow, which came in the beginning of December, marking the end of autumn labors, with everything stored and preserved: the cabbage in barrels of fermenting sauerkraut, the cucumbers in barrels turning into pickles, and the pumpkins, rhubarb, apples, pears, plums, and cherries all cooked, sweetened, and put away in rows upon rows of jars sealed

with rubber rings under the lids, each function performed in an almost ritualistic sequence, and with the arrival of snow promising the special pleasures of winter that culminated in the fast-approaching Christmas.

I did not have a chance to enjoy the pleasures, or Christmas, the last one the entire family spent together. On Christmas Eve, after helping mother by transporting on my long sled masses of breads and pastries to the bakery for baking, and making at least ten trips, I decided to go skating rather than watch my mother prepare her famous ten-course Christmas Eve dinner and not be able to sample it on account of the obligatory fast until the first star appears in the sky. My father had just made the grand gesture of giving me a little ahead of time the promised prize—a pair of brand-new skates, which I was now going to test. At the pond, I noticed a group of people in the middle with long poles. Curious as to what they were doing, I put the skates on quickly—they were the old-fashioned ones that you fasten on to the soles—and skated towards the group. Only as I approached them did I realize that they were the three school bullies. They parted obligingly before me, exposing a large square hole in the ice which it was too late for me to avoid. As I was falling in, legs first, I was thinking frantically that here I was, in water again, but who was going to save me now? Apparently nobody was, because I felt no poles touching me that would allow me to grab hold of them to climb out; on the contrary, I heard the sound of footsteps on the ice and then nothing. Only then the iciness of the water hit me like an electric shock, a feeling I was to experience three more times in my life, each time more painfully. My head, with the cap buttoned under the chin still on, touched the ice. Treading water with my legs, I removed my mittens and touched the ice above. I was amazed at its porosity and roughness. Then I opened my eyes, just long enough to notice the light square in the ice about one meter away, the distance my speed must have carried me in the water. Thank God the water was

clean! All the time I was holding my breath, which I could do for 90 seconds at that time, enough to reach the edge of the hole, grab it, and stick my head above water. I opened my eyes again: there was not a soul around and it was snowing lightly. My hands started getting numb, and I regretted taking off the mittens. As I was struggling, I was thinking about the three bullies, not with anger, but with a feeling of sadness that human beings could do this to another human being. I knew I would get out, and finally I did, by wedging my back into one corner of the square hole and resting my feet, with the skates still on, against the other, then making a desperate lunge at both ends to the right-hand corner, whose angle was the most acute and the water area the smallest, and crawling on all fours to safety.

When I returned home, I was completely frozen. My teeth were chattering and I could not speak. My mother took one look at me and sent Agnes for Sister Cezarea, while telling Maria to put the biggest pot of water on the stove. My father, meanwhile, took my frozen outer garments off and put me in the tub full of cold water, in which only a short while ago a large Christmas carp had been splashing. The water felt almost warm compared to that of the pond. When Sister Cezarea arrived, she took my temperature first, visibly worried at the result. She immediately ordered us to prepare the little room which had often served as hospital and nursery because it connected to the master bedroom and the kitchen. A fire was started in its tile stove, hot bricks wrapped in towels were placed in its bed, and a large portable tub placed next to the stove. I next found myself soaking in warm water, which was gradually made warmer, and then hot, after which I was put in bed, with Sister Cezarea administering some medicinal drops to me. When she took my temperature again, her worried expression did not change. She was a wonderful woman, almost a double of the British actress Flora Robson, but she was fighting a losing battle. Nothing was known at that



time about hypothermia, which it took me fifty years to find out I had, when I read reports about a little boy who had fallen in Lake Michigan in Chicago.

For the next forty-eight hours I was shivering in my bed, with either mother or Sister Cezarea, or both, at my side. I vaguely remembered hearing carols, taking a sip of fish soup, a stab at the carp and the delicacies mother had prepared, but it was no use, my temperature stayed low. On the second day of Christmas, which is a visiting day in Silesia, I had many visitors, but only one of them helped me. A young gypsy woman, Regina, returned a violin which her father, allegedly a king of the gypsies, had been making into a gypsy violin for Paul. Regina took one look at me and knew what to do. She took a vial from a leather pouch hanging from her neck, opened it, took a minute quantity of a silvery ointment and smeared it on my chest, which immediately felt warm, almost hot. The ointment exuded a strange smell, which Sister Cezarea declared "pagan," without protesting, however. I came across that smell three more times in my life and each time it reminded me of Regina. Her cure was short. First she had me soak in water as hot as I could take, then dried me out and smeared my entire body with her ointment. When its effects were about to wear off she asked for more hot water, then closed the door and got into the tub herself, after which she joined me in bed, holding me closely. Her body was hot, as hot or hotter than the ointment, and I began to perspire, which was obviously a good sign, because she smiled and we started to chat. Then she got up, dressed, and called the women. She asked Sister Cezarea to take my temperature, and when it registered normal, even a little above normal, she said that now I would probably get pneumonia, adding "but *that* you know how to fight." Then she excused herself, saying that she had far to go. My father paid her double the repair of the violin, and my mother handed her a parcel of food for the journey. Receiving it, she whispered something mysteriously to my mother, scribbled the numbers 6-6-66

with a finger on the tile, looked in my direction, and then she was gone.

The fight with pneumonia was long and close. How close, I was not to find out until thirty years later, when I visited Poland for the first time after the war (1959). At that time it was my sister Maria who whispered something mysteriously, but to my British wife, looking in my direction. My wife did not understand much of it, knowing as she did neither Polish nor German, but she remembered one word, repeated over and over, "Lunge! Lunge!" (lung). It was then that I remembered my fears of tuberculosis fed by my family's suspicions and ended only in 1942 by the camp physician of Stalag XVIIIB in Austria, Stabsarzt Werner Maier, who, after examining me thoroughly before employing me in his office as chief interpreter, found only some old scar tissue on the tip of my left lung, diagnosing it as such ("Alter Spitzenprozess links") on the official meticulous camp health certificate (*Gesundheitsblatt*) which I still have among my papers. The scar tissue, covered by an old calcium deposit, dated from the winter 1929-30, which means that I was in real peril then, especially since many children died that winter in Silesia. We were vaccinated against smallpox, but penicillin had not yet been invented, and children (and adults) were dying of influenza, scarlet fever, and whooping cough in Poland just as they died in the United States during and after the First World War. One of the victims was Gretchen, whose slow death affected us all, particularly her father, who was devastated by it, but also me, whose companion reciter she was meant to be.

Gretchen's death had deep literary connotations. One of the celebrations in which she was to appear with me was the 400th anniversary of the birth of Jan Kochanowski (1530-84), premier Polish Renaissance poet, father of Polish poetry and drama, author of hymns and songs, translator of psalms, master of both Latin and Polish, a Renaissance figure par excellence, but known to us children chiefly as the author of his *Laments (Treny)*, a cycle of nineteen poems in which the poet comes gradually

to terms with his grief over the death of his favorite daughter, Urszula. Gretchen was to be Urszula in the celebration, a role for which her angelic personality fit her perfectly. Some of us already called her Urszula on account of her devotion to her father and vice versa. Before she died, she told me (my father had to carry me over to see her) that she wanted my sister Josephine to take her place, and she asked me to read to her the "Lament" I selected for the celebration. It was no. 7, my favorite (the best known was no. 8), in which the father takes a mournful leave of his daughter and the "sad trinkets" she is taking with her. It ends:

And so a single casket, scant of measure,  
Locks thee and all thy treasure.

This also turned out to be an epitaph for Gretchen. She died a few days later, but I was too weak to attend the funeral, although the entire school did. Her father, like the poet, could not contain his grief at first. He sold the villa and built another one, taking with him only a slab of concrete on which Gretchen had once left an imprint of her tiny foot.

By early spring 1930 I was back in school, never divulging the details of my accident. But I was weak, and Gretchen's death depressed me. I went through the motions, fulfilling my obligations, but requested that the Kochanowski celebration be shifted to autumn, when Josephine would be starting school. This was granted to honor Gretchen's request, but also because the May 3 celebration was almost upon us. For this one Dorota and Kram chose a remarkable poem, for me, a highly patriotic "Catechism of a Polish Child," a question-and-answer poem, with the question part going to a girl, Aniela, who had won the prize for German. There was some wisdom behind it, having probably to do with a desire to attract the German minority to Polish celebrations, and I never questioned it, finding Aniela highly acceptable for this particular assignment. She was the complete opposite of the saintly Gretchen, an earthy girl with just the right degree of toughness, energy, and

a strong voice that was the match of mine, which was already then acquiring the accents of command. The poem became a shouting match, which was exactly how it was meant to be recited, with Aniela's hair, the color of ripe wheat, bobbing up and down as she was throwing the questions to me:

Who are you, boy?—A Polish schoolboy!  
What's your emblem?—The White Eagle!  
Where do you live?—Among my own!  
In what country?—The land of Poles!  
What is this land?—My fatherland!  
How was it won?—With blood and wounds!  
Do you love it?—Most sincerely!  
What is your faith?—In God only!  
[Translation mine.]

It was a memorable performance, with everybody in the hall giving us a standing ovation and a huge encore, forcing us to another performance and then another. How memorable, I was again not to find out until decades later, when I took part in 1975 in a meeting of Polish veterans from all over the world. The Polish hosts honored me, as a Silesian, by asking me to chair a session in the famous Knights Hall (Rittersaal) of the old Rathaus in Wroclaw (Breslau). A small ceremony was held later on the steps outside, where, on the top step, stood a young boy, who on a given sign started reciting, alone, "Who are you, boy?" and I felt that there, but for the grace of God, stood I. I insisted on meeting him, and I told him about myself and the poem. "I know," he said, "you started it in Silesia."

There remained one more celebration, the 100th anniversary of the November Insurrection of 1830, or the Russo-Polish war, as it is often called. In this connection most of us discovered the other side of Poland's national poet, Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), not just the singer of beautiful ballads and romances, which we already knew, but a flaming patriot and creator of a terrifying drama, *Forefathers' Eve* (*Dziady*), which is a vision of the destruction and salvation of the Polish nation in the form of a Holocaust perpetrated on all the Polish children except one, a future savior. Excerpts from the

drama were read by Kram. As for the children at the celebration, we were overwhelmed by the thought of what a child could grow into in a society, and that is what Kram was trying to stress.

That same winter Kram committed suicide, having been led to believe that Dorota had jilted him during a carnival ball. He threw himself from a bridge under an oncoming train, having previously cut his wrists. Hearing the terrible news, Dorota suffered a brain fever and spent years in hospital. I saw her once more only, on a train on the day I was leaving Poland during the war. Somehow, she guessed it and wished me well.

Without Kram and Dorota I lost interest in school, using it only as a place to read new books in the library and books that my father brought me from Rybnik, where he now worked. It was also my father who pulled me out of my stupor by pointing to the changing political situation. I knew nothing about the treaties of Rapallo and Locarno that worried him, but I shared his concern when Hitler came to power in 1933. The Polish-German treaty of non-aggression in 1934 calmed him down, but the death of Pilsudski the following year brought new worries. For me, it was the year to begin the gymnasium, rather than the Cadet School, which my father could not afford. I passed my entrance examination in June with flying colors, no easy matter with 1,000 applicants for 200 places in the freshman class, and immediately had a beautiful uniform tailor-made. It turned out that my father wanted to take me to visit our relatives in German Silesia before

it was too late, as he feared it would soon be. His fears were well grounded. Our travel document (*Verkehrskarte*) was meticulously and suspiciously checked at the train's border crossing, and at Ratibor Hammer, our destination, my uniform attracted noisy attention. Outside the station we were immediately surrounded by a group of uniformed boys and girls walking around us in a circle and loudly singing a parody of "Fuchs du hast die Gans gestohlen" ("Fox, you have stolen the goose"), which ran something like this:

Pole du hast Land gestohlen  
Gib es wieder her!  
Gib es wieder her!

My father was flabbergasted. Only two years earlier he had traveled to Ratibor with my mother to see the Zarazani circus, and had a most pleasant visit with our relatives at the same time—but now this. Why was there no one at the station to meet us? When one of the boys tried to spill something on my uniform, and I pushed him so that he spilled it on himself, a fight was likely to ensue, and my father called a policeman standing nearby. It turned out that they were personally acquainted, but the policeman icily gave us the advice to go back home. After some thought, we decided to go back, especially since there was a return train leaving almost immediately. On the train, my father was visibly depressed. I was looking at the countryside, as was my custom, thinking about our relatives, about our German neighbors at home, and about the future.

*"To resist the idyllic imagination and the diabolical imagination, we need to know the moral imagination of Edmund Burke."*

## *Why Edmund Burke Is Studied*

*Russell Kirk*

CATO THE ELDER told his friends, "I had rather that men should ask, 'Why is there no monument to Cato?' than that they should ask, 'Why is there a monument to Cato?'" Now I do not suppose that people often inquire, "Why is there a monument to Burke in the city of Washington?" Nevertheless, some Americans in high places remain interestingly ignorant of the great men and women whose statues loom tall in L'Enfant's little parks; therefore, in considering Edmund Burke's statue I offer you some reflections on why Burke is still much read and quoted nowadays.

Statues have their enemies, a sept of that body of the malicious whom I have called, in one of my books, the Enemies of the Permanent Things. Two decades ago the gentleman then Secretary of the Interior declared that Washington was cluttered with monuments to nobodies—anyway, to folk forgotten by everybody—and that those statues ought to be cleared away. Pressed for an example of the nobodies he had in mind, the Secretary of the Interior responded, "Well, that statue of Benjamin Rush, whoever he was." Now Dr. Benjamin Rush, as many today are aware, was one of the more eminent signers of the Declaration of Independence; but that is not the most important thing about him. Rush was a famous physician, a man of letters, one of the two founders of the first antislavery society in America, the holder of various public offices, and a chief man of intellect during the formative years of

the Republic. As one edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* summarizes Rush's literary productivity:

Benjamin Rush's writings covered an immense range of subjects, including language, the study of Latin and Greek, the moral faculty, capital punishment, medicine among the American Indians, maple sugar, the blackness of the negro, the cause of animal life, tobacco smoking, spirit drinking, as well as many more strictly professional topics. His last work was an elaborate treatise on *The Diseases of Man* (1812). He is best known by the five volumes of *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, which he brought out at intervals from 1789 to 1798 (two later editions revised by the author).

Such was the scholar and public man whose effigy the Secretary of the Interior would have consigned to Avernus. (Incidentally, that Secretary was given to frequent praise of "intellectuals.") But *nil admirari*! Earlier in this century, the administrators of New York City's parks came near to tossing into the Hudson the bronze bust of Orestes Brownson, the most vigorous of American Catholic thinkers; the bust had been knocked off its pedestal in Riverside Park, and everybody in authority had quite forgotten poor Brownson. (That bust was rescued in the nick of time by Fordham University and may be seen on Fordham's campus today.) From ignorance or from malice, there flourishes in our era a breed of haters of the past, who chuck down the memory-hole of 1984 (the dystopia, not