

CHAPTER : THE EXAM

Thus the time went by. I returned to Prossnitz for a summer vacation and was back in Vienna in time for the examination. At the entrance to the Academy I stumbled into the huge Czech guard right between the two bronze centaurs. He recognized me as the blankety-blank country boy who knew nothing about anything a year ago. With sneers and ironic remarks he sold me paper, thumbtacks, charcoal, fixative and a few pieces of black and sanguine Conté crayons.

After registration was over we started. I picked a middle-aged woman because I found a space in front, where I did not have to look between three other heads or easels. I peered to the right and left to see what the others were doing. Most of them came equipped with all sorts of clever tricks but I thought I could hold my own with my little planes in charcoal with an occasional attempt to include here and there other little tricks I had noticed other contenders applying with great confidence. After two days (9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with an hour for lunch) of work among the many city boys who were sparkling with smartness and bursting with self-importance I was one of the small minority who was timid and dulled by doubts and questions inside. I studied my drawing carefully after fixing it and although I had done only those things, which I had learned to be "good", yet, it made me sick to look at it. Again watching the others it was clear

that my drawing was more or less on the level of the others, clever and what they called "good". But - there was the But - out of several hundred only eighteen were to be accepted, many had been coming for years. Their names must have been familiar to the exam committee, by now. Why should anyone select my drawing when even I myself did not like it. And it did hurt me to look at it. In spite of my new routine I was haunted by that compulsion to make it live and it just didn't *live*,

In the midst of my sad reflections, Sveboda, the huge Czech interrupted with his harsh voice: "~~Jasie~~^{Jex's} Maria-Josef, time is up and this country pumpkin (Landpomerantzen) hasn't signed it yet. Here, right side, signature, left side, date, for crying out loud!" I hastily followed instructions and he grabbed the drawing and dumped it - with his characteristic sneer - on the heap of drawings.

I went home with very little hope. Probably exams were not for me or I wasn't made for exams. Worst of all, what are the Sponsors going to say or Meister Horowitz when they find out how I failed.

Next day we had the second model. What's the difference? it will be a different nose but the same charcoal tricks and the same uncertainty. I looked around and in the other room I saw an old man of the Tiroler type. A reddish weatherbeaten complexion, a typical sharp hook nose, clear blue eyes that suggested the telescopic vision of an eagle, silvery hair and a silvery beard just like one of the Gamsjäger (Hunter of the ^{Gamsbock} Gamsbock) who looks down from one of the high peaks or glaciers in the Alps. I had read about those mountaineers, their endurance and courage but had never seen one before. I got really excited. Here I was in my own element, I just had to get that head. Most inspiring head since the Moses plaster cast. "Zum Teufel" (to the devil) with that examination, I heard myself murmur and in no time I had another paper and I was ready. All my developed instincts returned.

No one ever told me what could not be done and I had years of experience of creating the most unbelievable color effects with only three ^{primary} cakes of color, sometimes only two. Without being able to explain why, I found myself smearing a thin coat of sanguine chalk over the whole sheet except where the hair, the iris of the eyes and the beard should be. With my handkerchief, I rubbed this layer smooth until it was a light brownish ^{orange-}red. I modelled the forms with black and sanguine, with every wrinkle and almost the pores and little bumps on the skin. The big areas of smoothed sanguine, with lots of yellow and red in it, had their quick effect on the eye. It produced on the retina of the beholder a complementary effect of blue which was only noticeable in those islands that had been left untouched white. A few careful details with black chalk were sufficient ^{ient} and the drawing looked at you with blue eagle eyes. Thin black lines making the silky waves of the beard, looked even a little too blue and I had to add a little sanguine so as to make them look more greyish. I worked and forgot everything, even Horowitz and David Kohn, until the hour came and Svoboda's brutal voice shrieked: "Jozis Maria Josef, again no date, no name, left side date, right side name. Quick, do you expect me to stay here until next year?" I mumbled under my breath "Zum Teufel with you and the exam" while signing. He roared: "What was that?" I was really not the cussing kind and I did not want him to get really mad so I said: "Oh, I was just saying 'thanks a lot'." He grabbed the drawing and dropped it on the heap and then he straightened up to his full size and bawled loudly: "Next Monday at 10 a.m. you'll all come back here to find out the names of the lucky eighteen. This afternoon, two hours for composition."

I returned at 2 o'clock just because I was curious as to what composition was all about. A professor announced that the theme was a scene from Goethe's "Faust". I drew Valentine dying on the floor after the duel with Faust in defense of his sister's honor. This scene of ^{the} death of a

brave, innocent man by the hand of the sinner, that medieval form of justice on the side of the faster sword was as fascinating then as it is today in the thousands of cases in movies and TV, where the one with the faster draw, lives. So far so good, but, about "composition" I had not heard anything from Zoufal nor from Meister Kohn. Well, that ~~went~~ ^{passed} by too. Having just included Mephistopheles, the devil, into the composition I felt more than before "Zum Teufel" with exams and Svoboda's and such.

After a depressed weekend, thinking of going home to Prossnitz with another defeat and realizing that I could not expect subsidies after a lost exam, my relatives insisted, I should go to the Academy on Monday even if not expecting a positive result. After all, if I should get another chance in a year or two or even later it would be valuable to know, what kind of work was being accepted and what was rejected and most candidates had to return, any how, year after year.

Monday I sneaked in, carefully avoiding Svoboda and his ^{Sarcasm} irony. It was 10 o'clock Monday morning and we were sitting in what seemed to be a lecture room. I sat quietly in the back watching the smart ones confidently bragging, others nervously trying to hide their impatience and fear. There must have been ~~so~~ many who got their preparation ^{for this exam} without a court painter's recommendation, as a result of sacrifices at home and they dreaded a disappointment.

It was 10:30 and then 11 and no professor appeared. The boys with several past attempts said, it had never happened before - the old faculty members were all sticklers for punctuality and everything had to be on time. The waiting crowd including a few parents (who had come to stand by their boys) was already getting noisy and sounded almost like a Realschule in intermission time.

At a little before half past eleven Professor Schmidt with a gray beard, an unimpressive figure but a kind, harmless voice appeared on the

podium with some papers and sat down. With ^{Harry} great horizontal wrinkles of deep regret on his forehead he apologized gently for the delay and expressed willingness to forego all introductory remarks so not to test the patience or impatience of the audience any longer. "The following is the list of the eighteen admitted contestants." And then he announced slowly and clearly the eighteen names in alphabetic order. I tried very hard to remember who they were and what kind of drawings they had produced. It ^{gave} made no clear picture of what the ^{criteria} criterions were for being in or being out. The list of eighteen finished, there was an applause. I was neither surprised nor upset, not to have been among the eighteen. The ceremony ^{could} might go on ^{without me} but I had no reason to stay and I quietly sneaked out of the hall.

Just outside the door I bumped again into Svoboda. With a ^{steamed} strenuous grin on his face he said, trying to sound cute: "Look who is coming! Congratulations! Who would have thought that? Such an honor! Congratulations!" I blushed and felt myself getting very red in the face. I never like outbursts of angry words and was usually calm but this was too much. I was finished at the ^{Academy} Academy and had nothing to lose, so I straightened up as well as I could and almost shouted: "Listen, you brute, I had enough of your sarcasm and cruelty. I know when I am licked. I didn't expect to be among the eighteen. If it had not been for you making me sign those drawings and then snatching them, I probably would not have submitted them at all, so let me go in peace." Now Svoboda in turn straightened ^{me} up to his full size: "Jesus-Maria-Josef, of all the dumb animals!" and he grabbed me by the arm and without ceremony pushed me back into the room. He had a copy of the list in his hand and pointing to the last part of the text he pushed me down on a seat. The noise of the applauding, congratulating, and comforting in the crowd had subsided by that time and Professor Schmidt (well-known for his popular pictures depicting Beethoven or Schubert walking dreamily through the

countrywide, preferably during ^{or after} (a thunderstorm) tried to raise his dainty voice above the disturbing sounds: "Meine Herren (gentlemen)", he said, "I have to make an additional announcement. First, I have to express again sincerest apologies on my own behalf and on behalf of the Admittance Committee of the Faculty of this Kaiser und ^{Königliche} Academy of the Fine Arts for the unusual lack of punctuality. I can assure you that only something of importance could cause such a long delay. As a matter of fact something came up which demanded a change in the statutes of the constitution of the Academy of Fine Arts. One of the submitted drawings was of such superior quality of draftsmanship, technique and power of observation that there was an unanimous agreement that an applicant of that level would be completely out of place in the first year, which, as you know, is the year devoted mainly to the teaching of how to draw heads. Therefore, we all felt that to do justice, that applicant, whose name is Leo Katz, should be admitted directly into the second year class where, as you know, the drawing of figures is taught. But, Meine Herren, the original text of the Academy constitution and bylaws has no provision for such a procedure and had to be changed by a full ^{quorum} of the faculty and that was the cause of the unprecedented delay. I thank you!" He coughed mildly and with some awkward movement of his hands and arms he lifted my head of the Gemsjäger (with the blue eyes made of black chalk) so that all could see the justification of the delay. I was speechless. I could only think simultaneously of the round table and in Svoboda's voice it sounded like "Blöder Hung^d" in free translation: of all the dumb animals. "Wer's Glück hat dem Kälbern die Ochsen!" and after another minute it reached my surprised brain in the same voice "Ježiš^š Maria Josef, it means graduating in three years instead of four." Then it seemed like a thought coincidence or a conditioned reflex: "such superior quality of draftsmanship, technique, and power of observation"... "Noch nicht dagewesen - mein Schüler!"

In both cases I almost missed the verdict -- in both cases the change in voice and attitude was almost identical -- two unfriendly Czechs, Zoufal and Svoboda, changing from cruel sarcasm to a patronizing friendliness. Only Zoufal never found out that I was crouching in the closet while I listened to his change of heart. Where and how can those little events be related?

I went home to the Hedwig Gasse and my relatives were very proud of me, especially Uncle Emil. Tante Malvine was interested in a reserved way and Tante Mathilde seemed happy and more affectionate. I could not help thinking; what if I had not followed their advice to wait until Monday and to attend the announcement before returning to Prossnitz? What if Svoboda, the brute, had not stopped me physically from leaving after the announcement of the eighteen? Would anyone have bothered locating me? Did I leave my address? I did not remember. After all, if I am not interested enough why should they fret when over 200 or 300 others are more than anxious to get in, especially if the new stipulations and changes would take more time to become really legal. Or suppose I had made the second head "good" like the first head, I probably would not have been accepted at all, because there were too many such drawings, killed by "good" conventional training.

Many years later there was another flood of questions added. When Hitler had started ordering the extermination of millions of defenseless people, I learned that he first planned to become an artist and had his heart set on passing the examination. He never got over not being one of the eighteen when he applied. If it is true that he tried, it could have been the same exam, the same year, the same room, perhaps the same model. He was a poor frustrated unknown boy, as I was. No one would have remembered his name or his drawings. If he was there he must have heard the name Katz with the only drawing that was shown. There was room made for me although the

eighteen places were filled. Why could he not be the one? They said he never could forget this one defeat. Did he remember the name? Is there any justice or sense in the fact that all available members of our family from Vienna and Prossnitz were killed in his murder factories including gentle Uncle Emil and kind Tante Mathilde, besides millions of others who were turned into fertilizer to compensate for his early frustrations?

And what would have happened if a different jury had been in charge at that exam? One, who like Hitler's drawings and did not like mine or my name. After all, in the three years I was the only Jew studying at the Academy and every exhibition contains art which was rejected by another jury. What would the history of the world have been during the last thirty or forty years had they accepted him as an art student and flunked me instead?

Most of our thinking is conditioned to memorizing or ^{for} piling up endless numbers of unrelated informations, creating a mental desert of fragmentary thinking. Therefore, I feel that my attempts to relate - or at least to inquire, whether things can be related, things of the past, the present and the future - to discover what is and what is not relatable - must go on. Even if we don't find right away answers which are practical and guarantee profit of some kind we should not drop efforts to think in terms of relating. Can we afford, in this age of ^{Einstein's} relativity, to refuse to learn about possible, factual, causal and noncausal coincidental relations or the relatedness between small individual experiences and big world events? Can you imagine anything more far-reaching and tremendously fascinating than a discovery of an intimate and basic relatedness between the submicroscopic nuclear patterns of design and those of the supertelescopic galaxies. Is it scientifically acceptable to educate us into the habit of ignoring such problems because we "don't like them" or because it is simpler to ignore them as long as possible?