

2

The Move to Uzhorod



During the years of my girlhood, life in the Czech countryside still followed the old traditional patterns. Most people lived and died in the district where they were born. They moved away only if they had to, and usually to the closest possible place. My family made its one move when I was 11. My parents decided that we children needed better schools, so we shifted to Uzhorod, some eight or nine miles away.

Our formal education had begun with governesses. Almost invariably, they brought out the worst in my brothers and me. The fear and respect we felt for our parents was sacred and unchangeable. The fear and respect we were supposed to feel for our governesses was strictly provisional.

Most of our governesses were “old maids” in personality as well as in years and appearance. They projected an icy sternness that challenged high-spirited children. Our mischief was meant to irritate them out of their proud reserve. The goal was to make their lives so miserable that they would quit, so we could be free for a while.

We succeeded at this, I must confess, many times. I’m half-ashamed to describe our nasty tricks, but the fact that I was a rebellious child is a part of the truth.

Governesses always wore immaculate white blouses and modest black skirts. We children would contrive a ball of some cheap red fabric, then dip it in water and squeeze it out so that it was still juicy but wouldn’t drip. Then we would toss our “ball” back and

My First Life

forth among the three of us until it “accidentally” landed on our governess’ white blouse, leaving a permanent pink stain. The governess’ anger was instantaneous and so was our spanking, but that never stopped us. Our parents immediately replaced the blouse, of course, but it was less easy to restore her dignity.

We also liked to collect little green frogs and put them into the governess’ bed. For that we also got spanked hard and often.

Once or twice, we got an attractive young governess. That was certainly more pleasant, but it brought its own problems. The young men in the district could never resist a pretty new face. When she took us for our walks, they would bribe us with candy so we’d get out of the way. Late at night, a knocking at the window would wake us up. We would lie quietly to see what would happen. Unfortunately, all the activity would also wake up my parents, and that would be the end of our pretty young governess.

Finding replacements was one of my parents’ regular chores. Since the main function of our governesses was to perfect our German, they always sent for them in the German-speaking Western part of Bohemia. It took a lot of time, correspondence and exchanging of photographs and recommendations before a new one was hired, but most were gone in no time. Of Ani Pist, however, I have only the fondest memories. She was the last and best governess we had, and she stayed until we were all in school and had outgrown the need for her.

Starting school did not improve our relationship to education or educators. Neither my brothers nor I were the type who cared to sit still or be told what to do. Our fellow students were of very mixed backgrounds and ethnic origins, some from comfortable homes like our own and others from peasant hovels, arriving at school with lice walking on their hair. Our parents expected us to stand at the top of our classes, but we never did.

Personally, I had no difficulty with the material. I simply preferred having fun to studying for tests. With my brothers, it was

Childhood

different. They had a really hard time. From time to time, something like Latin or chemistry would utterly stump them, and my father would have to find a tutor to live in with us until they caught up.

Once we moved from Sobrance to Uzhorod, we were expected to buckle down and excel, and to do it in a new language, Czech. Czech was a Slavic tongue, quite similar to the Slovak we had used in Sobrance, but different enough to cause confusion. We needed extra effort, extra tutoring and extra lectures to try harder. It was rough going and none of us did well enough to satisfy our parents.

Bandi was the biggest disappointment. Being the first-born son, he was obliged to shine. But the move to Uzhorod hurt him more than it helped. He was so handsome that girls all chased him, and all he thought about was having a good time. Despite the limitless opportunities before him, he neglected his studies more than ever, and my parents could not imagine what would become of him. Eventually Bandi decided to own a drugstore. This was quite a comedown for a son of such a distinguished family, but it was obvious that anything more strenuous was beyond him.

Other than school, we had no complaints about Uzhorod. It was not the sort of quaint or historic town that draws tourists, but there was an active cultural life, with its own orchestra and opera, a promenade by the river, plenty of relatives to visit, and new friends to be made. Our home was a city villa rather than a sprawling country house, but very pleasant and elegant. My father reestablished his banking career and we began our new life.

The move to a bigger town, or perhaps simply the onslaught of puberty, had striking effects on me. I realized that life and people were far more complicated than I had imagined. Uzhorod was a gossipy town, and there was plenty to gossip about. I soon discovered that married people were not necessarily faithful, and that the most faithless spouses appeared to be doctors and their female patients. After hearing a few stories about the multiple affairs of a certain attractive physician, I made up my mind never to marry a doctor.

My First Life

I was also growing more sophisticated about politics. With the 1930s came many social changes, and it seemed obvious to everyone that democratic Capitalism was doomed and that the future belonged either to Fascism or Communism. Of the two, I certainly favored Communism. The Russians were right across the border and even in school the teachers referred to them as “our cousins, the Russians,” and “our fellow-Slavs, our brother Russians.” They certainly seemed like the Good Guys, especially compared with the likes of Mussolini and Hitler.

I was personally a great Slav patriot. Every year, on the first day of school, we students all had to give our names and announce our nationalities. I always declared myself a Slovak. My teacher would say, “No, you are Jewish.” And I would reply, “No, my religion is Jewish, but my nationality is Slovak.” So I was all the more given to romanticizing the Russians.

My Grandfather Kaufman was particularly horrified by my Leftist leanings. He had built up a huge fortune and was affronted by my contempt for wealth. The truth was, I meant him to be. I thought it ridiculous that one man should have so much.

Grandfather Kaufman always wore gray silk gloves when he went out. He would tell me to throw away perfectly good clothes if he found on them the smallest fleck of lint or the tiniest loose thread. He spoke with extreme elegance, never permitting a vulgar expression or a word of Yiddish in his house. It seemed to me that he was influenced by the local nobility, those last survivors of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who lived in palaces, dressed like characters from fairy tales, never did a stroke of work and associated only with one another.

In fact, it bothered me far less when the nobles behaved that way than when my grandfather did. After all, they had been born and bred to it.

One day, I spoke my mind to him. I told him that any system that encouraged or rewarded such behavior deserved to go under.

Childhood

He slapped my face. I did not carry a grudge about this encounter, but I did remember it. It taught me that people are particularly likely to reply with blows when they can't think of a good argument.

I must add that, despite these tensions, I really did love my grandfather. I also decided quite soon that it was a useful and pleasant thing to have money, if it wasn't carried too far. In time, I even came to realize that I was just as great a snob as my grandfather. The difference was that it was not for their incomes or their elegance that I honored people, but for their talent, intelligence and sensitivity. In short, I was not a money-and-manners snob, but an intellectual and moral snob.