
Breslau

A child of the turn of the century who returns to his memories in the last quarter of that century, the son of a professor and himself a professor, what should he discuss? How it was then? But what aspect of those times? Certainly not simply the things that flare up in memory from earliest childhood: the red roundness of an Edam cheese, a spinning fan in the window on Afföller Street in Marburg, the fire engine pulled by heavy stallions thundering along the Shoe Bridge in Breslau. Such early remembrances are ridiculously intimate and irrelevant because of their very communicativeness. People today are more interested in early memories in which the progress of technical civilization reveals itself: the transition from gas lighting to electric lighting, the first automobiles. What earthshaking jolts those automobiles gave! Later, during the First World War, I was allowed to ride with an uncle in his army truck for a stretch of about a hundred kilometers. Breathtaking! The first cinema, the first telephone in my parents' home with its turning crank (number 7756—why does one remember such a thing?), my first bicycle—one could still see three-wheelers for adults—the first Zeppelin over Breslau, the news of the sinking of the *Titanic*, which, based on what I snatched from my parents' tabletalk, absorbed me much more deeply than the Balkan Wars: "If peoples out in the backlands of Turkey want to slug it out. . . ." Finally the outbreak of the war, my boyish zeal and what struck me as the highly unusual earnestness of my father. One scene at the dinner table made an especially deep impression on me. As my father argued that the loss of life in the sinking of the *Titanic* was

“like a whole village going down,” I rejected the comparison contemptuously with: “Oh, well, just a bunch of farmers. . . .” I had to apologize to our maid who was from the country and was just then serving us—a lesson I never forgot.

A breath of Prussian military tradition also blew over me as a child. During summer vacations in Misdroy, I was active every year as an eager soldier and strategist in a “beach company” that received its marching orders from officers of the general staff. At that time, following 1912, I was above all interested in “strategy,” due to a childlike inclination to the art of the Napoleonic field marshal and to the military studies of the German Wars of Liberation that were then filling the newspapers. People said I had an officer’s career in front of me—until I was pulled away from this by dreams of the inner man, poetry, and theater.

Also very childlike was my participation in the centennial exhibition arranged in Breslau to commemorate the Wars of Liberation. For a thirteen-year-old this was above all a confirmation of patriotic pride. A special satisfaction for me was that a piece from our old garden, a sandstone urn in the classical style, was shown on the exhibition grounds. Also not forgotten is how I became acquainted in the neighboring Rummel Square with the first cake baked from coconut fat—a piece of German colonial propaganda. Given the Silesia of that time, swimming in butter and eggs, the coconut fat was unusual, no, crazy!

Another slowly entangling network of relationships that formed me was that of the school. It was made up of schoolmasters of the old stamp, who no longer actually gave thrashings but who did throw chalk at the heads of inattentive children and loved to raise lumps on their heads. School was about wonderful games for the learning of foreign languages. It was about teachers, often so unusual with their tics, their ways of speaking, and especially their vulnerabilities.

I was deeply moved by the first funeral for a teacher who had died in the war. On this occasion the headmaster, that fearful man, was overwhelmed by emotion. Other puzzling phenomena were encountered for the first time, and they call up their own reflections—for example, a disagreement between two teachers over whether religion originated in fear. The pluck of the hard-boiled Enlightenment thinker who represented this thesis impressed me more than his somewhat bigoted opponent, who in any case corrupted almost everything with his pretentious Greek classes. Then the war closed in on our age group

too. The highest classes dwindled in response to increased draft calls. Fatality reports continuously came in from the front. These were the hunger years, a time of revolution, graduation, and the beginning of university studies. All this passed by as in a daydream.

When I began my university studies in the spring of 1918, I was eighteen years old and anything but mature—a bashful, clumsy, inwardly turned kid. Nothing pointed to *philosophy*. I loved Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks just as much as the classical German writers, and I was especially fond of lyric poetry. But during my school years I had read neither Schopenhauer nor Nietzsche. Breslau in the war years was a quiet place, a province in a nearly patriarchal sense, more Prussian than Prussia, and far from the fronts.

My father was a pharmaceutical chemist, a significant researcher, a self-conscious, accomplished, energetic, and capable personality—a man who drastically embodied authoritarian pedagogy in the worst way but with the best of intentions. With body and soul he was a natural scientist, yet his interests were broad. I remember that once during the war I had to go to his institute to get a wire frame—Bohr’s 1913 atomic model—for a presentation he was to hold at home for a circle of people. Another time I had to read for him a paper by a French chemist on the theory of benzene rings, as I recall. He knew no French. But on another account, quotations from Horace, he was superior to me. (So far had the schools declined even in my youth!) My inclinations to literature and theater and on the whole to the least profitable arts he disapproved of from the bottom of his heart. I was in no way clear in my own mind about what I wanted to study. Only that it would be the “human sciences.” That was beyond question.

If one began, as a bashful eighteen-year-old, very much on one’s own, to muddle around in the work of academics, one quickly found oneself downright lost, dissipating one’s energies hopelessly. German literature with Theodor Siebs, Romance languages with A. Hilka, history with Holtzmann and Ziekursch, art history with Patzak, music history with Max Schneider, Sanscrit with O. Schrader, Islamic with Praetorius—on all these I nibbled. Unfortunately, though, not on classical philology. The influence of my school in this area was minimal. There, too, was Wilhelm Kroll, a brilliant and witty storyteller whom I admired greatly, a friend of my parents. He took an interest in me and defended my scholarly interests to my father, just as years later the physicist

Clemens Schaefer, himself something of a philologist, was to defend me.

Psychology had only the briefest hold on me. This came about as follows: Full of zeal and curiosity, I systematically put together my class schedule according to the catalogue offerings. "Systematically" meant "take as many courses as possible." And so once upon an early (7:00 A.M.) April morning in 1918—an undernourished city kid who was still not needed as a soldier—I found myself in the psychology department. This, I thought to myself, is going to be interesting. I was thinking deep thoughts about Shakespeare's and Dostoevski's profound knowledge of human nature. Then there entered a professor in black habit, clearly a Catholic priest, into an auditorium where whole rows of benches were decorated with similar black habits. He held forth with great eloquence in a language nearly incomprehensible to me—it was Swabian. It took me a long time to guess that the *hemir* I kept hearing about was in fact a chemist. Then, after what seemed like a few hours, the professor made a few observations taken from the child psychology of William Stern. What he said struck me as strange. I screwed up my courage after the period and asked him whether he had not gotten things backwards. He was taken aback but referred to his notes once again and said, "Oh, yes, you are correct!" That was too much for me, that an eighteen-year-old should be instructing a professor, so I stole away. The professor was Matthias Baumgartner, a brilliant student of medieval philosophy who, for reasons related to the concordat with the Catholic Church, was compelled to give lectures in psychology even though he understood nothing of the subject.

My liberation from my parents was due to a book by a middling literary figure: Theodor Lessing's *Europa und Asien*, a spirited and sarcastic work of cultural criticism that bowled me over.¹ At last I had found something else in the world besides Prussian efficiency, performance, and discipline. Later, at a higher level, this initial orientation would be strengthened when I encountered similar cultural criticism in the circle of the poet Stefan George. Of course the dissolution of my frame of values that was the result of my early education also manifested itself in a new political orientation. This much was required

1. References cited by Gadamer will be retained in the original German if they have not been translated into English. If they have been translated, then the English title will be given and the German omitted. [tr.]

by the appetite we had in those years for finding contradictions. Meeting representatives of the Social-Democratic, Democratic, and Conservative parties—their names are forgotten today but were then noteworthy—meant above all a confrontation with the art of political speech and with democratic-republican ideas that had been foreign to my school and my parents' house. The extent to which the early influence of my parents remained operative was questionable. Noteworthy was that one day—I was still a freshman—Thomas Mann's *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* came into my hands and I found it wonderful. A little later the second part of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in a similar manner awoke in me sympathy for the judge Wilhelm and, unsuspectingly, for historical continuity. Today I would say that Hegel held the upper hand over Kierkegaard.

The first book of philosophy I picked up was Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in a paperback edition published by Kehrbach. It was in my father's library. In his time when one took the Ph.D. one still had to pass a small examination called the *philosophicum rigorosum*, even if one was a natural scientist. For this he had crammed Kant, the natural thing to do in Marburg (and he was coached by the young Albert Görland). Thus was I initiated to philosophy during my first academic vacation. I really brooded over the book, but not the slightest understandable thought slipped out of it.

I was also on bad terms with the university library. One day, bashful first-semester student as I was, I screwed up my courage and put in a request at the university for a recommended book, Cassirer's *Freiheit und Form*. When I went back to inquire the next day, without a word the sullen, one-armed lending librarian threw my call slip at me, embellished with a mysterious cipher. That sufficed nearly to frighten me to death.

But still I stuck with the philosophers. I did not, however, remain for long with the solemn lay preacher Eugen Kühnemann, who with a splendidly intonated voice and a fulminating rhetoric introduced me to the secrets of the "logical squares." His style was to me what the rhetorical pomp of Protagoras was to Socrates. It sounded too beautiful. I was dazed but not taught by it. In contrast were the polished presentations of Richard Höningwald and the tortuous chains of argument of Julius Guttmann. All three were neo-Kantians. Although I was still a third-semester student, an exception was made and I was admitted to Höningwald's extraordinarily well-conducted seminar. I still recall

what the seminar was about and how I “distinguished” myself: I could not grasp why the relation between meaning and word should be different from the relation between meaning and sign. But anyway, with the first intrusion into philosophy all of the signals were put into place. They pointed toward Marburg.