

Before the Time of Greatness

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One day in 1925, soon after entering the Fifth Form of the *Gymnasium*, I came home from school and found my mother visibly upset. She was standing under the big, gold-framed pier glass in the hall and received me with the words:

“I had quite a shock when I went to see your teacher this morning.”

Like any normal boy of thirteen or so, I was immediately put on guard by this startling announcement. I was not aware of any particular derelictions at the moment, but from experience I knew that trouble was always just around the corner. Instinctively, I assumed a cautious stance and inquired:

“Why did you go?”

“Just to find out what is going on and how your marks are holding up.”

These trips to the teacher had become something of a semi-annual routine. My mother had frequently been summoned to school on behalf of my older brothers and sister, years earlier; *their* marks had left much to be desired. I—the youngest—had never presented a problem on that score, and Mother, in a weak moment, once admitted that she now found the interviews with the teachers rather pleasant. Somewhat reassured, I ventured to say:

“I have not had any demerits lately.”

The behavior problem was a horse of a different color. Certain dark spots, one might say. But I had started the school year with a clean slate, figuratively speaking. This new teacher we now had called for a different approach. A professor, even; it was the first time that our class was thus honored.

“There seems to be nothing wrong with your conduct, but the professor acted very odd. A man of his rank should know better than to ask questions like: “Why are you coming here...What do you want from me?” Mr. Kern happened to be in the room while we talked. He remembered me from three years ago when you were in his class, and *he* was very friendly. But this Kesselmaier is really something—what a strange name, anyway.”

“One of the boys told me that he was born in India. His father was a German missionary there,” I explained, rather aimlessly. “We think that’s where he got the pockmarks. You must have noticed them, covering his face like pigskin.”

“How often have I told you not to make fun of people’s looks? What really disturbed me is the professor’s rudeness. He made it clear to me that he does not want me to come back unless there is something seriously wrong.”

Now I suddenly understood the whole thing. In a way I was relieved because this had nothing to do with my marks or my conduct. I could just imagine the talk that went on between the teachers after Mother had left.

If it was up to me to make a choice between these two I would be hard put. Kern could be a brute when he was in a bad mood. Paddling was permitted in the lower grades where he taught, and Kern sometimes used it to the limit. Then again, he could be friendly when the spirit moved him. Kesselmaier was always the same old codger, always taunting and making cutting remarks, especially about Jews.

There was really no point in trying to explain it to my mother: it wouldn't do any good. I tried another tack.

“What did Mr. Kern have for lunch today?” I asked. Kern was known throughout the school as an inveterate eater; he seemed to have a continuous need for recharging his batteries. Molding the young minds—and bodies—could be so exhausting. The size of those sandwiches was extraordinary; I had seen it with my own eyes on occasional errands to the teachers' lounge. His taste ran to pungent cheeses, or liver sausage, to be washed down with dark beer. “I bet it was good and smelly,” I added, immediately realizing that I may have said the wrong thing again.

Yes, Kesselmaier's ideas about punishment were in keeping with his role as scholar and gentleman. Students arousing his displeasure received tongue-lashings that sometimes left deeper marks than paddling. As official class teacher of the fifth form he reigned in stern impartiality; there were no favorites, only favorite *targets* and a few other, less conspicuous students who rarely entered his ken. His sarcasm was tempered by a catlike subtlety, no matter whether the target was a delinquent boy, Louis XIV or Josephine Beauharnais.

Moving along the halls in a bear trot, with shiny frockcoat tails brushing against baggy, striped trousers, he would acknowledge a student's greeting simply with a short nod, and without turning his head. His hair was done in toothbrush fashion, perhaps in honor of Marshal Hindenburg, the World War I hero who had just been elected President of the Reich. The “uniform” still was the accepted mode of teacher dress then, especially among the older members of the faculty. A man like Kern wore business suits.

The professor was rarely seen in the company of his colleagues; his unappealing looks may have imposed a certain shyness on him.

But in the classroom he was thoroughly secure. His facial expression ranged from mockery to contempt to an outright leer when he warmed up to one of his pet subjects. Once the lesson got under way he would step down from the dais on which the teacher's desk was mounted. He wanted to be at close range with his charges. His customary place was in the first row, between the left and center tier, his stubby hands resting on the ink-stained desk tops to either side.

“What have you done?” he once exclaimed in mock horror, leaning over a boy's shoulder to inspect a notebook whose margins were decorated with doodles. “The

humanities will suffer if you waste your time with such nonsense. You belong in the kindergarten.”

He leafed through the book and came upon a rogue’s gallery of teachers, including his own likeness, with the pockmarks forming an odd pattern.

His anger was genuine now. “This is a disgrace!”

After a moment of hesitation, he grabbed the book. “I will deal with you later.” With these words, he placed the book on his own desk, leaving the unhappy scribbler in a suspense that could last for days.

My own place was in the center tier, towards the front, well within the professor’s purview. I was a sturdy boy, above average height, and pretty well able to take care of myself in a tussle. This was important because there were many occasions which, in my opinion, called for militant defense against antisemitic remarks by fellow students. In this class of thirty there was only one other Jew—or rather “Israelite,” the official designation which was considered at once more accurate, denoting a distinction of faith rather than race, and less offensive.

Frankel was a boy of slight build, and quicksilver temperament, quite popular with the fellows and much less prone to take offense at a mere word. He had been born in the Rhineland and spoke in the glib, fluid accents of that region, affording a pleasant change from the prevailing slow, broad south-German dialect, yet not too different. Since Frankel was immune to the taunts of the hecklers, I felt called upon to do double duty as defender of the faith.

By some strange undercurrent, the pitch of antisemitic feeling in my class was tied to the bigger events that shook the fatherland. Here was living proof that popular opinion in a national emergency spreads like wildfire, and knows no geographical or age limits. The ways in which this affected the youngsters varied from case to case.

There was no denying that Frankel enjoyed a certain popularity among the boys. Just how well they liked him became clear at the time of his accident.

It was a frightening thing. We were exercising on the horizontal bars in the gym, doing the usual swings and somersaults. When it was Frankel’s turn he went through the required exercises with his usual élan and, as a final flourish, attempted a handstand. Something went wrong: he slipped, fell on his head and lay motionless under the bars, eyes closed.

Dahl, the gym teacher, knew just what to do. This man grew in my estimation as he carefully shifted Frankel’s body onto a mat and took his pulse. I have always had a healthy respect for people who keep calm in emergencies and know their way around with first aid—probably owing to my own incompetence in such matters. There was no visible external injury, thus the accident was even more of a mystery.

Frankel had a severe brain concussion and was in critical condition for days; he didn't return to school until nearly two months later. The remarkable thing was the reaction of the class. Many students and teachers responded in a spontaneous wave of sympathy: with gifts and flowers and, after his condition improved, a steady flow of visitors to his bedside.

Before long, Frankel was his old chipper self again, and none the worse for wear. Whenever I called on him his younger sister was in attendance in the sickroom—I was to see her again in later years.

Towards the end of his illness during a visit, we got onto the irksome subject that was never far from my mind. I told Frankel of an argument with a classmate who had "exposed" a Jewish author and biographer, then much in vogue.

"I think that you are taking these things too seriously," Frankel said. "Why pay so much attention to idle talk?"

I was caught unawares by this line of reasoning. "This is a new one to me! You mean to say that these insults don't bother you?"

"Well, I don't set much store by it. You know the old saying—*words* can't hurt you." He rubbed the top of his head, where he had fallen, as if to prove his argument.

"That depends. At times they do." I tried to indicate that you had to draw the line somewhere.

At this point we were joined by Frankel's father, who had overheard the discussion. He was a tall, vigorous man, speaking with the same Rhinish accent as his son.

"Let's get a few things straight," he now said. "There is no point quibbling over a thoughtless remark; we must concentrate on the important things. You remember what happened a couple of years ago—I think it was in 1923 when the French occupied the Ruhr district and things went from bad to worse."

"Sure I remember," I said. "It was just before the Hitler Putsch."

"That's right. About half your class started to wear swastika buttons; it was like a rash, and some of the teachers even egged them on. Now that was the limit! I was so upset that I got in touch with the school principal who said he would look into it."

"Rex put the screws on them," cracked Frankel junior. The nickname was derived from *Rektor*, German for "principal."

"He has the right ideas, your 'Rex.' A fine scholar, too. It is his subordinates who went off on a tangent, following their own vile tendencies. But in the end he prevailed, and then matters got better."

"What does that prove?" I interrupted.

“Well, it shows that whenever you have a crisis of some kind the Jewbaiters get busy. Scapegoats, you know. They have to let it out on somebody. But lately, things have been looking up, and everybody relaxes a little, even the fanatics.”

Still only half convinced, I replied: “Suppose there were to be a new crisis. What then?”

Mr. Frankel came around, laid a hand on my shoulder and said: “Stop worrying. There is no point in trying to figure out what’s going to happen. Just do your best and enjoy life.”

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The boy who, unwittingly, had brought on this conversation was commenting on a critical biography of the former Kaiser. Parenthetically he had added: “The man who wrote this book—his full name was Emil Ludwig *Cohn*.”

Coming from Kreutzer, this remark, intended to “debunk” author and book alike, had significance. Not only was he qualified to pass judgment—the Kreutzers were a well-known publishing family, part of the town’s *haute volée*—but he rarely lowered himself to engage in polemics of any sort. This boy was something special, and the remark was simply intended to put me in my place.

From the first grade on he had been surrounded by a retinue of boys from fine old families, socially acceptable if not quite his equal. Needless to say, I was not one of them, my father being only “in trade.” Young Kreutzer had all the trappings that went with his station in life. He lived in an elegant villa amid a parklike garden on the hill, with white columns surmounted by a balcony where I saw him sometimes when I had to go on walks. There was a governess who appeared in immaculate uniform to fetch him from school, long after the age when other boys would have disdained such tutelage. He was good-looking and of athletic stature, except that a certain indolent reserve kept him from engaging in sports. His marks were rarely outstanding, probably for the same reason, but he managed to be in the upper half.

Perhaps Kreutzer was shy, but he concealed it under a display of snobbish detachment, literally looking down his nose at everybody, with his blond head tilted upward. After all, there was always his retinue to shield him from the world, the small band of faithful who were paying tribute while he was holding court.

Even the teachers could not escape the charismatic effect of the well-known family name. From year to year they were paying homage to Kreutzer through small favors, by closing their eyes to minor infractions or simply with a general air of deference.

So far as Professor Kesselmaier was concerned, his contributions to the antisemitic cause were of an indirect sort. He preferred the flank attack as more becoming to a teacher and posing a greater challenge to his ingenuity and wit. It was also a good deal safer under a system, like the Weimar Republic, that had provided constitutional safeguards for minorities.

He had developed some standard routines to get his point across. One day, during a Latin class, he turned toward me with this request:

“Will you conjugate for us the active voice of *portare*?”

I got up and commenced to name the tenses in their proper order, right up to the future perfect.

“Good, good. You haven’t disappointed me. Now the passive voice, please.” His voice sounded sincere.

I resumed and easily negotiated the imperfect, the perfect, and the past perfect. Then I hesitated. I knew it had to be formed with an auxiliary, but I had forgotten the ending.

Kesselmaier waited.

“Come on now. Get on with it,” he urged, after a brief pause. I remained silent. I couldn’t remember the ending and began to feel hot under the long-haired angora sweater my mother made me wear.

Kesselmaier lowered the boom.

“You will never amount to anything in the cloak and suit business if you don’t know the future perfect. Sit down.”

The first few times the professor used this line it caused considerable amusement in the class. At the outset I was puzzled. I hadn’t given much thought to my future occupation; my father’s business had nothing to do with clothing. Once it dawned on me I got into the habit of looking squarely at Kesselmaier’s face whenever he delivered the line, noticing how the mocking expression changed into a leer.

In deference to the class it must be said that the whole routine lost its effect after a while. But Kesselmaier persisted in using the joke long after it went stale.

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Our house was only a short way from school. On days when I overslept I could cover the distance in about five minutes if I ran all the way—mostly downhill. The city, capital of one of the South German states, was in a valley, almost completely surrounded by vine-covered hills. As the town had grown it had spread out over the hillsides; the newer, more desirable residential sections were mostly up there—the higher, the better—offering a nice view of the old town. The school was on the edge of the valley, and our house just a bit up the hill, but I had to cross a wide thoroughfare which was bustling with traffic, especially on market days. Not too many cars yet in the middle twenties, but farm carts carrying produce, delivery wagons and horse-drawn beer trucks competed for space with a trolley line.

It was over these same cobblestones that a contingent of the German army had retreated from the Western front in 1918. I well remember the rainy November day, barely three months after I had started first grade. The soldiers marched in good military order but an air of weariness hung over the scene and spread to spectators on the sidewalks, including myself and Hans, my best friend and classmate.

To us boys it seemed as if the entire German army was marching by; what we saw was probably not more than a single division of field strength. Perhaps the march was intended as a “show of force”—to prove that the military still had enough fight in them to keep order on the home front. The foot soldiers appeared grim and tired; the men on horseback looked fierce under their steel helmets, chinstraps firmly in place. There were awe-inspiring heavy guns and funny-looking field kitchens (known as “goulash cannons”); also a few armored cars. Most garrulous were the men lucky enough to ride on the back of lorries. They called out to the young girls on the sidewalk, and the girls waved back at them. In my mind, girls and soldiers somehow went together. I had seen Minna, our maid, standing in the doorway with *her* soldier boy. Mother wasn’t very fond of the idea, but Minna said his leave was so short, she had to make every minute count.

As more lorries rolled by, the noise increased. “Down with the king,” cried a loudmouth. “Let’s get rid of him and the whole bloody monarchy.” He was referring to the local ruler who resided in a castle in the center of town, and now faced unemployment under the newly formed republic. Actually, the king had already resigned a few days earlier; the “revolution” in this part of the Reich proceeded quietly, and with a minimum of bloodshed. A humorous note was added by the story—true or not—that some jokesters had sent a sleepwear ensemble up to the castle, consisting of a night cap, dressing gown and slippers, to brighten the elderly king’s retirement. Hans had told me of the incident, and he seemed to approve of the idea. His father had a gun, and there seemed to be much excitement around his house, with lots of strangers coming and going. Minna had said that Hans’ father was a “Red,” and she didn’t approve of that. My own parents seemed to go along with the Republican cause. They thought it was a good idea—good for the Jews, too—as long as things stayed on an even keel and there were no radical experiments.

The new democratic regime faced heavy odds at the start; its first item of business was the signing of the peace treaty, an onerous task left to the moderate parties since the reactionaries refused to cooperate. That first winter was marked by many school holidays because of the coal shortage. Food was scarce, too; I well remember the milk and cookies provided by American Quakers for German schoolchildren. Slowly conditions improved, though, and the country got back on its feet.

My own political awareness began at the tender age of ten, when the assassination of Walter Rathenau, the foreign minister, jolted the nation. The newspapers were filled with exciting accounts of the manhunt for the killers. Rathenau’s unceasing efforts to restore Germany’s place in the world, by economic means and through diplomacy, had aroused the displeasure of the radical Right, which wanted recovery on their own terms. At the same time, his murder served as a warning to Germany’s Jews (Rathenau had been one of them), an indication of things to come.

While the Allies, in the Versailles Treaty, had fixed the war guilt on Germany, the reactionaries' concern was with the "peace guilt," or responsibility for the defeat and ending of the war in 1918. This required a "doctoring" of the historic record on a grand scale. The 1918 uprisings, which led to the demise of the German empire, were said to be the *cause*—rather than the *effect*—of the Reich's downfall. Closely connected was a second fallacy: that the heads of the German post-war government did not deserve to be called leaders, but in reality were back-stabbers and collaborators with the enemy.

Western support of the frail young Weimar Republic was slow in coming. And when the Allies showed softness and indecision towards the successive Nazi government, they compounded their mistakes by yielding to the wrong leaders at the wrong time. But then, Hitler's determination was boundless; he dealt with foreign enemies in much the same way as he had dealt with his domestic opposition earlier—by bluff, threats, and "blitzkrieg" methods.

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The Modern History course in the Fifth Form called for a systematic review of world events from the 18th century on, but Kesselmaier had his own ideas as to what was relevant, and fit for his audience. Truth and objectivity were abstractions; intuition and poetic license were part of *his* stock in trade. Little interested in political institutions and without faith in democratic forms, he saw history as a clash of blind forces that had to be molded by a great leader, like putty in the hands of a sculptor. Frederick the Great was such a man; he had carved an empire out of a backwoods nation. Old Fritz was his hero because he did not hesitate to use force when diplomacy failed. Frederick's goose-stepping Prussians became a symbol of "Destiny on the March."

Here the chauvinistic schoolmaster was in his element, but when he looked elsewhere, across space and time to the French Revolution, history became a sham, a human comedy, a puppet show. In his own subtle way, Kesselmaier practiced sleight-of-hand.

According to him, the Seven-Years'-War was an entirely German affair. The concurrent North American conflict between England and France wasn't even mentioned. This could be overlooked but for the fact that the American Revolution and the War of Independence, under his "censorship," were given the silent treatment as well.

There simply was no time left for these trivial details—Frederick's exploits were treated with such thoroughness that most of the fall semester was taken up with his many battles, setbacks and eventual triumph. *Ad astra per aspera*. The lesson for young Germans in the 1920s was obvious.

As a suitable finale, Kesselmaier arranged for the class to attend one of the movies about Frederick that were all the rage just then. Admittedly it was the first time that he embarked on such an extracurricular venture; one had to move with the times, he explained. The reactionary newspapers had given the film an excellent review. (He read one of the hate sheets every day, carrying it in a pocket under the frockcoat tails.) A silent movie, billed as "historical drama," it served as national ego-builder and was intended to perpetuate the myth of the great leader.

Many of the boys had attended flickers of the Tom Mix and Harold Lloyd variety, but this was different. Expectations ran high as they marched off to the theatre, in breeches and knickers, student caps at a jaunty angle. Kesselmaier walked at the head of the formation. It almost seemed that, once removed from the classroom, he had shrunk in stature. Insubordination was in the air.

When everybody was seated, the lights went down and a player piano started to blare out the *Hohenfriedberger Marsch*. The opening scene showed the hero as a young man engaged in quarrels with his father, the reigning king. Young Fritz was something of a slacker and got into bad company.

To the boys of the Fifth Form, the story had a familiar ring; it was something that could happen to any one of us. Our curiosity was further aroused by some attractive young ladies at the court, beautifully attired and with breathtaking décolletés. But when events took a normal turn and the young king, having succeeded his father, became absorbed in state matters, attention lagged, and the boys became restless.

During the intermission, the professor surveyed his charges. He noticed some gaps in the rows reserved for his class but before he could count heads the show continued.

When it was all over, only a handful of boys remained in the theatre—mainly those who had sat too close to the professor for a comfortable getaway, including Berner, the *Primus*, who never misbehaved. Kreutzer and his retinue had also stayed; this kind of thing was undignified, vulgar—and more trouble than it was worth. The others had either gone home or headed straight for a nearby Italian ice cream parlor.

Kesselmaier was furious, but there was little he could do. It had all been a big mistake. After he had dismissed the boys he made his way to the Ratskeller to cool his anger over a *Dämmerchoppen*, a “twilight sip” of local wine. This home-grown vintage, made from the grapes on the town’s hillsides, was known for its acrid taste.

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From the point of view of their background, the students of the Fifth Form were an assorted lot. With its emphasis on the classics, the school naturally attracted the sons of upper middle class families slated for an academic career, with Kreutzer at the head of the list. But the new era had brought an influx of other elements: sons of minor officials, small businessmen and skilled workers.

Not all of these homes provided an atmosphere favorable to serious study, and there was probably a greater proportion of poor students among the latter group. What nature—or circumstances—refused them in brain power was sometimes made up by greater athletic proficiency, bigger muscles and longer legs. The explanation was simple: these boys were older than the rest by a few years because they had failed once or twice to make the grade. They were also inclined to lord it over the other pupils, whose average age was between thirteen and fourteen.

And there was something else: these older boys already showed an interest in the other sex. Their concern for a nearby girls' high school was anything but academic. The ice cream parlor served as an observation post, with some boys always on the lookout for "skirts" that might venture down the street. Coming in two's or three's, among much giggling and turning of heads, the girls never set foot in the place, but posted themselves nearby—with or without pretext—and waited. To my knowledge, nothing of consequence ever happened beyond some teasing and name-calling at long range, but even this modest display of prowess lent distinction to the participants.

All these factors made the matter of a boy's status in the class a delicate balance between social origin, ability to throw his weight around and—a poor third—scholastic standing.

In a class by themselves were the namby-pambies, nice boys with somewhat girlish mannerisms, and always chattering away—in high-pitched voices that had not changed yet. Often they came from genteel, middle-class homes where anxious, overprotective mothers ruled the roost. Sometimes an older sister or two could have a similar effect on adolescence. There was a boy named Stahl who had three of them, all older and each determined that the little brother should grow up in *her* image. Stahl was a most pleasant, inoffensive chap. His one fault was that he talked too much (usually about something his sisters had said, or done), and in due course he got someone else into trouble. The accident of alphabetical seating order had paired him off with a fellow named Stickler, a good two years old and taller by a head than the average.

Stickler was quiet-spoken, reserved, and almost apologetic when he had to use his physical force—which was impressive—to restrain a badgering classmate. His noble bearing was the object of some teasing, and so were odd bits of clothing he wore—short pants, leather sandals, a beret on his blond head. A member of an ardent right-wing youth group that went in for hiking and folksongs—to the exclusion of women and wine—he was an idealistic dreamer and easy prey of a political trend which rejected compromise as degrading.

Kesselmaier's hold on the class was partly based on his poking fun at students who were remiss; he rarely had to resort to angry outbursts. His resourcefulness in name-calling was considerable and would take various forms—even simple verse, such as:

“Stahl and Stickler, side by side
These two lads I can't abide.”

The remedial effect on the two boys who found themselves in collective jeopardy—chained together in the professor's doggerel—was immediate, if not always enduring. Actually, he was quite fond of Stickler and always tempered his sarcasm, almost to a point of endearment, when dealing with him singly. Perhaps he knew of and approved the boy's political leanings, or it could be that he was pleased by his proud Germanic exterior.

Before long, Stickler's physical assets were to be utilized on a festive occasion. With the approach of the Christmas season, preparations got under way for the annual school play. The selection of a suitable subject was up to the teachers' council where it had been turned into a bone of contention among opposing factions. Some had pleaded for a presentation with a Christmas theme, in keeping with the season's spirit, but others, Kesselmaier among them, held out for a more general topic containing a specific message

for German youth. The school's principal, a high-minded scholar and author of books on Plato and Aristotle, stayed out of the discussion. In the end, Kesselmaier won out because he had come up with a concrete proposal. What's more, he was entrusted with the task of directing the play.

It was the story of Arminius the Cheruscan, noble chief of a Teutonic tribe, and his fight to drive the Roman conquerors from German soil. This happened a long time ago—in the year 9 A.D., to be precise—but it was worthy of a modern audience, to prove that Germans were destined to be free from foreign rule. The lesson for arrogant Frenchmen, bent on dismembering the Reich, was obvious.

Kesselmaier's choice for the leading part was never in doubt. It would have to be a boy in *his* class and without much ado he picked Stickler for the part of Arminius. He had the height, the manner, the blond hair; what of it that he spoke with a slight lisp?—he would carry it off with aplomb.

Stickler accepted, and Frankel was drafted into playing a Roman legionnaire. I agreed to help with the stage set; the part of Varus, the Roman general, went to a boy in another class. Stahl was picked for the role of Thusnelda, the prim Germanic princess who helped to save her country's honor. He was a natural for the part and anyway, nobody else had volunteered.

Excitement mounted as the rehearsals got under way and, for the participants, the play overshadowed everything else. Kesselmaier used every means to make a success of his venture; *his* brainchild: he threatened, he cajoled, he reprimanded. After-school rehearsals sometimes lasted into the evening, and he missed many a *Dämmerchoppen* during those weeks.

One day, as I was working on the set with the help of some other volunteers, the professor looked in.

"Well, I am glad to see you taking charge of things around here," he said briskly. And pointing to the newly painted backdrop he added: "I didn't know you had such talents."

I seized the opportunity to ask for special dispensation. Would the professor mind if I took a few hours off from class the next day to experiment with the light effects?

"No, not at all; take time off if you need to. It's for a good cause."

I was pleasantly surprised. Praise from the professor was praise indeed! In a way, he reminded me of my uncle Ben. *There* was another man who was hard to please. Scolding and ridiculing most of the time! Uncle Ben had a silver snuff box and a whistle which he always carried with him. When he wanted to call one of the hired hands out in the lumber yard he owned he would blow the whistle. The story went that in a fit of impatience he once caused a railroad train to depart ahead of schedule; the engineer had taken his cue from Uncle Ben's whistling.

On rare occasions Uncle Ben could be friendly and kind, though. And that was all the more gratifying. Perhaps Kesselmaier was the same way.

My reverie was interrupted as the professor called to me: “All right, keep up the good work.” With these words he left the room.

When finally the big day arrived, teachers, students and their parents gathered in the auditorium. After some Christmas songs rendered by the school choir, the curtain rose on the improvised stage. Stahl, in long braids as Thusnelda, looked appropriately demure, and his three sisters, side by side near the front row, nodded their approval as he made his appearance. Stickler was magnificent and fierce-looking, in bearskin and Teutonic headgear with horns, as tribal chief surrounded by his henchmen. Technically, Arminius was an officer in the Roman army and owed allegiance to Emperor Augustus. In his role as intermediary, he persuaded Varus to invade the wild woods of Northern Germany (where he had prepared an ambush). As Varus’ columns approached the appointed place, members of the neighboring tribes, alerted by smoke and horn signals, rose to a man.

The ensuing battle proved almost the undoing of the makeshift stage; the tumult and the shouting were a severe test for the ears of the audience. The invaders were doomed from the start; Varus, in true Roman fashion, fell upon his sword, and there was great jubilation and a final hurrah for Arminius.

There were a number of curtain calls, and even Professor Kesselmaier was whisked to the stage to take a bow. His frockcoat was neatly pressed, and he wore a choker collar and ascot tie for the occasion. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down; for once it seemed that he was really touched. And now, as the boys gathered around him, something unexpected happened. Stickler, standing next to the professor and taller by a few inches, was suddenly seized by a crazy notion. He reached up, removed his headgear and placed it squarely on Kesselmaier’s grey hair. This brought the applause to a new crescendo; a professor with horns was indeed a novelty. There were shouts and laughter from the students in the audience at this contrast between headgear and full dress. For a moment, Kesselmaier couldn’t decide whether to be angry or join in the general laughter. At last he broke into a sardonic grin. *That* made it unanimous.

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Soon after the Christmas vacation, an unpleasant fact caught up with me: the number of demerits I had received during the term had reached the danger point. For once, Kesselmaier was blameless: a series of “engagements” with the chemistry teacher was at the bottom of this. To go into detail would exceed the limits of this essay; let me just say that it involved certain chemical experiments without official sanction, such as setting off firecrackers and stink-bombs during class in the lab.

The school system provided for various stages of disciplinary action for a given number of demerits. First-timers had to put in a personal appearance before the principal, and I faced the prospect with mixed feelings.

I decided to talk things over with Hartmann, a fellow student with previous experience in such matters. He was not easy to approach; an oddball who usually kept to himself. Hartmann would get into trouble for things he *failed* to do, rather than for any flagrant acts. One sometimes had the feeling that he wanted to get caught or, at any rate, didn't care one way or the other.

Since we both took the same route home, I seized the opportunity to tell him of my problem.

Hartmann gravely shook his head, assuming a thoughtful expression behind the thick glasses he wore. "It's hard to say what Rex is going to do," he said. "He has his moments, and you can never tell beforehand."

"I heard that the first time he lets you off easy, with a warning," I suggested.

"His 'warnings' can be pretty noisy. When you go up the second time, it's two hours confinement after class. I never had the third degree; that calls for 'solitary' in the cell under the roof. But *every* time Rex gives you a good dressing down, and a lecture."

"What did they make you do during the confinement?"

"Oh, some Greek translation. The hard part is how to explain it to your mother, coming home two hours late. Mine is very strict."

"Can't you make up some excuse?"

"I usually get caught when I try it. She is wise to everything, never misses a trick. You don't know my mother."

I could not argue this point. Nobody I knew had ever been to Hartmann's house. He was a shy fellow who did not mingle much. Sometimes it seemed as if he was trying to hide something.

Since we had exhausted the subject, I took a ball from my pocket, bounced it a few times and said:

"Why don't we forget about demerits and all that? Let's kick this around, for a change."

Soccer was—and still is—the most popular sport in this part of the world. Hartmann was pretty good at it, too.

My appointment with Rex was a few days later. I had to wait in the anteroom to his office, sitting under a bust of Plato, with trepidation. Finally I was led in. Rex was working at a desk covered with papers. He looked up and asked me to be seated. I had never seen him close up; now I noticed the sharp profile, his keen eyes, the well-groomed beard.

“What brings you here?” he asked. Not quite sure what to say, I hesitated, and after a brief pause he added: “Your name and form number?”

He opened the class diary I had brought along and made some entries. I noticed with relief that he did not further inquire about the nature of my demerits. In fact, he didn’t ask any other questions but simply said: “You can go now. But pay more attention in the future and do away with the shenanigans!”

He was not unfriendly, though, and it almost seemed to me that I noticed a twinkle in his eyes when he took off the pince-nez.

* * *

In the new year Kesselmaier resumed the history lessons with renewed vigor; he now came to grips with the French Revolution and proceeded to unfold a grim tableau of the events from 1789 on. To his pedantic mind this was untidiness carried to the extreme, a suspension of law and order in the absence of strong leadership. His bias must have been of long standing, but it was fanned anew by the fact that at that very moment France’s army occupied Germany’s western provinces.

I would listen to the professor’s harangues with half interest. Whenever the subject of France came up at home, my parents spoke with pretty high regard of her people. Mother came from the Palatinate, situated to the west of the Rhine and quite close to the border. She used many French expressions and was fond of Paris fashions and French cooking. She would say that people who had such good taste couldn’t be all bad. On my vacation, I had gone on a trip to her home town. Now the people there were bitter about the French occupation.

I remember the time when Uncle Ben was arrested by the occupation authorities as a hostage. It was in 1919, after the French troops had moved in amid some popular unrest. They seized a number of local citizens in order to assure that things wouldn’t get out of hand. The news came over the telephone, and Mother was very upset. Uncle Ben in prison! It was unthinkable. Both my parents worried about his health, his peace of mind, the treatment he received. I had visions of the old man languishing in a dungeon, as in stories of medieval castles I had read. One of my concerns was whether they had let him keep the silver snuff box and the whistle.

Soon after Uncle Ben’s release, part of his house was requisitioned as living quarters for a French officer; he and his family still lived there when I visited my uncle that summer of 1925. They were nice, well-mannered people, but the regular soldiers, especially the African troops stationed in the occupied zone, were much disliked by the local population. A lot of angry talk could be heard by anyone willing to listen, of the same general drift as Kesselmaier’s lectures.

It would be idle to deny that the professor’s explanations had a certain fascination: he certainly knew how to talk! He was much better educated than Uncle Ben, but in a way, the two had something in common. The way they avoided your eyes when they talked, looking somewhere into the distance as if they had discovered something nobody else could

see. (Unless they were making fun of you; then they would look you straight in the eye, grinning.) Neither of them was overly fond of people, I could tell. Yet there had to be *some* folks they liked. If only *I* could be one of them!

“The Third Estate,” cried Kesselmaier, rudely waking me out of my daydreams. “What did they really want? Reconvene the French Parliament, the Estates-General, which had not sat in almost two hundred years? What a farce! Their leaders were Lafayette and Mirabeau—a figurehead and a fathead at cross purposes. Mirabeau had at least a brain but unfortunately he was too devoted to fast living.”

“The king had money troubles, but nobody could help him with *that*. The coffers of state were empty. A weak fellow, that Louis. And the queen, the Austrian, who said of the hungry mob: ‘Let them eat cake.’ Quite a pair, these two. Not fit to be rulers of twenty-five million.

“What about the people? The Paris mob, under the sway of demagogues, ran wild, looting and burning. Once they had tasted blood there was no holding back. A sad sight, chaos and disorder everywhere. All authority was breaking down. The army disintegrated, and the royal family had to come back from Versailles with an honorguard of fishwives.”

Thus went Kesselmaier’s account. For the moving historic events he had only condescension and mock sympathy. But as time progressed and he came to deal with the radical later developments his tone became more and more cynical. It was not the anticlerical trend that he disapproved of. It was pretty obvious that Kesselmaier, the missionary’s son, had turned his back on established religion. But the failure and final overthrow of the monarchy was anathema to him: an historic “error” that became self-evident under the Reign of Terror.

“Let me tell you of Danton and Robespierre,” he began his lecture one day. “Of these two rascals, Danton had at least character. An imposing figure of a man, a good speaker with a booming voice, and full of energy. Naive as he was, he showed courage to the bitter end. The end that Robespierre had in store for him.

“Now *there* was a scoundrel for you. As suspicious as Danton had been trusting. A small man, in more than one way. He professed to worship reason and virtue, but his actions spoke differently. A double talker, this Robespierre.” He paused, as if something had just occurred to him.

“If you learned your French lesson, you’ll know what Robespierre means. *Kleiderstein*, that’s what it means. His real name was *Kleiderstein*,” he repeated, with that grin on his face, looking at me sideways.

For the remaining days of Robespierre’s career—which were numbered—it now was always “*Kleiderstein*,” or “Robespierre, alias *Kleiderstein*,” in Kesselmaier’s accounts.

The meaning could not be lost on his audience. It needed no further elaboration.

Years later, after I had studied history on my own, I realized that the professor had “borrowed” heavily from well-known writers whose antidemocratic bias he shared. In this light, his debt to historians of the “vitalist” school—men who replaced rational views with hero-worship—became obvious. Only the “Kleiderstein” bit, being untranslatable, was his own invention. (Kesselmaier was apparently in good company as far as his admiration for these men was concerned. William Shirer reports that during the last days of the Führer, Goebbels had to read to him from Carlyle’s “History of Frederick the Great.”)

* * *

Stickler, the boy who had played the part of Arminius in the Christmas play, never told anybody what got into him when he “crowned” Kesselmaier with the horns. Even allowing for the holiday spirit, how could he have dared? This sudden act betrayed a familiarity which went beyond the respectful bounds of a student’s conduct. However, the situation became clear as daylight to me after I overheard a conversation between Stickler and another boy. It took place after a gym period, in the locker room; I had gone back for my sneakers, when I heard the professor’s name mentioned. Not usually prone to eavesdropping, I could not resist the temptation, and what I heard was bound to increase my grasp of human nature.

By piecing together odd bits of conversation I gathered that Stickler’s father, a civil servant, and Kesselmaier were members of the same *Stammtisch*, a weekly roundtable that met at the local *Ratskeller*. To this day, the main purpose of a *Stammtisch* is good fellowship, small talk and beer consumption in large quantities. In the eyes of many good burghers it represents the epitome of *Gemütlichkeit*: a fine way to spend an evening away from home, amid hearty, all-male company.

This bit of information certainly helped to explain why Kesselmaier had favored Stickler for the part in the play; now the touch of familiarity began to make sense, too. But this wasn’t all I heard while hiding behind the lockers. Apparently, the professor presented quite a different face to his cronies of the roundtable; the hard taskmaster of the classroom began to change beyond recognition. Warmth and kindness were still as alien to him as ever, but here, among friends and equals, he made no effort to hide his true self: an old man whom fate had dealt a severe blow.

Kesselmaier had lost his only son in the late war; on the Western front, where millions of Germans—and Frenchmen—had died. Loss of life had cut deeply into almost every German family during the five-year war. So many had died for their country that personal sorrow was often alleviated by the common ordeal shared by all. The passage of time also helped to comfort bitter memories. But some of the bereaved were never able to forget, and it now appeared that the professor was one of them.

From what I could gather, he often talked about his son to Stickler’s father and the others, relating his outstanding war record and his academic achievements. On a few occasions, he had brought along documentary evidence: decorations, citations, photographs showing the tall, serious youth in a lieutenant’s uniform. Again and again he would bring up the subject at the *Stammtisch*, to a point where it became embarrassing to his audience.

Seen against this background of personal loss, the professor's harangues against the French and his revengist ideas began to take on a semblance of meaning, however distorted. It also became clear that Germany's defeat was unacceptable to him. His son's death could not possibly be in vain; a battle may have been lost, but not a war.

* * *

When the history lessons proceeded to Napoleon and his conquests, Kesselmaier found himself in a strange predicament. In a way, he was fascinated by the phenomenon of the foreign-born clansman who had imposed his will first upon France, then on a whole continent—a triumph of mind over matter. Something here appealed to the professor's view of history: the dynamic leader who wielded blind forces according to his will. He paid tribute to his military genius and his skills as administrator and lawgiver; he even forgave him for putting the First German Empire to a timely end.

But alas! There was to be no place for Napoleon in Kesselmaier's Valhalla—so the professor ruled from his customary place in the front row. As the story unfolded the reason became obvious: this Latin upstart could not partake of the Nordic spirit of duty and asceticism, the heroic ideal. Kesselmaier dwelt at some length on the changing fortunes of his marriage to Josephine, the Creole beauty who bore him no heir. Some of his other escapades also came in for caustic criticism, usually accompanied by a suggestive smirk. (Napoleon could never hope to equal the prudery of Frederick, who simply was not interested in women.)

Then there were the affairs of his large and close-knit family, seven brothers and sisters, and the mother whom he, already a general, implored to look after herself because "If you die there will be no one left with any authority over me." The sisters had to be provided for in a suitable manner: an estate here, a duchy there; and married off to further political aims. For the brothers, there were bigger stakes. As the political map of Europe was redrawn, they were installed as kings over parts of Germany and Italy. Both brothers and sisters, however, occasionally had plans of their own that did not always fit in with the emperor's grand strategy, resulting in lively family squabbles.

* * *

With the approach of spring, the students began to spend their study-free periods outdoors. They were not sorry to leave the rather severe building behind, with its stone floors, marble columns and plaster casts of long-dead celebrities. One day, during a recess, I was busily engaged in swapping postage stamps with two other fellows in a corner of the schoolyard. Stamp collecting was a flourishing hobby during and after the years of the inflation when the German Mark plummeted into a bottomless pit, resulting in ever new stamp issues of more and more astronomical denominations. While dickering over an impending exchange, we were joined by a classmate who immediately assumed the role of self-appointed arbiter.

With his brisk, forward manner, Braun was a meddler, a busybody, always sticking his nose into other people's affairs. Now he was doing it again.

“What have you got here?” he inquired, rhetorically. Turning to the others, he added: “A little business deal underway, eh? You boys should be careful that this guy doesn’t get the better of you. He comes from a long line of sharp operators, you know.”

“Just what is that supposed to mean?” I shot back, with stiffening posture.

Braun hesitated, groping for a reply. Actually, he had no deep-seated prejudice against Jews. His father was a doctor in a working-class district, a fair-minded man who disapproved of this sort of thing. Braun junior was mainly acting in the manner of the bully-boys he secretly admired, mouthing the current slogans of the ultras. He decided to go a little further.

“These boys know what I mean. I don’t like to see them get the dirty end of the stick.”

Now it was my turn to think; but quickly. If this led to a fight it would not be the first time. I didn’t mind trading blows as long as there was a reasonable chance to come out ahead. Braun was taller than myself; a fair athlete, quick on his feet. But I was angry, and getting more so by the minute. I moved forward a little.

“I haven’t got the slightest idea what you mean. Why don’t you come right out with it? Go ahead.”

“Chiseler!”

The fight was on. As always, it took the form of a wrestling match conducted according to the Greco-Roman rules—no holds below the belt. Free-style wrestling was taboo.

We were still groping for position, Braun attempting a waist hold but I dodging out of it. If I could measure him for a headlock it would be as good as over. It wasn’t very elegant but it did the trick nearly every time. The trouble was he was a bit too tall for me. Now, as he was bending down again for another waist hold, I got him around the neck. I made it good and tight, and, lo and behold, Braun wasn’t as strong as he had seemed. A bit more leverage—and down he went onto the gravel, with me on top of him. There was a short scuffle; his shoulders touched the ground; it was all over.

One morning, a few days later, Braun came over to my desk, touched me on the shoulder and said, a little sheepishly:

“You are not such a bad guy after all. We two may get along fine, if you stick around long enough... By the way, could I have a look at your Latin translation? I’d like to check a few things.”

The answer was no, I had turned it in already, but any other time I could help along his education I’d be only too glad.

* * *

My stay in the school was of limited duration. At the end of the term I was easily promoted to the Sixth Form, maintaining my place in the top third of the class. After finishing that year, I quit.

Kesselmaier had been quite right with his prediction about the cloak and suit business. Perhaps the old fox had more insight that I had been willing to admit; he knew what made “these people” tick. It was my parents’ wish that I enter an apprenticeship with a commercial firm upon reaching the age of fifteen. That was the way it had always been in my family; too much book learning might turn a boy’s head. I didn’t really mind because the idea of spending another three years in school held no attraction for me.

After entering the business world I completely lost touch with my former classmates and teachers. But the lessons of my alma mater were not entirely wasted on me: I retained an interests in books and what are generally known as the finer things in life. At the same time, my education had progressed in other directions. It was years later that I met Frankel’s younger sister again, at a concert. Marianne was an attractive girl, in a way like her brother—who was away in college—small, lively and speaking with the fluid accents of the Rhineland. As it turned out, we had many mutual interests, and I took her out a few times afterwards. She was more introspective than her brother—but more intelligent, too. This was towards the end of 1932, when the political fate of Germany hung in the balance. Depression, unemployment, street fights and Cabinet crises formed a vicious chain of events; it was not a good time for courtship. In the course of my work I did much traveling during this period and somehow I lost touch with Marianne. Months later I heard that the whole family had emigrated to Israel. The Frankels had understood the handwriting on the wall.

On one of my trips I encountered Hartmann again. We found ourselves practically side by side in the parking lot of a small-town *Weinstube* where I had stopped for lunch. He was driving a small, ancient delivery truck. The reunion was quite cordial, and Hartmann was more outgoing than he had ever been in school. He worked by himself, as an itinerant sign painter; the independent life seemed to agree with him. He used the truck for sleeping and storing equipment as well as transportation.

“I live like a gypsy,” he admitted, “but I like it that way. My mother insisted that I finish school and believe me, it was a tough grind. As soon as I graduated I took off, and I have been doing this ever since. I cover all the small towns in this area, making out real well. I don’t need much, you understand,” he added, pointing to the truck.

He became even more effusive over lunch and a glass of wine. Somehow, the talk got onto politics, a topic on everybody’s lips, as Hitler had recently taken over the government.

“I can imagine how you must feel, being Jewish,” Hartman said. “Politics isn’t for me, and I don’t believe in persecuting *anybody*. You see, I feel a little like an outcast myself. There is something I must tell you.” He moved a little closer. “Nobody in school ever knew this—that’s what made things so difficult. You see, I have never known my father. A bastard—that’s me. My mother wanted it kept mum, respectable-like; I guess you can’t blame her for that. But it was tough, going through twelve years of school keeping it a

secret. You remember the roll call every term when you had to stand up and give your father's name. I had to make one up every time; and the hardest thing was to remember it from one term to another. Imagine Kreutzer finding out about this. His parents would have had conniptions."

The notion of Kreutzer finding out made us both laugh, and we were still laughing when we shook hands to say goodbye. I have never heard from Hartmann since.

Sometime later that year I met the professor once more—under unexpected circumstances. We had recently moved to another part of town; the old apartment with the long winding hall proved too big after my older brothers left home and my sister got married. One evening, on my way home, I stopped at the corner grocery and—I hardly believed my eyes—there was Kesselmaier, just ahead of me in the line of shoppers. Even more surprising, he greeted me in a friendly way, like an old acquaintance.

Could this be the same man who once held sway over the Fifth Form and had embarrassed me in front of the class? He had aged over the years: the pockmarked cheeks seemed hollow and the white hair had thinned out, but he still wore it in toothbrush fashion, à la Hindenburg. It turned out that we were now practically neighbors. He lived next door to the grocery, he explained, by himself, in retirement.

Before we parted he asked me to visit him soon. He even called after me: "Don't forget—on the top floor."

As I walked home, things started to come back to me, little by little. I remembered the history lessons, the movie of Frederick and the Christmas play. Kesselmaier's theories about strong leaders and "great men," his hatred of democracy—these were really Nazi ideas, very much in fashion now. Could it be that the old fox had been right again? The Nazi victory must be a personal triumph to him.

He had not *seemed* triumphant, though. He had been rather mellow, in an animated way; a marked change from his sarcastic former self. I wondered what could have caused the transformation.

At first, the idea of a visit had seemed absurd, but now my curiosity was aroused. After all, I had nothing to lose.

Passing the professor's house next day, I noticed some well-tended flower boxes below the windows under the roof. And on an evening soon after, I actually found myself climbing the stairs to his flat. Near the doorbell was a card which read, in German print, "Professor Heinrich Kesselmaier, retired." He opened the door himself but was slow in recognizing me. The light in the staircase was rather dim. Perhaps his eyesight wasn't what it used to be.

"Oh yes. Now I remember," he said, distractedly. "Why don't you come in?"

He led me into a room which seemed to serve as parlor and study combined. It was rather large, with dormer windows and a sideboard with a motley collection of bric-a-brac,

including carved oriental figures. I couldn't help noticing a large, hand-colored photograph of a young man in World War I uniform, with a swastika flag draped over it. The sight of this familiar emblem filled me with revulsion, but the feeling passed quickly. This had to be expected.

The conversation turned first to neighborhood small talk, and then he asked me about my work.

"How are your studies coming along? Which college are you attending and what subjects are you majoring in?"

"There must be some mistake, Herr Professor," I heard myself say. This was too much! Was he adding insult to injury? "I left school after the Sixth Form. You had always—well, shall we say—predicted it."

He straightened up in his chair and stared at me in genuine amazement. All I heard was the ticking of the grandfather clock. Just to break the awkward silence, I said: "Do you remember the Christmas play we put on that year, when Stickler had the part of Arminius? I did the scenery for it."

Now his eyes lit up in recognition. "Of course you did. A fine job it was, too. That must have been seven or eight years ago. We have come a long way since then. It was an uphill struggle, but now we have arrived. *Ad astra per aspera.*"

My reply indicated that I begged to differ. I had no intention to bring about a showdown—what could be gained by it?—but my pride prompted me to make a stand, after a fashion.

"I know how you must feel," Kesselmaier said with a trace of emotion, "what with these attacks against your people. But let's make no mistake about it. This is a time of greatness. The *Führer* is a true leader; he will not tolerate the actions of some of his subordinates who go off on a tangent, following their own vile tendencies."

The words sounded familiar. Someone else had said this long ago, but I could not remember the occasion.

"A certain indignation on the part of good, right-minded Germans is understandable after the years of democratic decay. But in due time the *Führer* will insist on law and order. You are a young man; at your age one can easily adjust to new situations. Oh, to be young again at a time like this. You must be just about the same age as my son." He paused and turned to the picture on the wall, as if to introduce him. I noticed the lieutenant's insignia; the black swastika seemed to spin on its crimson field. Kesselmaier was on to a familiar subject now.

"I must tell you about my son. He was killed in the battle for Verdun, while advancing with his unit. His was a hero's death, inscribed in the Honor Roll of History! I have more pictures of him, and you must see his decorations. Wait a minute."

He left the room to fetch the cherished articles. I noticed a bookshelf in the corner and stepped closer. A row of well-worn, uniformly bound titles caught my eye: they were Thomas Carlyle's collected works. There were six volumes on "The History of Frederick the Great" alone, several on the French Revolution, another on "Heroes and Hero Worship."

Kesselmaier returned with a large folio, a kind of family album containing the usual stereotype photo portraits and posed group pictures. Among the latter was one showing the boy with his parents. He was an only child, I was told, and his mother died soon after the World War. There were school diplomas, military certificates and letters from the front, all dated and in chronological order. Finally he showed me the decorations, neatly suspended by their ribbons in small, black *etuis*—among them the Iron Cross First Class, posthumously awarded.

Remembering what I had heard from Stickler when I eavesdropped in the gym, I knew that the professor was bound to go on and on, talking about his son—a topic that had become an obsession with him. Not even the advent of the Third Reich could change this, it seemed. The triumph was incomplete.

At the earliest possible opportunity I excused myself, and departed. The visit left me with mixed feelings, but there was one thing that stood out in my mind: Carlyle's Collected Works. How appropriate to find Kesselmaier an adherent of Thomas Carlyle, the "Victorian prophet" who admired autocrats, equated might with right, hated popular governments, Frenchmen and Jews.

(Probably written in the 1950s or early 1960s, New York)