

1. Childhood Memories

I was lucky several times in my life. First, I was born into a very poor family. This is very important in life to provide the right perspective. Second, I married a woman who stuck with me through thick and thin. And third, I was lucky enough to meet many people who I would have never dreamt of getting to know when I first arrived to Prague at the age of fifteen.

I spent most of my childhood in the country. When I was three or four years of age, we moved from Brodce to Královice, which was then a suburb of Brandýs nad Labem. My brother Jan and I spent a lot of time on the River Labe. We would cut poles from a hazel tree and catch tiny fish using a bent pin for a fishhook. When we had about a quarter of a bucket of them, an angler would come and buy them from us. He would give us four Kreuzer for them and since we were usually three boys, we would divide up the lot. My brother Jenda would get two Kreuzer and us two would get one each – one could buy a decent cone of sweets with that money.

In front of the house where we lived, at Moravcovi's, there was a small pond and when it rained, the water became cloudy and that's when we would catch the small fish using a rake. We would just grab at them and get three or four at a time.

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When I was about to turn six, my mother took me to school in Brandýs for enrolment, but they did not take me as I was three weeks short of being old enough to go to school. At home, I cried so much that two days later, mother took me back to the school principal. He said: "Well, if you want to go to school, then come." So, I practically started a year earlier, which turned out to be important.

During Easter, we would go rattling our rattles and ratchets at the Archduke Karl who was staying at the chateau and who later became the Emperor Karl I. We were a band of boys – about fifteen to twenty. Some had wheelbarrows and some older ones had ratchets. Us smaller ones only had small rattles. There were three "chiefs" who were leading the company.

When we started rattling below his window at six in the morning, the Archduke opened the window, threw us a Gulden coin and went back to sleep. Then, when it came to dividing up the money, since it was for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, the three "chiefs" kept a Gulden each and gave us, who were the youngest, a Kreuzer and the older ones got a two or three each. If we complained, they added a clip on the ear for good measure.

When we walked back from school across the Riding School, and the Emperor – he was still Archduke then – was riding a horse along with an officer, we would shout "arch-fart, arch-fart" at him. This was 1911 or 1912.

There was more than one Archduke, but the first of them, who was to become Emperor, was called Franz Ferdinand d'Este. He married a Duchess from the Czech aristocratic family of Chotek. Their chateau was in Konopiště, near Prague. However, in June 1914, he was assassinated in Sarajevo and Karl became heir to the throne.

Karl could speak Czech fairly well. After he got married in Vienna, he had another wedding in Stará Boleslav, because this was where the dragoons he used to serve were stationed. When they drove him from the station – there were very few cars then – he was in a carriage drawn by four pairs of white horses. On the bridge over Labe between Brandýs and Boleslav, the officers unhitched the horses and drew the carriage themselves up to the chateau. At home, we had a photograph in which one could see my brother sitting at the back of the carriage along with Pepík Klíšenský. My mother had bought the photograph because it was so funny to see these boys on the same carriage as the Archduke.

At the time of the wedding, the city put on a great show – there were coloured lights everywhere and we the children went out to watch them.

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When I was seven years old, we moved to Prague. My mother became the caretaker at the house of her sister who was called Carbochová. I have to mention that we had a model mother who was well-read for the time. Both our parents were Roman Catholic. Our mother was religious, but not a bigot and she led us towards God. Until this day I remember a rhyming prayer that all children used to learn: “My Guardian Angel, guard my little soul”. She also taught us another one that only we knew, which went: “I am a small and poor child, what is to become of me, when I grow up? I will become whatever the world will want me to be, like a weed on a fallow that no one will plough nor harrow. I will become whatever God wills.”

When we came to Prague, we lived in a single room. It was an extremely meagre situation and Jenda – who was born in 1900 – was twelve years old. Back then, there used to be only fields between Olšany and what is today Hotel Flora¹. On those fields, boys between six and seventeen years of age used to play cards and sometimes shoot. And sure enough, whenever we had a chance to get out of home, we were at Baklovka² with the big boys.

In the same building where we lived, there was a dairy shop that belonged to the Sahula family. Mrs. Sahulová could not count and when we used to deliver milk for them, we brought her the money and she would just say: “It is correct.” She did not know how to count the money. We soon found out. One could get a bag of peanuts for three Kreuzer then. In short, we used to cheat and our mother, having soon found out, said: “Children, we have to leave Prague. What would become of you here?” We moved back to Brodce nad Jizerou and I went to school there.

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When I was about eight, at Easter, we used to go kneel at the Holy Sepulchre in Brodce as guardians. At the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic, this role was taken over by the members of the Orel (Eagle) organisation who stood there with swords. However, we had to kneel there and we found the whole business quite dull. We had to be guardians for two hours at a time. Once, I was kneeling there with Pepík Šulců. There was frankincense at one

¹ Orlická 2, Praha 3. The building now houses a branch of the VZP insurance company.

² Around what is now Táboritská street, Praha 3.

of the altars nearby – the one that smells nice and smells even nicer when put on a hot stove. Sometimes we reached for some, but some young seminarian noticed and kicked us out of the church. In doing this, he risked leaving the Holy Sepulchre without guardians, but he also wrote our names down in the class book. At the end of the school semester, I got a bad grade for behaviour. Pepík Šulců would get one the next time – we used to take it in turn.

I was an altar boy then and I lost that position as well. During Mass, the altar boy on the right carries the wine. There is not much of it and it is used during elevation. The one who carried the wine always wanted to drink some of it, so we took turns. One Sunday, it would be me who carried the wine, and the next, it would be the son of doctor Prokůpek, who was incidentally also called Jaroslav. Pepík also used to be there. We always used to push each other when we all met in front of the altar. We all had to kneel there, but once it got so far that we started kicking each other and we soon started fighting in earnest. The priest saw us from the pulpit and before he booted us out of the church he took the linen tunics off us and then literally threw us out.

This was the first time in my life that I encountered favoritism. Pepík did not get a bad grade for behavior because he was the principal's nephew. Had the priest been smart enough, he would have spared us both the punishment, but he could not let me off. This was my first bad grade for behavior in that school year.

I got another bad grade that same year and this is how: at ten every morning we would be sent to the toilet and us boys used to compete at who could pee the farthest. We all stood at the door of the toilets and at that moment, the principal appeared and said: "What are you up to here?" The other boys ran away, but I had already taken aim so I peed on his pince-nez as he bent down, trying to get hold of me. Then I got a bad grade for behavior – for mischief.

My mother had to go to school and they explained it to her. Our mother was quite tolerant in this respect. She used to say, boys will be boys. Not once did I get a spanking for a bad grade for behavior.

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When I was eleven, I went to secondary school in Nové Benátky. It was five kilometers each way and I had to walk this distance every day in every kind of weather. For instance, if there was a lot of snow, the town children did not come to school, but we from the village walked the five kilometers.

When a group of boys walk together, they may not necessarily behave themselves. Wherever there was some fruit to pick, we picked it – there used to be three of us for the job. And once there was snow, we made snow angels – in short, we just rolled in the snow and came to school drenched. The teacher would say: "You must take your shoes off." Then he would dry our clothes and tell us what good boys we were of having come despite the snow. It was completely natural for us.

I have to say that I was a good student and I liked studying, but I did not like drawing as I was no good at it. I preferred to do geometry because I was good at it, but most of all I liked

history. We had a great teacher. The boys used to throw pellets at the metal stove and disturb the class. The teachers would get mad, but not him – he was very good-natured.

When the World War I began, the younger teachers went off to war. Our teacher, Mr. Putz, was already retired. He had a garden with apricot trees. He always used to tell us: “Boys, please don’t pick the apricots, let them ripen, I will give them all to you.”

Around that time, I got into trouble again, but I did not get a bad grade for behavior this time. It was Tycho de Brahe’s fault. He was a famous astronomer who once lived at the chateau in Benátky nad Jizerou and this is where he calculated which geographical parallel ran through the town. He also had a rod made out of lead to highlight it. All of this was fine, this was his profession. However, he also founded a vineyard there and so every year there was a grape harvest celebration at which our teacher, Mr. Dostál, gave a speech. The speech was the same every year and he used to read it from a tattered piece of paper. He always said what great wine grew there to this day.

We from the villages used to get soup at the local pub. Somebody carried a slice of bread with lard, others had some white pudding. I sometimes got some change from my godfather so I could buy myself salami. My father was a regular at his pub. His name was Kučera and he always gave me some extra salami so the other boys wanted me to buy it on their behalf too. I then got some of theirs. However, during the celebrations, they did not want to do that and we ended up fighting right in front of the people of the entire town. We also spilled a whole lot of wine in the process.

The next day at school, Mr. Svoboda, who was the main organizer of the celebrations, went to every classroom and said: “This is for the wine” and gave each one a smack. Jirka Kazimour protested: “Sir, I wasn’t there.” The teacher replied: “Alright, you got a smack that you did not deserve. Next time you are to be punished, say you have already got a smack for the wine.”

Back in the day, corporal punishment was common. At primary school, my mother said to the teacher: “Sir, if my boy needs a thrashing, just go ahead.” But once he beat me with the cane on the palm of my hand so badly that he cut a vein and blood started spurting. It was quite nasty. He quickly dressed it with his handkerchief and two days later, he came to our home. My mother told him: “As I said, you can punish him, but reasonably.” The teacher told her he punished me for lying, but it wasn’t true.

At the end of winter, it happened that all the windowpanes in the classroom were white with frost and on every one of them, somebody had scribbled “Vašata”. There were four windows in the room with four window panes, so “Vašata” was written sixteen times. The teacher observed: “Fools’ names, like fools’ faces, are often seen in public places” and told me to wipe it off. I told him: “Sir, it wasn’t me.” But he ordered me to wipe it off, so I took a sponge and wiped it off.

I sat down and said to Pepík: “I would be quite glad if ‘Vašata’ was written in every public place.” As we were giggling at this the teacher asked: “What did he tell you?” “He told me that he would be glad to see his name in every public place.” He then asked me: “Why would

you like that?" But I did not know why. I could not give a reason. What does a ten-year-old boy know? "I don't know, Sir." "You must know. If you'd like that, you have to know why." He split my hand for lying, although I wasn't lying, I didn't even deny having said it.

I remembered this episode some years later when I was driving from Marseilles to Paris. On every other pole along the road there was a poster advertising the "Byhrr" drink. This reminded me of my teacher Mr. Sedláček.

Some years later I was on a train going to see my mother. I found Mr Sedláček sitting in the second class compartment of the train. I said: "Hello, Mr Sedláček" to which he replied "It's Principal Sedláček, I am now the head of the secondary school in Mladá Boleslav." I excused myself: "Sorry, Sir."

Then he said, smiling: "Listen, Mr. Vašata, I think of you quite often – I find your advertisements interesting." I replied: "And do you remember that one time?" And I told him about my journey from Marseilles to Paris, how it reminded me of him and of fools' names in public places. Embarrassed, he said: "Sometimes one uses inappropriate expressions." After that we didn't speak of it anymore.

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We had an inspiring mother, but our father was much less so. My father was a mill-hand and often he acted as the foreman at a mill. Especially in wartime it was illegal to grind grain and he was an expert. It was very important for the foreman to dress the millstone correctly. In short, people travelled far and wide to him because he knew how to grind grain.

When my father was foreman we never lacked anything. We always had plenty of flour for buchta rolls, koláče, and bábovka cakes. Our mother was an excellent housekeeper. She would spend all day in the kitchen. Our breakfast was simple – a cup of coffee with a slice of bread. Then there was lunch and in the afternoon, a snack.

We were six children, but at least another five boys regularly came to our home for bábovka or koláč. Mother would only keep half a sack of coarse meal for the pig we kept because within a fortnight, someone would come around and bring another sack of flour, or a sack of meal, or a sack of dark flour that was used for feeding geese. My father was warned three times for having been found grinding grain without official permission (probably for our use at home). When it happened the fourth time, the gendarmes came and took him to a jail in Boleslav.

It happened during the First World War and my father claimed that he couldn't be drafted because he had an "obšít" (Abscheid). It was an official document which proved he had finished his army service and therefore was exempt from further service. However, in the later stages they also took older people. One day they came for him and the next he was already at the Italian front. Since he was a skilled mill worker they thought he would make a good baker. Sure enough, he knew how to bake bread and so he was posted in the officers' mess.

He was used to drinking beer – like everyone who worked at the mill. On Sundays, after lunch, he would drink a litre or even two of beer. My mother only had a sip and he also gave the older children a little taste. Then he smoked two cigarillos and drank his beer. Mother made him some good-quality coffee. For us children, she made coffee out of rye grains, but she always added some proper coffee to make it taste better.

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Now I would like to say one thing. When it came to food in our household we never used to divide things up. There were always enough cakes and doughnuts so they belonged to everyone. Once, when my father was in the war, my mother made doughnuts from the last bit of flour we had left – I remember there were thirty five of them. There was a POW camp nearby in Milovice which held Russian and Italian prisoners of war. They were fed so poorly that they had to go begging for a piece of bread in the surrounding villages. When they came to our home my mother gave them doughnuts, but she also gave them the rest that were meant for us – in half an hour, they were all gone.

This was near the end of the war in 1918. The people in charge of the military camp were so stupid that the commanding officer ordered his men to sow groat on a large field. To obtain groat, one has to sow barley first and then make groat from it. Groat is a finished product, it does not germinate. The soldiers tried to explain this to their commander, but he ordered them to do it anyway. So, they sowed groat. People far and wide knew what a blockhead he was.

But I want to come back to how our mother gave away all our doughnuts. I sometimes say I witnessed the greatest gift of all when mother gave captured soldiers her food and also the food of her own children. Jenda was the eldest – he had also been drafted – then there was Mařka whom we also used to call Mářna or Mářnička. Anička was the youngest – she wasn't even four, but mother gave away her doughnuts too as well as those of my brothers Pepík and Frantík. God knows if she wasn't thinking of our own soldiers, who maybe also had to beg for food.

I don't think it's significant when someone who is worth a hundred million gives away twenty million for some cause or another. That's no real gift – even if they only kept two million. But to give away all the doughnuts, even those meant for one's own children, that's the greatest gift of all.

This is what I lived through and that is my opinion on life. Once we gave them away we didn't have anything left – we didn't own anything – so we went hungry. The whole family was hungry.

In the house next to us lived an employee of a large farm who was responsible for guarding the field of potatoes right below our windows. We were desperate for food, so I took a basket and a hoe and went to dig up some potatoes. Two days later, I had to go again because we didn't have anything else to eat than those potatoes.

The overseer saw me and said: "You're right to be digging on the headland." Headland is the area at the end of a field where the plough turns. I picked one row on the headland and was

digging there, but the row wasn't very long so I was prepared to start digging another one. But he told me: "You're doing it right. Other people do it at night over there beyond the hill and dig a little here and a little there. When we're hungry, what else is there to do?"

Since then my family would say "the master of the house will sort it out."