

## Als ich ein kleiner Junge war

*E.Kästner*

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This is a most delightful book, as memoirs of childhood often are. Kästner was born in 1899 and hence belonged to the generation of my grandparents, although somewhat younger than those as they were born in the interval of (1885-1893, and he was incidentally also born the same year as my teacher in Elementary school (1959-1963), thus it is a period of which I have no direct contact with, yet very familiar to me through the older generations and children books, and one to which I always looked upon with a kind of nostalgia and wished I had been born back then. It all seemed to me, in spite of all its admitted shortcomings, so idyllic, with none of the modern technological contraptions that I thought sullied everyday life in my own time. Of course you can never appreciate the absence of things you have no inkling of, so had I lived back then there would of course been plenty of things for me to resent. It would, however, been rather pointless for me to go back even further in time, I suspect, instead I might have hoped for a future with technological conveniences. Being happy is less a matter of context than of temperament<sup>1</sup>. It is also very interesting to note that those memoirs of childhood were written in 1957, half a century later, and to the author those fifty years seem a very long time and make up an unbridgeable gulf between then and now. Children of today, the author laments, and I was one at the time he was writing those pages, cannot really understand those times, so different from our own. I guess that applied to me as well, although incomprehension provoked sentimentalism rather than alienation. And indeed so much happened to the generation of my grandparents. Two World Wars for one thing, that completely destroyed the old order, as well as technological inventions, such as the car and the airplane, as well as the radio and later TV, which totally changed everyday life. When I look back fifty years now, I come to 1968, and life back then was not so dramatically different from what it is now. There were no world wars in the interrim, only the fall of the wall, which at the time seemed incredible, as the division between East and West seemed to be a permanent one. The void that the fall created has now been filled with the fear of Muslim extremism and concomitant terrorism, and the fear of a nuclear winter replaced by a far more abstract concern about climate change, which few seem to take seriously<sup>2</sup>. As to everyday life, the

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<sup>1</sup> Popper claims that happiness is not the business of the state, its responsibility goes no further then to relieve its citizens of avoidable sufferings. Thus, one infers, that the concerns of politicians to further our welfare and well-being are misdirected, part and parcel of the liberal market economy, seeing the citizens as customers and pandering to their perceived needs and wishes in exchange of power. One may see this attitude also as market liberal (or in the American context, market conservative, as 'liberal' is known as the L-word), assigning to the State minimal duties to interfere as little as possible with market capitalism. But that is not necessarily true. More equal income distribution has less to do with well-being than with justice, and is as such a legitimate political issue.

<sup>2</sup> In the 80's, there was concern about 'Waldsterben' and acid rain, those concerns have faded, maybe

personal computer and the mobile phone, have effected the greatest changes in everyday life, still not as dramatic as those experienced by earlier generations<sup>3</sup>.

Kästner makes a distinction between 'Gedächtnis' and 'Erinnerung'. The former concerns objective facts, such as the multiplication table, while the latter is far more complex and rich and often comes unbidden. It is also very personal, and usually has no interest at all to outsiders, however precious to the individual self. Thus the memories presented to the reader are but a faded copy of the living ones of the author himself, unlike of course objective facts which are transferable from one mind to another. As a writer of memoirs one hence has a duty to be very selective, all you can do as an author is to suggest and provoke the imagination of the reader, which only works if there are some shared experiences of some sort. In my case there is the sentimentalism of my childhood, nourished by many similar tales as that of Kästner's<sup>4</sup>. Without those, I might very well have found the account tedious, and if not it would only have stimulated cold curiosity as opposed to imaginative engagement. The book could easily have been twice as long, and I could surely have devoured many more episodes from his childhood, giving me windows into a past of which one does not seem to get enough. Yet there is after all such as too much of a good thing (and had the book been thicker, I would surely have postponed its reading, and what is postponed always runs the very high risk of being permanently so).

It starts out with a 'Vorwort'. Every book should have a 'foreword' writes the author, just as every house should have its 'Vorgarten'. It is not seemly to directly knock at the door from the street. (There is also an 'afterword' but he does not exclaim what this correspond to in real estate terms.) By this he sets the tone of the whole book, which is a tone you use when addressing a child, an intelligent child that is. Such a procedure has its disadvantages, because it can become condescending, but as long you keep in mind that children are always ignorant, that is inevitable, but often, if not always, also very intelligent. When you speak to a child in that manner, you do it by speaking to the child in yourself, because the child is always present within you, following whatever you do, like a dog, with interest and bewilderment, but unlike the dog with true understanding. It is only when you make something intelligible to the child within, that you really understand something. Speaking and writing to the child, you automatically do away with all what is ostentatious, all the pretensions, all the fake profundities, all the pointless decorations, snobbery and obscurities. In short you cut the crap, and communicate directly and lucidly. This is what permeates the book throughout and makes it such a delight to read.

A memoir is about the author, but often before we get to him, we have to plow through pages about his or her ancestors. And that might even more true when it comes to biographies, when the main protagonist is kept on hold at first. This is often tedious. Kästner acknowledges this and makes his apologies. He comforts the reader that it will be

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they were unfounded, which may account for the public indifference.

<sup>3</sup> Few people seem to regret the intrusions of the digital gadgets, looking back nostalgically at a time innocent of them. But the book and the printed word may be in decline, and some older authors still use typewriters and stock up on ribbons stored in freezers. The technology is still too new, but surely there may in the future be a backlash.

<sup>4</sup> The memoirs of Fallada, a contemporary, come immediately to my mind. As to experiences one may also add the homes of my grandparents which were to my mind mysteriously imbued with the past.

short because he knows next to nothing about his forefathers. But he does give an account of little Ida, his future mother, and her older brothers. It turns out to be a moral tale, but also very important for what follows, setting his early life in a proper context. The overriding emotion of his childhood was his love for his mother, his father makes a rather shadowy presence, but it is with the mother he engages, And for her, he is everything, her husband plays but a peripheral role, she clearly was never in love with him,

His mother was a studios girl, while her brothers were only interested in doing business, for which they had a much better head than any of their ancestors. They skipped school and instead they raised and sold rabbits in secrecy. Their sister Ida revealed the truth when confronted by their father. And since then she was always resented by her brothers as the one who rattled, the most despicable individual in criminal circles. Her brothers were not criminals, but there is much that unite the successful business man with the criminal. If one would be cynical one could claim that what distinguishes the successful businessman from the criminal is that he is smarter, he knows the rules, but instead of breaking them he bends them to his own advantage. In this sense the criminal is more honest than the businessman. Not surprisingly the brothers became very successful when they got older and one of them, the most brutal by name of Franz, even becomes a millionaire<sup>5</sup>. They started out as butchers, but grew out of it, (it was but an initial stepping stone) and started trading in horses eventually on a very grand scale. Horses was what it was all about at the turn of the century, and that would soon change drastically. The father's family Kästner, were also connected to horses, but then as craftsmen dealing in leather. His father grew up in that tradition and was an expert craftsman. For a few years he run a business, but he had no head for business. He loved his craft, and when he made a rucksack say, for some school child it never wore away. A rucksack would last the entire span as a pupil and then handed over to younger relatives or friends. While modern sacks had to be replaced at least three times during the years at school. So instead of selling nine ruck sacks, as Kästner explains, he ended up selling only one. This is not good for business. And also his wares were a bit more expensive, and although people appreciated them, they did when all was said and done chose the cheaper, after all price is a very convenient way of making purchase decisions, and it often elads you astray. This is market economy for you, and the skill of a craftsman went unappreciated in economic terms, instead factories took over. The result was that more gadgets became available and society became more and more consumer oriented, and his poor father had to move to Dresden and become a lowly factory worker, hardly able to support his family. In fact without the mother Ida's initiative to rent out two of the three rooms and become a hair dresser, the family would not have survived. Her brothers though made very good and some crumbs came her ways. No wonder that the father became such a shadowy existence, relegated to the basement where he could boil his stinking glue on a little burner doing odds and ends to augment their meager earnings.

Kästner grew up in Dresden. A most beautiful city, which no longer exists the author writes ruefully<sup>6</sup>. This gives the background to his entire childhood, and as he tells his

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<sup>5</sup> Franz comes across as a larger than life character of whom everybody is in awe, but who not necessarily wants it this way. Kästner would return to him in later books.

<sup>6</sup> To some extent it was rebuilt, most of the population did after all survive the onslaught, but survive

ostensibly young readers, there was no need for him to learn what beauty meant, it was all in front of him. The beauty of Dresden was of the past, in more senses than one. It was and is no more, and it was created in a very different spirit than what holds for creations of today. It was a city created by craftsmen having a passionate interest in what they were doing<sup>7</sup>. Childhood is the richest part of an individual's life, not necessarily for posterity and the outside world, but as noted above, to the individual himself, and the author has only chosen a very few. We become privy to this fascination for teachers, having had two of them as lodgers. He wanted to become a teacher himself, and that involved severe economical sacrifices for the family. He points out that at that time, continuing to more advanced schooling was to a large extent a question of money not of scholarly merit as such. Not seldom the most gifted were denied advancement, this strikes us as unbelievably unfair, but the attitude at the time was very different. For one thing it was not a stigma not to advance beyond elementary school, and intelligence and intellectual competence was available at all levels of society. With more justice and a meritocratic system there is an inevitable stratification of society with the 'scum' tending to remain in the lower strata and thus confirming it. But even if higher education was denied the poor, there was a possibility, be it still with economical sacrifices, to attend a Seminar and become a teacher<sup>8</sup>. Finally the author is ready to become a teacher and gives an excellent lecture to his students, approved by all the pedagogical experts. Experts as they were, they failed

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to what? In 1979 I visited the city one bleak December day. The ruins were everywhere. My purpose was to visit the art museum, to see on the wall, the only Vermeer I had not yet seen in real life. In 2001 I made a very brief revisit, the day after 9/11, while waiting for a train. The impression was very different. And then on a bicycle trip in 2012 I came by along the Elbe and made a longer visit and by then everything had been rebuilt, including the Frauenkirche. But is it the same Dresden? Is it as beautiful in any deeper sense, or is it just a Disney copy, because the elusive soul of a city hardly survives such a hiatus.

<sup>7</sup> Ruskin has some interesting things to say about craftsmen and their attitudes to their crafts, in connection with the erection of cathedrals. And Dresden was a work of Art.

<sup>8</sup> This was the way open to my own paternal grandfather Julius Persson 1885-1958) who proved himself manually inept as a farmer's hand, the standard way for a young penniless boy to make his living, and thus considered the other alternative. In his uncompleted memoirs he wrote down in a note book, he never explained how he supported himself. His father had died from appendicitis when he was only five, and his mother became a widow in her twenties. My mother and her sister were able to study beyond elementary school in the early 1940's, but this was considered as a major financial investment by their father, as a compensation for his son inheriting the whole farm. By the standards of the village he was fairly wealthy, but how he exactly came into the possession of the farm I have never understood. He too came from modest surroundings, although they were not starving as many were, and he started out as a farmer's hand at the farm he eventually would possess. He was very good at school, but only were given a few years of schooling and never considered the feasibility of continuing. This was the social reality only two generations ago, such social changes have not occurred in my own life time. Finally, by the 1970's employers of auto mechanics started to complain that the new generation tended to be stupid. The good ones, who recently would have chosen the profession, now went on to academic studies. Exceptions existed of course. My father-in-law was an auto mechanic, but of undeniable general intelligence and a wizard at mechanical things. Being practical with mechanical contraptions is not primarily a question of manual dexterity, such can be learned and acquired, but by pure thinking, a kind of hands-on programming. What

to notice, as did his pupils, that he was not cut out to be a teacher, something he only then realized. He was more interested in learning himself than teaching. A teacher must be more interested in his students than in himself, and he must have patience (*Geduld*) which should not be confused with indifference. One of his teachers had no 'Geduld' at all, and ended up giving all his students, with a few exceptions, one being Kästner himself, a lot of corporal punishment. Not out of sadism, as with the case of some teachers, but out of exasperation, that the students were so slow so slow-witted and resistant to acquiring good habits and develop into studious characters. Once he was invited to climb with him, and he found an entirely different person. He should never have been a teacher (but what career may have been open to him?).

His love for his mother shines through, especially in the hikes they took around Saxony. They did not just walk for a day, but was out walking for a week or two, longer than that his mother could not spare away from her costumers. Later on they got bicycles, the author borrowing that of his father, while the mother got her own. But she always forgot to brake when going downhill and had several accidents. How could she forget to break? The reader of today, a hundred years later, is puzzled. What was going on? <sup>9</sup> As a result they went back to hiking. And when his mother got into her forties she was content with day trips. Walking along was a very popular pastime at the turn of the century. Fallada writes about the 'Wandervogeln'<sup>10</sup>.

The reminiscences of Kästner do not follow some strict chronology, but rather complying to various themes going back and forth in time, and so will my review. One noteworthy thing is that at a very early age the author wanted to become a 'Turner' i.e. gymnast. One would have thought it unsuitable for him, intellectual as he was. But he says that he deplored those who did not follow the mantra of *mens sana in corpore sano*. Scholars who neglected their bodies, athletes who neglected their minds, not to mention all of those who neglected both. He deplored them all. In this context he makes a distinction between 'echte Helden' and 'falsche Helden', he being neither. The fake hero has no fear for the simple reason that he has no imagination and is simply stupid. If so they need nothing to overcome. Real heroes need to overcome themselves, their own fears, and then accomplish something. This is admirable, the other is not<sup>11</sup> At times Kästner wonders whether he would have been happier had he not been a single child. He notes that your friends

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always struck me with him was the way he thought through a problem before he attempted to solve it. This was not a matter of training, as most people surmise, but, if you want, a case of intellectual temperament.

<sup>9</sup> The memoirs refer to a 'Rücktrittsbremse' what is that? Is it something you should engage before you start to roll downwards? Later on it is too late? Modern Google does not give any clue, but German Wikipedia is helpful. It simply means a back pedal brake, the standard on bicycles in my childhood and youth, I was twenty-one and in the States when I first encountered a bicycle without one. It was scary at first, constantly pedaling backwards and nothing happening, but I very quickly got used to it. Maybe when stressed remembering to pedal backwards may not be so easy. But yet?

<sup>10</sup> Those extended walking trips remind me of my own bicycle trips for the past fifteen years or so, no doubt taken in the same spirit and exceedingly enjoyable as they involve effort and minor hardships to be overcome.

<sup>11</sup> The notorious Heindrich accomplished many physical feats, escaping from burning airplanes about to crash etc. At first one is bound to admire him, after all one must give him that, doing things one would

you choose and have the option of getting rid of would you so desire, while your siblings are pushed on you, and you can never get rid of them. Also relations with siblings and relatives could be very bad, even if exceptions always exist, but he admits that at times, the burden to be the only child to both his parents and their concomitant jealousies, was something he wanted to be relieved off, at least at Christmas. He also remarks that when he was a child, he was able to do so much in the time allotted to him, now when he is an adult, time feels like a bed cover which has shrunk in the wash, and no longer is able to fully cover.

His childhood ended in August 1914. War broke out. He was, at the expense of his rich uncle Franz, with his mother and cousin Dora by the Ostsee, where he incidentally for the first time encountered a flat landscape, so different from the Saxon Alps close to Dresden. They along with everybody else had to return heads over heels back home. It was a scramble, and a chaos, and hard to get conveyance. In fact they are forced to drag their luggage by hand to the train station. His cousin Dora remarked that it would be good for her father's horse business.

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oneself be incapable of. But maybe he was just stupid and devoid of imagination. Even Hitler scoffed at his stupidity and fool-hardiness when he was tracked down, pursued and finally shot by some Czech resistance fighters, and tried to shoot back.