Chapter

In the Army

Life in Tobl did not change very much while the war was going on in the distance. Everybody had fullest confidence in the Austrian Army and Konrad von Hoetzendorf, the general in command. The psychological turning point came one day when the optimistic newspapers contained the headline: "Przemysl noch in unserem Besitz" (Przemysl (a fortress on the Russian border) is still in our possession." This telegram was never forgotten and I heard it mentioned many times among people from Austria. It was the first sugar-coated admission that we were losing battles. However, after our unsuccessful situation on the Russo-Polish border had become dangerous, the Germans could not permit a further advance into Austrian territory, so they took over. They used to say, "The Austrians are nice folks. They kept the Russians busy until soldiers arrived," which indicated that they had little respect for the Austrian army.

After a time the Gutmanns stayed more in Vienna. In their absence My wife Hedi had the strange idea that during the absence of the Baronin Hedi, she was automatically in charge of the castle. This concept seemed not to have been shared by others and thus frictions of the Krimhilde-Brunhilde type were unavoidable. The Hofrathin, who had never forgiven me that first portrait of her daughter, saw her chance for action and did not rest until we found an apartment in Vienna. It was located in Grienzing, a lovely well-known suburb where the real Viennese came for "Zum Heurigen" (this year's wine). There our second son, Peter, was born. The air of Grienzing was mild and just right for the children. There was also

enough space in the vicinity to give Steff, the Doberman, his lessons and exercise.

It may easily create a wrong impression that I just mention the arrival of a second son and then write at length about Steff, the Doberman. Therefore, I confess right here and now that I fussed a lot about the children and went through all the serious and ridiculous experiences of a proud young father. But I promised not to complicate my story with family life and its details. Therefore, let us return to things which belong to the tale of certain developments in my art life. Steff, the dark spot in my mural, belongs to that tale.

Fortunately the dog soon became attached to us and was eager to learn. Not a single move or gesture of mine went unnoticed by him. I had to exercise remarkable control over myself before I could teach him anything. He certainly used his head constantly. The first day I took him out he noticed where I had the collar and leash hanging. After I had put the collar on him I took him to the door and we went out, I holding him on the leash until we returned home. That was strenuous work because he kept pulling with all his strength. When I felt he would not run away we went to a nearby meadow where I let him loose. By that time his desire for exercise had become desperate and he kept running full speed in big circles as if life had only one goal--to warp that meadow out of shape by hitting the ground with all his might. After a while he stopped when he found a little puddle of water. He was thirsty from the run. I encouraged him to keep running until he had his exercise. Then I

turned to going home and he was anxious to come back to me. I attached the leash and we started to work, simple lessons of obedience, walking on my left side with his head close to my knee, sitting down when I stopped walking, etc. At home I gave him good clear water to drink and he was satisfied.

Next day I thought of the muddy puddles so I gave him first a bowl of water to drink then I put the collar with the leash over his head and we went out to the same place; same procedure. He again ran like mad but paid less attention to the water puddles. The following day, when it was time to go out I filled his bowl with water, whereupon he jumped up and grabbed the collar with the leash from its place and brought it to me. He remembered the sequence of events and acted with anticipation. I wonder why we are always so surprised and impressed by such examples of the ability of simple deduction shown by animals, since they possess many other abilities definitely superior to ours.

And so it went, with steady progress until I could take him out on Sundays when real crowds arrived by electric tram in Grienzing. I told him to sit down and he would not move in the middle of that crowd until I gave the signal. He would come running and sit down next to my left foot. In good weather we used to walk to the Beethovengang. That was a path which followed a lovely brook with dozens of little cataracts (thirty-six of them, if I remember right) that murmured and gurgled in the sunshine. There were interesting old planks along the brook and high-reaching plants with flowers. Everything seemed to sing with the lark high up in the mild air. It was there that Beethoven got the inspiration for

the second movement (with the murmuring brook) of his Sixth Symphony. I don't know of any other place in the world where he could have breathed such lyrical, pastoral atmosphere and write that particular kind of rhythmic, singing music. I made a number of sketches of different parts of the brook. Two of them I have still in a portfolio. Occasionally we also passed the "Schuberthaus," where another great genius wrote unforgettable music and starved to death. Much of his work also could not have been composed anywhere else. Certain places have something invisible, intangible and indefinable about them that gives them a unique reality. Thus did Steff receive part of his education in an environment full of the finest musical tradition, yet all he could think of was to catch some of those birds.

Once he stood on top of a little hill against the light-filled air and I made a quick study of him from which I made a life-size painting in my studio. By that time I hardly needed a study for Steff. People said the picture was so incredibly real and life-like that I became curious. I took the dog to the studio. I had placed the picture, without frame, on the floor against a light wall. When I opened the door and Steff saw that dark dog standing there he really growled and his hair at the shoulder blades and neck stood up. Aha, I thought, remembering the story of Zeuxis, the famous Greek painter (420-390 B.C.), who had painted grapes so convincingly the birds tried to pluck them. Perhaps it was another step toward my goal, my quest for life, when the eye of a Dobermann was deceived. But then Steff stepped cautiously closer and when he came into

smelling distance and smelled the dead odor of oil paint on canvas, his expression suddenly showed such a load of doggish contempt that I felt thoroughly humiliated. I then had my hands full to save the picture from the lamppost treatment.

When I took the dog to Tobitschau he was pretty well under control and apparently anxious to adjust to his new environment. Everything went along peacefully until he once used his own judgment, probably with all good intentions. ~~It was a time when~~, On a fine sunny day, when I was getting ready to take him for a walk and the Baronin expressed a desire to join us. We went through the gate out towards the fields. There were some dikes raised above the general level of the plowed soil and a path on top of each dike connected some of the points of the estate and the village. We walked on top of one of those long dikes, As usually we would deeply engrossed in some philosophical or artistic problem and, as usually, we finally ended in discussing some of her personal problems, of which there were many. She did most of the talking and I could only listen, most of the time. We reached a point where a tree stood on the edge of the path throwing a fine shadow on the grass, where it sloped down towards the field. It seemed a perfect invitation to sit down for a while and so we did, all three of us.

Steff studied the world while we talked. His watching intensity increased noticably when on the path in the distance a man appeared. It was obvious that the dog was getting ready to defend us against the intruder, so I had to watch him. When the man came closer we recognized him as one of the employees of the castle, and

I told Steff that it was allright. So the dog seemed to observe this OK object, who, when he came near us, stopped and respectfully removed his hat. We exchanged a few friendly words. Then the man continued peacefully on his way. I showed Steff my satisfaction with his behavior. A few minutes later we saw another man approaching. It was the Czech postmaster from the village, who was not personally connected with the castle. Steff, the alert pupil, had just learned how a friendly man behaved, so he watched the new object with his newly acquired knowledge. There was absolutely no reason for any greeting or conversation with this man, so we paid little attention when we recognized him. Not so Steff. He watched the exact spot where the first man had stopped, and when the new man passed that spot without stopping or removing his hat, there was no possible doubt in the Dobermann's mind that here was an enemy, who had to be taught where to stop, and there was no time to lose. Before I could prevent it, Steff jumped up and had out through the man's trousers. He took the poor victim to a doctor and he needed 10 stitches on his ankle.

For the village it was a signal to make the most of it. They had never seen a Dobermann so they spread the story that it was a black panther and went to court accusing me of keeping a wild beast outside a cage and without a trainer's license. Of course, all expenses and compensation were paid out of court without any argument, and all possible expressions of regret and apology on my part had been made, but it took a good lawyer and a lot of time until it could be proven in court that Steff was a police dog in training and not a panther. In the end they did not insist on destroying

Steff. How it all would have ended without the help of the Gutmanns is hard to guess. I myself would not have known how to defend myself because my understanding sympathies were with the poor postmaster who was so suddenly attacked when he crossed that line, a line he knew nothing about. And all that because I needed that dark spot in the mural.

Back in Vienna I felt haunted by a problem of another nature. As I explained in the beginning, I did not intend to make this book a real biography. The story of my marriage, my family, and other purely personal and emotional experiences would make another book. In the pages of this volume I am using those events and stories from my life that may in the end help to create a background or a platform out of which an understanding may grow of my quest, and other things, which cannot be explained by the usual methods. Speaking of this quest for a living quality in my work, I must mention a certain major experience with which I had to wrestle. This experience was the "Mona Lisa."

For many years it was Albrecht Dürer's burinsharp drawing and Michelangelo's sculptured precision which represented the main constellations according to which I oriented my work in the navigation through the oceans of art problems. Leonardo's drawings were just as sharp and clear in their definition of form. But one day I met Mona Lisa in the Louvre and like many other artists, I was greatly disturbed. Like everything else Leonardo did, he was far ahead of the Renaissance in this portrait: The drawing, the painting, the treatment of form, of space, of movement, of color and, above all, of light. The psychological approach in the facial

expression is a chapter in itself. Perhaps the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci in the Liechtenstein Gallery in Vienna (now in the National Gallery in Washington) is even more clearly Freudian. But it is a much earlier painting which still has the "homogenious" precision drawing, whereas the Mona Lisa has the famous sfumato, a symphonic change from razor sharp contour to the soft melting of a tangible form into the immateriality of a shadow, or the space of the background. I had known that last phenomenon before. In the St. Stephan's Cathedral in Vienna I sometimes watched light rays come in through stained glass windows and, hitting a section of an altar or one of the columns, created an island of light, tangible reality, surrounded by enormous spaces of mysterious shadow. I watched those islands of a shiny gold frame on an altar, or forms of hard stone, gradually dematerialize into a dark nothingness. Of course one thinks first of Rembrandt who threw a small island of well-lit flesh into a big mass of very dark colors. But that was really not the same, because usually it is just a mass of dark paint used as contrast to give the golden light to a face or object. Only Leonardo had that Gothic effect of light vibrating on the skin of La Giaconda, making the cheek, for example, really round and solid; then having that same form without interruption, infinitesimally gradating itself out of existence by his magic dematerialization into its own shadow, not into a big dark painting.

It seemed to me an important jump beyond "painting" towards "life." I had already started to grasp the hypocritical stupidity of our judging pictures as good or bad, so I did not waste my time judging the Mona Lisa, as thousands of visitors are apt to do. It

simply had become an essential step on the road of my quest. It was something I had to experience. It could not be done on the wall, and of course I did not intend to copy the Mona Lisa.

I searched and found a fine model named "Reserl" (meaning Little like Therese). She was a circus performer and in the long months of unemployment she tried to earn some money as an artist's model. There was something clean and decent about her and she seemed to trust me, so we started a canvas. I took her head in profile, bent down, ~~x~~ neck and shoulders and body almost ~~almost~~ to the hips. I started in solid tempera underpainting, then added fine layers, almost transparent, of oilpaint, stroking and stippling with breathless continuity until my forms vibrated and disappeared ever so gradually into the darkness. There were no brushstrokes visible in the dark nor in the light. I finally felt I truly had relived that part of Leonardo's experience but without copying. For ~~three~~ eight months that fine girl came daily for four or more hours (including Sundays) without once disturbing me with a word, a giggle, or a gesture. I sensed an unusual instinctive understanding for my work in her silent cooperation. Again I had been lucky finding a woman who really helped which was not easy under such extraordinary conditions.. I am not now sure. Had I worked myself back into the end of the fifteen century or had Leonardo jumped ahead into the early twentieth? Many people in art circles won't understand why I am not silent about such experiences, since no one seems to be interested in this kind of work today. All I can say is that at that time neither the painters of the Academy nor the moderns painted like that. The picture was not commissioned and I don't remember having even shown it to anyone at the time.

Come to think of it, Klimt tried as hard as anyone to get the skin of his portraits and figures to vibrate. So did Renoir. But neither of them searched for the Gothic mystery of the shadow. Light shadows often increase the effect of solid form. It has to be darkness, or rather its unreality. Their vibrating flesh was painted in more or less visible spots of different color shades. Their tendency was to avoid dark shadows.

The painting was referred to as the "Halbakt" (Akt was the professional term for a nude figure, and Halbakt was a half figure). I found out another thing. After eight months of hard work the lower part was not quite finished, although most people would never have noticed. It was quite evident that Leonardo must have worked at least three or more years to finish the almost front-faced Gioconda; those hands, those almost dancing rocks in the vibrating atmosphere, etc. A clear, objective and wonderfully detailed painting of a Holbein could have been finished in a fraction of that time. And, believe me, it is not only a matter of patience but of strength and devoted concentration to use ten thousand tiny, practically invisible brush strokes in perfect continuity without slipping into some dead routine. Very few people could or would attempt such an ordeal.

The war had in the meanwhile gone on with all its tragic absurdity. More officers and men were needed. In 1916 the men who had previously been rejected were called up for re-examination. I was found to be OK--there was nothing wrong with my eyes. Most men among my friends were already in the army. Edmund Heilig, who was a professional veternarian before he became a manufacturer of men's

clothing, had been called soon after the outbreak of hostilities. The armies of Europe were not yet motorized. Cavalry was still much needed (except in trench warfare) and transportation of artillery, provisions, ammunition, casualties, etc. was entirely dependent on railroads, a few automobiles, and ~~cavalry~~ horses. Every available horse-doctor was needed, and friend Heilig with his blond bushy hair and beard, his blueish gray eyes and imposing figure was sent to Krakau, an old fortress on the Russian border. There he became the commanding veterinary of the then famous "Reitende Eins," short for Mounted Artillery Regiment No. 1. It was a regiment normally reserved for the officers of high aristocracy. Of course, the non-commissioned soldiers were from every walk of life. The less ambitious titled officers served in certain cavalry regiments but those who preferred something more intellectually stimulating went to the Reitende Eins. In addition to fine horsemanship one had to learn ballistics and anatomy of horses.

At the time I was called, the exclusively aristocratic character of the regiment as far as officers were concerned had been abandoned of necessity, because there were not enough counts and princes available. In fact, the major part of the staff consisted of officers without a title. Thus, friend Heilig talked the commanding officer into accepting me into his regiment on the ground that it would be fun to have an artist around. I was glad, and grateful, to be in the same outfit with such a wonderful friend. But first I had to attend officers' school. As a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts I had the right to become an officer after I passed the examinations. In normal times I would have had to serve only one year instead of three. They called such a soldier "one year volunteer"