

Ein Kind

Th. Bernhard

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The fifth and concluding volume in the suite of five which constitute Bernhard's autobiography starts at the very beginning and ends just about where the first one starts. This somewhat unconventional procedure has its advantages, for one the curiosity for the author has been wetted through the first four volumes and the reader is hence more motivated to take part of it than he or she would otherwise have been. More to the point this also works on the author, who after having written four volumes starting in media res may be ready for confronting his early childhood a task which may have been even more painful than the latter ones.

Once again it starts in media res. Bernhard is eight years old and he has just learned to ride a bike. Not one adapted for children, those I believe, would not become readily available until the 50's¹, but an adult one, belonging to his guardian, his stepfather, who was away at war. He decided to bike to Salzburg a distance of 36 kilometers to visit an aunt of his, but of course he did not know her address, but that was a minor detail. He did not quite get as far, the chain got stuck and wrapped itself around some spokes, and the bike was quickly rendered unusable. Terrified as to what possible punishments it would bring him, when home, he nevertheless started to walk homewards, a long walk indeed. He came to a Gasthaus, exhausted and was let in and fed out of compassion while a big party with dancing was going on. When it was over after midnight, two young guys brought him home, one bringing him on his bike, the other rolling the destroyed one with one hand, steering with the other. Once at home, the author put the bike by the wall and hurried instead to his grandparents who were living in an adjacent village, because he was always sure that his grandfather would take his side, no matter what. And sure enough, while his mother was predictably aghast what he had done, in addition to causing such worry, his grandfather lauded his initiative and ambition.

So here we are as readers confirmed by the basic set-up. A distant mother who may have loved him as others instinctively do, but yet in his very existence constantly being

¹ As I was five I got a small bike. I remember the occasion, we had just moved to the town of Motala and I was walking with my parents by a bicycle store - Rydells by name, something I remember as I would have many occasions for next 15 years to avail myself of its services, in which I saw something that intrigued me, and wanted my parents to return. They did so, caught sight of the bike, and bought it right there and then, and I was devastated, as it was not the bike that had caught my fancy, what it was I have now forgotten, and I was terrified that my parents had misunderstood me. Anyway I was taught to use it, and I recall screaming going down some grassy slopes, but I must quickly have gotten the hang of it, and since then I have been on the saddle almost continuously. At the time such small bikes were unusual, people my age normally had to learn to bike on bigger ones, and soon I outgrew it, and instead my brother took it over, and in due time it was shipped up north, where two of my cousins used it and ten years later I saw it still in use on the farm. In those days things were made to last.

reminded of the man who had impregnated and abandoned her, and on whom she always thought with the greatest bitterness. A bitterness which incidentally was shared by the entire family, including his grandparents. Bernhard would never meet his father, his name would not even be mentioned, once he had in fact possession of a picture of him, and he was struck by the likeness to himself, the spitting image so to speak. A fact that must have pained his mother, and so with the forgiveness and the loyalty of a child towards its parents, he attributed his mothers abuse to really be directed against his father. And a loving grandfather with whom and his wife he spends most of his time as a child. His mother regularly beats him out of frustration calling him names. As in many cases the mental abuse that this entails hurt much more than the physical. Most adults are unable to hurt their children seriously, the hitting is more of a ritual to let off steam, and the physical pain is passing anyway; but the verbal barbs may settle and be remembered for the rest of their lives. *Unruhestifter* and *Unfriedenstagter* were some of the words hurled at him. He was also a *Bettnässer* a source of constant embarrassment, and something his mother his mother believes she can cure by shaming him of the habit, by publicly displaying his soiled sheets, but of course this is not the way it works.

But let us begin from the beginning. Bernhard's mother could not give birth to a child out of wedlock in her home village of Henndorf near Salzburg but was advised to go to Holland, traditionally a more liberal society, and give birth in Herleen in Limburg, at the very southern extreme of the country. Later on she moved to the coast, supporting herself as a maid, while leaving her son with a woman on a boat, a woman who took care of a lot of children besides, a primitive daycare center at the time. This gave occasion later for the author to brag that he was brought up on the sea. Soon he moved with his mother to live with his grandparents in Vienna. They were hard off, the grandfather being a *Schriftsteller* and a philosopher, in short a *Denker*, was not gainfully employed living on the meagre earnings of his wife. He hated life in Vienna, where he had been stuck for twenty years, and seized on the opportunity to move to Seekirchen close to the family estate, taken over by an older sister, in Henndorf. Here Bernard came to live alone with his grandparents for some years, and he thought of it as paradise. Although they lived in poverty, and never could afford eating at *Wirtshaus* the stay must have been happy. He made friends, had access to the daily life of a farm, and took long walks with his grandfather who taught him all kinds of things. At five he was induced to start school, which he duly did after having received permission from his grandfather. Permission that was not automatic because his grandfather had a very low opinion of teachers, finding them worse than worthless. The first year at school was very pleasant. His teacher a beautiful young woman made him her favorite. It started with her showing up his drawing of a pewter pot for all to admire, then she was always giving him the best marks as well as her undivided attention. He was always singled out, when there was a procession of children, he was sure to be the one in the front with the flag. He felt it was undeserved and was sure it would not last. It did not, already the next year he had a different teacher, and no longer a favorite, his marks plummeted, and he thought of school as boring struggling to write and to do arithmetic. From then on school would be a living hell for him, he was considered stupid by his teachers and despised by his classmates².

² It is now called 'mobbing' and can as well strike those who are best in the class, envy being a source

There was also a move across the border to Traunstein where his mother's husband - a barber - had found work. The grandfather resented moving to Germany but he had no choice unless he wanted to starve, but set as a condition that he would not live in Traunstein proper but in some village outside. A German *Kleinstadt* was the worst he could think of, he much preferred to live in the countryside. Eventually his daughter and son-in-law found him a place in Ettendorf, where he for the first time could set up, to his delight, a library of all his books, which he had collected throughout the years. So from now on Bernhard would live separated from his beloved grandfather in an apartment in the small town, but would of course, as the initial anecdote revealed, often walk to his grandparents place only a few kilometers away.

Life in Traunstein was hell. He often thought of committing suicide but was held off by the pain it would cause his grandfather, who also regularly spoke about suicide. He was not happy with his mother, and definitely not at school, as already remarked. The only consolation being that he was good at running, unbeatable at fifty and a hundred meters, and even longer distances. He was obviously running for his life, but the recognition for that, which was not done under the auspices of the school, but at the *Volksjunge* a prelude to the more well-known *Hitlerjugend*, took long to diffuse. However, the most traumatic event occurred when he was advised to be sent to a *Erholungsheim* in Saalfelden across the border by Salzburg, but instead was sent to Saalfeld in Tübingen, a Nazi correction facility *Erziehungsheim* for difficult children. That was the lowest depths of his existence. He was constantly wetting his bed, being subjected to general ridicule and being punished by having his food rations cut, being deprived almost every morning of a sweet soup he loved. The only comfort was that there was one even worse off than himself, a poor boy suffering from rickets, and who instead of wetting his bed at night actually defecated in it. This poor guy was at least someone to befriend³. Forty odd years later, in connection with writing the book, he returns to Saalfeld, only to find to his horror that it did not seemed to have changed in the interim. Instead of a swastika flapping on the flagpole there was now the one of the German Democratic Republic, but it still was an institution of correcting problem children.

But life is not entirely black, eventually he was relieved form Saalfeld and there are references to a girlfriend and some sort of sexual initiation, without providing any details. Gradually the narrative eases into the stage at which the first installment took off. There is references to the war, the bombing of Salzburg having not yet started, but American planes heading for Munich were regularly seen flying in formations. Once he and his grandmother became witnesses to a German plane shooting down one of them, how the plane was shattered into pieces separately falling to the ground, some of the crew members bailing out in parachutes, while others were only seen as black dots falling to the ground faster than the shattered planes. But even among the lucky ones with parachutes, luck did not sustain itself, the parachutes suddenly caught fire, and their charges fell quickly to the ground. This excited the grandmother so much that she took him along to seek out the place of impact. She found it, the plane had struck a pig farm and incinerated a lot of pigs, the stink of which was strong. Here and there you could see deep dark holes in the

of resentment.

³ Reminding me of Charles Bukowski in his autobiography 'Ham on Rye', reviewed in XII(a).

snow, where bodies had hit the ground. The whole disgusted the author and he felt that all the excitement he had as a child felt for the war evaporated.

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