

Excerpts from the Memoirs  
of  
Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”  
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Translation by Daniel H. Setzer  
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## Childhood in Fähr / Lobbendorf

We children in those times, that is to say we working-class children, were good playmates, even if there were a few exceptions. In general we got along with each other very well. However, there were some cases where friendships flew out the window. We were a mix of good and bad kids and sometimes unpleasant situations arose that were marked by hate, meanness and perfidy.

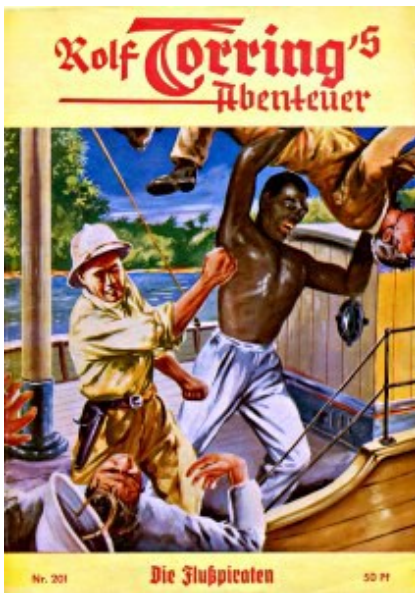
I had developed a very close friendship with the Scheffel kids. In the garden behind the Scheffel's home we were allowed to build a clubhouse. It was really just a shack made out of orange crates, but it was our castle. We made it our home and always felt good there. No one else was allowed to enter. In addition there was some unused land across Vulkanstraße facing an apartment block where we and some other kids dug out a cave. We dug it in such a way that it could be closed off and there were supports inside to prevent a collapse in case the ground shifted. In these 'Hallowed Halls' we lived our young lives full of romanticism and a lust for adventure. It was also full of dangers that we did not pay the slightest attention to. We defended this world against everyone, but especially against our parents who did not at all like this sort of game.

As a really close-knit club, we had also become blood-brothers. The blood-brother ritual was sacred to us as it was to many other clubs. Other clubs had formed in the neighborhood, but they were not always very nice clubs. Often they would battle, not only to measure one's strength against the other, but also to control territory. We weren't nice little kids, we were more what one might today call a gang of street urchins. Our behavior wasn't always child-like, we could be evil, mean and treacherous even toward grown-ups. It is just that we did not have the power to do much damage like gangs do today. We weren't 'programmed' for it. There was no television with gory images, no brutal slasher movies, inhuman depictions. We did have access to a lot of trashy books, as the adults called them, but we saw them otherwise. We found these books to be full of exciting descriptions, often of the Wild West, like the stories of Karl May which were too expensive for us. There were also adventure stories and murder mysteries that we devoured without having them turn us into dangerous monsters. These books went from hand to hand and fueled a lively trader market that was particularly active in the schoolyard.

This literature could also be obtained from a bookseller's shop in Lindenstraße that was run by two elderly sisters. Even though they weren't truly children's books, not the Westerns and certainly not the murder mysteries, we read them anyway with great enthusiasm. Included in this were the 'penny books' like the "Rolf Torrings Adventures" that often took place in Africa. Or, there were the bizarre stories of "Sarrasanis Circus Stories" and out of the Wild West came, "Tom Mix and his White Stallion," which would later make its way to the silver screen. We liked the Indian stories of "Sitting Bull" and also "Buffalo Bill." Among the murder mysteries were John Kling's "The Avenger of the Dispossessed," a sort of forerunner of Jerry Cotton in modern times and there was also Sherlock Holmes. There were also a lot more trashy novels that we devoured when we could get our hands on them.



*Lindenstraße*



Sometimes we would get our hands on them in a very unsavory manner. The dear elderly sisters who operated the bookshop would sometimes be overwhelmed by hordes of dear little children who would descend on their shop en masse then make use of the ensuing chaos to swipe books off the shelf. The good old days were not always so good and the dear children were not always so dear. Swiping books was also seen as a test of courage. Frequently, it was the older boys who pushed the younger kids into doing this sort of thing. New kids would also pull this stunt to gain a reputation in the neighborhood. So, we were even doing this sort of stuff in the old days. Nowadays the old folk don't want to acknowledge how we behaved then. They want you to believe that it was a good and ideal world that we lived in. It was by no means so, it was very much otherwise.

The dear little kids also played games that were not without some danger. Particularly loved was Indians. The background for this game was the many adventure magazines about Indians and books, but above all the movie halls which were flooded with American Westerns. The littlest kids didn't get to go to the movies, but the older boys did. They learned a great deal about the Old West from the silent movies and about the brutality of those days. This was not a good thing. They didn't just take away stories from the movies, sought to put what they saw into practice in the Indian game. This game was much more intense than 'Cops and Robbers.' Here kids would be tied to stakes and tortured, not very seriously of course, but they would also be shot at with bows and arrows which could lead to serious consequences. In this game girls would also participate taking the role of squaws. It would give the boys an excuse to actually touch them.

In addition to the more or less nice games and not-so-nice games there were other childhood activities that bordered on the criminal. In Vulkanstraße there was one kid, a schoolmate of mine, who was already beginning his career as an extortionist. This hopeful young offspring of a working-class family was Karl O., whose talent was to find ways to get information out of his fellow students that could then be used to blackmail them. He made pocket money like this or traded his silence for goods. All of us had some 'dirt' to hide, like pilfering change from mother's cookie jar. Nearly every household had a collector's cup somewhere in the cupboard that used to contain some awful drink, but was kept for its beauty and its usefulness for other purposes! They were all accessible to children's dirty little hands. Kurt knew this and would use the theft as a threat to the kids. Since it was almost always true, unfortunately, the kids were easy prey to blackmail. In order to pay Karl off the kids would have to hit their parent's cookie jar again, which gave Karl new reason to extort even more money from his victims. Dear little Karl was a jerk who conducted his 'business' with a rotten, ice cold demeanor that boded well for a successful criminal career. I don't know what became of him. One day he simply disappeared from our world when his family moved to Blumenthal. Peace returned and we were done with this common little bugger.

One day our playing around with bows and arrows resulted in an accident that had a truly awful outcome. The bows we used were homemade and we also made the arrows. We were trying to imitate the Indians and we made free use of these weapons. On this day one of my best friends, Dietrich Viole was hit in the eye and his eye was shot out. That was horrible, but it got worse. In spite of intensive medical care, he lost sight in the other eye also and became totally blind. All of this due to those stupid bows and arrows. In spite of everyone's efforts, the shooter of that arrow was never identified. It

remained a mystery forever. On the day it happened the kids were running wild and arrows were flying all over the place so no one could figure out which arrow happened to shoot poor Didi Virole in the eye. Our parents immediately forbid all of us to play with bows and arrows. It was not long before bows and arrows again appeared in the kid's hands and the sorrow and misfortune was quickly forgotten.

Didi's parents later opened a vegetable stand in Gerhard Rohlf's Straße in Vegesack next to Herbert Eimen's grocery store. Didi went to live in a home for the blind. It was a ghastly fate for the boy as well as for his parents.

Along with the Scheffel kids, my circle of friends expanded to include Helmut Lankenau, Karl-Heinz Garrels, Helmut Peters, Fritz Facklam, Heinz Dombrowski, Günter (Guschi) Hoffman, Bernd Tienken and others from the neighborhood and school. Also in that group was my very good friend, Friedel Esser, who became the headwaiter at the Strandlust Hotel after the war.



*German Boys in 1930 Playing Rough Indian Games*

Around this time my mother tried to get me interested in gymnastics, because she was never comfortable with my low grades in school for gym. She signed me up for the Hammersbecker Gymnastics Club. All of her efforts were for naught. I showed up a few times then it went by the wayside. The main reason is that I got teased there. After that I lost all interest in the club and never went back. On the other hand when I joined the Kinderfreunden [*Literally: Children Friends. The children's club associated with the Socialist Party. The Roten Falken (Red Falcons) was the group for older boys.*] I was much more at home. I thought everything they did was loads of fun and I really liked it. I was never teased there.

At any rate, I was never an Adonis. I was very self-conscious about my physical appearance, my red hair and freckles. My outward appearance was not at all impressive. My build did not make me happy. In my own circle of friends it was never a problem, but when I got into strange surroundings, it became a big problem. It was different in the Socialists youth clubs, I was immediately accepted and welcomed. In the gymnastics club I failed using the gym equipment and that gave the other kids an opening for scorn and mockery. Later in the soccer club I had a problem of another sort that was related to my father's position in the club administration. That caused me a lot of trouble because I had to work with a lot of enmity directed toward me. A lot of it came from 'Fat Heinemann' from Hafenstrasse, son of the Heinemann furniture dealers who had their home and store there.

Among the many activities that were part of my free time was the fulfillment of my gardening duties in my little patch in the communal garden behind our house and also the care and feeding of the rabbits. Often those duties were supplemented with my mother's efforts because sometimes I would be lazy. When I did work in the garden I really enjoyed it and threw myself into the task, even the weeding. It made me happy to see how the seeds we bought grew to beautiful flowers and how 'my' strawberries and raspberries grew into fruit with such a wonderful taste. In spite of my periodic laziness I was very proud of 'my garden patch' that I had worked myself, though not without the good ministrations of my mother.

My special delight was my rabbits whose population grew not only by 'normal' methods but also by the addition of additional varieties such as Angora and others. There were frequent surprises when baby rabbits would suddenly appear in the cages. At first I marveled at the event, but soon came to understand where baby rabbits came from. The new arrivals would engender lively trading sessions with other rabbit fanciers that helped increase the variety of rabbits I raised. I always became troubled when the talk turned to the mention of roast rabbit. That meant that one of my well cared for rabbits was about to be culled from my cages and slaughtered. It hurt me, but I understood that this is what they were being raised for, to provide our family with a good roast. When the time came my father would select one of my rabbits and stuff it in a sack to be carried off to a butcher or an acquaintance. When he returned, mother would be ready to prepare a tasty roast. In spite of all of the pain I felt leading up to the sacrifice, I had to admit that the roast rabbit casserole really tasted good.

My circle of friends eventually moved on from blood brothers to real, true friends that meant a great deal to me. Among them was Rolf Kappelmann whose big brother was a concert violinist. Their mother was a war widow who had a little grocery shop in the Hammersbecker quarter of Schillerstraße. Rolf and I remained friends when we were in the Jungvolk, but unfortunately the war split us up. Who were the others? The top student in the class, the mad mathematician, Ferdinand Erstling, good old Heinz Sosna, dear Heinz Segelken from Lobbendorf, and last but not least the son of farmer Semken who invited me to his farm near the Lobbendorfer Gate near the entry to the Vulkan yards. When I was there in the evenings after the milking, I would get a wonderful pitcher of absolutely fresh milk.

As I said, I was hardly an Adonis, but I was not the only one who had a problem with their physical image. I had at least one fellow sufferer who also had red hair and a face full of freckles. He wasn't as fat as I, but his lanky figure was not very impressive either. We were companions in misery because we both went to the same school and both had to endure hazing and teasing by the other kids. His name was Heinz Gördes and his parents lived in a single dwelling in Lindenstraße. They were good friends with my parents. Heinz had a lovely sister. I was hopelessly in love with her, but she didn't have the slightest interest in me. I often went to the Gördes house when my parents were out at their moonlighting jobs. The friendship between the two women was cemented when they discovered that they were both originally from the Rheinland. They would often meet to be homesick together. Mrs. Gördes was from Neuwied and also came to Aumund after the First World War. Her husband had been a soldier in the Air Ship Corps. He had great stories to tell about Zeppelins and flights over England, especially London.

Another good friend was Herbert Maykowski who was with me in the Socialists youth groups. There was also good old Guschi (Gustav) Hoffmann. After the war he worked with Heinz Ehrhard [*Ehrhard (1909-1979) was a much beloved comedian, musician and entertainer.*] when he was just starting out. We ran into Ehrhard once when he was touring in Walle.

Another school chum who had a great career was Erwin Krebs. He was already known in school to be a good singer. Later he became a soloist with the Bremen Theater Chorus.

I will never forget the children of the Paulenz family, Karl and Maria. The people in this working-class family were dedicated Social Democrats who were pursued after 1933. The father and the older brother were imprisoned for a long time. Our activities in the Red Falcons were carefully followed and reported upon.





*Blumenstraße at the Corner of Grenzstraße*

But my dearest, best and most loyal friend was Karl Jungbluth. We were closer than brothers. We were immediate neighbors with him in Grenzstraße and me in Blumenstraße. As friends we were devoted to one another. During school holidays we liked to take long bicycle trips through Westfalen and into the Rhineland as far as Wiesbaden, and we had wonderful adventures on those trips. I am sure this friendship would have survived everything and endured event to today if Kalli had not been killed in that damned war. Even he, the son of a staunch Socialist, had to give his life for a Reich that he hated. After we got out of high school he went to work at the Vulkan shipyards as an apprentice to learn the same trade as his father, that of shipbuilder. Then the war came along! The war where most of the boys born in 1920/1921 died for Führer, Folk and Fatherland.

Now to talk about Kalle Paulenz and the Paulenz family. We got together when we both joined the Socialist children's club. Later, as we got older, we graduated up to the Red Falcons which was led by Kalle's older brother and sister. Here is where something startling happened. I, the tone-deaf kid, yielded to the urging of the two Paulenz brothers and joined the Red Falcon's band. I took up the flute, and it was not too difficult. At first my practicing was pretty hard on my mother and the neighbors, but they all put up with it and eventually my melodies became recognizable. Playing music for the sake of music was not so great, but I did enjoy being in the band and marching with the other players. We were filled with enthusiasm and were very proud on those occasions when we could play and march with the Socialist Party and the Reichbanners. The Socialist children and youth groups were almost always present in spite of the possible danger that could also engulf the children. Our enthusiasm prevented us from holding back, nor could the fears of our mothers. We felt it our duty to support the party. We were not pressured to show up, we did it willingly. If we were not actually making music in the drum and bugle corps, then we sang along with the grown-ups the battle songs of the worker's movement, which were part of our very being.

In addition to my practicing inside of my four walls, I would also go to the Paulenz home every week and practice with them. With my flute packed in my carrying case, I would then go back home and proudly demonstrate to my mother what I had just learned. So now this apparently unmusical kid was actually making "Music," and I was OK with that. I was having fun.

## **Our Family Grows - Perhaps**

Then something happened that I could not understand. Suddenly my mother found the sound of my flute to be unbearable. That wasn't the only thing that surprised me. I also noted that she looked different, and also seemed to be getting fatter. Finally the moment came when I was let in on the secret, namely that soon I would no longer be alone, I would be having a little brother or sister. There was no talk of the stork arriving. My mother knew that I had long ago stopped believing in that fairy tale. This revelation was a considerable surprise to me and it took a while to get used to it. It meant that soon I would no longer have the undivided love of my mother all to myself. I would have to share it with another creature that would always be around me. That was a problem for me, but so was the idea that such an old lady like my mother would become a mother again. In those days a woman with a nearly grown son was considered to be an old woman. Only young women had children, and if they had more than one, they all came at the same time, one after another.

My mother tried to make it clear to me that her love for me would not diminish, it would never change. She insisted that everything would be wonderful when another kid arrived, both for her and for me. It had always been her wish that another child would come along after I had reached a certain age. She was very happy that her wish was coming true and she wanted us all to celebrate the coming event. Slowly, I began to think that maybe it would be nice to have a sibling, a sister would be preferable and not just because my mother wanted one. A sister seemed a better choice to my mind than a brother. It seemed like we had to wait a long time for the big day, but there was no hurrying things. My impatience grew more intense when I saw my mother under the weather. It seemed like she felt worse and worse each day, and she had to spend a lot of time in bed.

Something happened to worsen the situation and led to a serious emotional trauma for my mother. The increasing difficulties with the pregnancy meant that my mother was becoming unable to do her normal household tasks. Fortunately, a good friend stepped in to help out. She was willing to take care of us. My mother was very grateful for her help in keeping her two 'men' going. Dora was from Grohn and was the wife of the mailman. She did everything around our house that needed doing. My parents were friends of the couple and remained friends with them. She did not seem to mind the distance she had to travel from Grohn to Aumund. In those days it was not a problem to walk those distances. There were no buses and only occasionally would one have a bicycle to use.

It was a Sunday morning and Dora was with us to help out with Sunday dinner. In the afternoon her husband was coming to have coffee with us then walk Dora home. Dora was in the kitchen and my father was there also to help with the preparation. This 'help' became rather personal. My mother got up from her bed for some reason, possibly because she thought something was not quite right, and she went to the kitchen. What she saw there must have been an awful shock. She found her best friend in a very compromising situation with her husband, my father. At that point a fierce quarrel ensued. My always impulsive mother flew into a rage, which was understandable given what she had just witnessed in her own kitchen. She immediately threw her, up to that point, best girlfriend out of the house and ended their friendship forever. Mother also forbade Dora to ever step foot in our house again. She

would have loved to have thrown her husband out of the house at the same time, but that did not happen.

The loud arguing on a quiet Sunday morning meant that all of the neighbors would have had to have heard it all. That was not good but it could not be avoided. It was the case that every family sooner or later would have a similar ruckus. There were several common causes, most had to do with too much alcohol consumption on the part of the husband, but just as often the cause was philandering on the part of him or her. It was hardly an uncommon occurrence. So now it was the Mork's turn to have a row. The neighbors went back to their own lives. They gossiped about us for a few days then the topic was as good as forgotten.

When all of this was going on I was in my room intensely concentrating on my erector set. I heard the loud voices but could not figure out right away what was going on. I soon realized that something had happened between my father and our beloved Aunt Dora. Who the guilty party was, who led who astray was not at all clear. Most likely they both shared some blame. Dora was a very attractive and lively woman with a nice figure. My father was not bad looking and made a noticeable impression on women. He was no a prude. Whether this hanky-panky was a real love affair, or just spontaneous impulse was never known for sure. It is possible that the beginnings of this situation had its roots at some earlier date.

The worst part was that my mother discovered all this when she was at her weakest point and now she was near collapse, and all this just before she was to give birth. She did not want to have anything to do with her husband. Things were very cold between them, and I suffered from it also. I did not know how to act and who I could talk to. Not to mention problems getting fed, something to drink and being clothed. Fortunately, Frau Braubohm in our building, came to our aid and took over the basic household tasks during these difficult days for my mother.

It wasn't long after this that my mother went into labor. A young, pretty, redheaded midwife from the neighborhood came to the house. She was so cute and prim and neat that, scallywag that I was, I immediately fell hopelessly in love with her. Not the least of the reasons that I found her so attractive was that she had the same red hair as I did. I thought that it would have been a terrible burden for her like it was for me. I didn't know any better at the time.

The two women got along very well, and the relationship continued after the birth. It was a nice, healthy relationship that did my mother good.

The birth took place in our house with the help of the skillful midwife without any complications. But the baby came into the world still-born. Over were the wishes and dreams for another child. There would be no brother, no sister for me. The worst was that my mother would have no little creature to pet and care for. It was just a dead, empty being. This and the previous shock were too much for my mother and she suffered a breakdown. She took a very long time to recover from it. A bad psychological result was that she harkened back to the horrible curse that my nasty, bigoted Aunt Marie hurled at her all those years ago. My mother was now convinced that the awful curse was a evil reality that she would have to live with forever. She was never able to shake free of that idea and it stayed with her right up to the time of her premature death.

It would have taken even longer for her to recover her stability, but for her sister, Aunt Anni. She left Hamm shortly after the still-birth to stay with her sister so that she would not be alone. She stayed with us for several months. Her husband, Uncle Richard, along with Willi junior were taken care of during this time by the grandmother, Oma Briem.



Aunt Anni was not only a physical help around the house. She also had to deal with her brother-in-law after she had learned from my mother what had transpired in the kitchen with her girlfriend. Aunt Anni was not real thrilled with my father and had a difficult time with him just as I would have when I got older. She is totally responsible for freeing my mother of the nagging thought that the still-birth was related to the upset she had on that tumultuous Sunday morning.

Aunt Anni and the midwife spoke with the doctor who came to the house after the still-birth. The doctor was of the opinion that the baby was already dead for quite some time before the birth. My mother admitted that for quite a while she had not felt any movement, but didn't want to believe that the child inside her had died. It was all an unfortunate complication in an unpleasant situation. At that time a birth was a very uncertain event, there were not all of the options that we have today. Only occasionally would pregnant women go to the doctor. In any case he would only listen for a heartbeat, little more. Women did not like going to the doctor anyway, they were ashamed to stand naked before them, much less lay down. In many respects those were very different times.

It was Aunt Anni that got my mother and my father talking to one another again, with the result that things gradually got better between them. My mother forgave my father his 'weakness' and shifted all of the blame on Dora, the seductress, the sole guilty party. Dora was uncategorically dead to her and she did not want to see or hear of her ever again. She was a viper, a snake and mother only wished her ill.

## **Unemployment**

The family drama played out before my father was laid off, before he joined the ranks of the unemployed. It was good that my mother had time to regain her equilibrium so that she was able to grapple with the misfortune in a way she saw fit. In spite of all of their hopes and opinions, my father, too, was laid off and the ironworks were shut down cold.

The dream of him one day becoming a Master Iron Worker was gone. All of those dreams had to be buried. My father had to get in line at the unemployment office to get his little stipend. His way no longer led to the gates of the Vulkan Shipyards, it led to the unemployment office in Lobbendorfer Pohl.

The problem for my parents was how to get out of this mess, how to make basic household expenses and rent. This had to be done taking into consideration that there would be no jobs available for the foreseeable future. My father was hit harder by all of this than my mother, because for him this was the second time that a career collapsed around him that looked as though it was going to assure his future. He had never figured on being unemployed. He thought that the shipyard would keep staff on to maintain the iron works operation in anticipation of the day when things got better, and then he would still have a chance to advance to the level of Master. Once again his whole world fell apart. He became listless, resigned and depressed. It was a good thing that my mother had gotten her spunk back and was ready to take the reins in her own hands again. She did not want to be defeated. She wanted to get her family through this tough time, she did not want to fall victim to this national disaster. And she did it too. It was thanks to her that the problems and worries did not overrun us, and that my father began a new career that he liked very much.

My mother attacked problems head-on and with vigor. Once she had a purpose and then a clear goal in front of her eyes, she would drive hard to reach the goal, and usually did. In this respect she was better than my father, because he would let himself get caught up with the 'ifs' and 'buts' and that just multiplied the problems. He was only like that with household matters. Outside the home he was decisive and willing to act.

She had an idea based upon a measure she had already taken before my father was released from his job at the Vulkan shipyard. Mother was skeptical from the start about father's prospects at the shipyard once she saw the first layoffs.

She had started her plans with the bar belonging to the sports club that father belonged to, the "Aumunder Sporthaus" in Grenzstraße. These overtures were done much to the dismay of my father because, given his position with the sports club, he did not think it seemly for her to be involved with the sports bar.

This bar had a large ballroom and it was heavily used on weekends for dances. During the 'Ball Season' it was always packed. It also served as a theater for guest appearances by touring companies. For example there were the groups from Bavaria who came to showcase Bavarian folklore with their farces as well as tragic hunting tales, scary stories about poachers and earthy comedies.

A sports bar for soccer fans had a lot to do on game days, as did all of the other bars near the playing fields. The concessionaires who ran these establishments changed fairly often. That was quite normal since they were always trying to better their positions by moving up to another business. This bar was run by the Esswein family, a husband and wife. They were very active and hard working. Thanks to my father's work with the sports club, he got to know and be friends with the couple.

One day Frau Esswein confessed to my father that she felt she had no skill in dealing with the events in the ballroom. She didn't feel like she had the aptitude to arrange the buffets and oversee the waiter's billing of the customers. In addition she had a hard time finding and managing the dance bands. She had had several bad experiences, and was looking for someone she could trust to take over those duties. She asked my mother if she knew two people who might be interested in taking on the work. My mother thought it over for a bit then went back to Frau Esswein and told her that she had found the perfect people for the job, namely she herself and her husband! Mother also mentioned that in the case of her husband's possible unemployment, he would also be available to take over other duties if needed.

So it happened that the clever and forward-looking Frau Mork was hired by the Essweins. My father for managing the buffet and my mother for managing the dance bands, and when possible also the hat check. My father learned of his 'good luck' only after my mother had sealed the deal. Once again, there was nothing for him to do but make the best of it, even though he grumbled about it quite a bit at first.

What would they say in the sports club when they saw him behind the buffet table serving food, and his wife selling tickets for the dance hall and checking coats? He simply had to deal with it. His wife had made the deal and that was 'that.' The end result of the tense conflict between my mother and father was that they both went to the Essweins together and told them that they would be delighted to work for them. Mom won again.

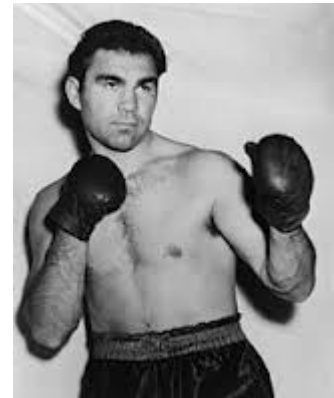
So, at this time we had an additional income. When my father eventually was let go from the shipyard that extra income turned out to be a real blessing. There were also side benefits like free food and drink. On the evenings when there were big events there would always be a lot of leftover food which

they could bring home rather than throw out. Both of them came to like working at the bar, even though it made for a long evening. Even though official closing-time was 1 AM, the organized events would often run as late as 4 AM! It was hard on them, but they made it work in order to get that extra income.

I was a problem for my parents in this arrangement, because they could not simply leave me at home while they were out working the events. My mother solved the problem in her own special way. She spoke with her Rheinland girlfriend who proved ready to take me in the evenings and even have me sleep over at her flat. In addition to this option my mother also got Frau Esswein's OK to come along to the bar and gave me a room where I could sleep. After the events my parents would carry me home to my own bed. When I stayed with the Gördes I would get up in the morning and make my own way back home. In the evenings before leaving for the Gördes my parents would admonish me to be good and to behave myself. I always tried to in spite of the enchanting charms of Heinz Gördes lovely sister.

My father's colleagues at the sports club showed total indifference to his double duty working events at the sports bar. All of his worries turned out to be unfounded.

Shortly after my father began working for Herr Esswein he was given another project to work on. Herr Esswein was an avid sports fan, not only of soccer, but also of the new sport of boxing. This sport was just beginning to grow in popularity among the masses. Mainly because of the new idol of German boxing, Max Schmeling. He fascinated everyone in Germany. He was a great boxer who won every contest and had aspirations to become the world champion in America also. The German public identified with him. He was 'their' man, a great German. As a result of this fascination with Schmeling, boxing clubs were popping up all over Germany and they were pulling in often sell-out crowds.



*Max Schmeling  
(1905-2005)*

This gave Herr Esswein the idea to start a boxing club in Aumund. Not only because he loved the sport, but also because of the business it would generate when he sponsored boxing events in his own hall at the bar. He was sure that the sales from drinks alone would be enough to make the venture profitable. He started the boxing club and named it "Heroes." He brought my father in for his expertise in managing a sports club due to his experience with the soccer club. Once a bureaucrat always a bureaucrat.

Herr Esswein invested a good bit of money putting together everything needed to run boxing matches and provide training. He found people who were interested in participating in the sport. A trainer was found and contacts were made with clubs in the neighboring towns. They were now ready to begin operating the Aumunder Sports Club. For events the boxing ring would be set up in the hall with seats all around for the spectators. The sport became very popular. They began with matches among the members of the club to determine the club champions in each weight class from lightweight to heavyweight. All was done according to the strict regulations of the German Amateur Boxing Association.

The beer sales were great and Herr Esswein was pleased, until the economy turned bad. Attendance at the fights fell off and with it the beer sales. The result was the Herr Esswein had difficulty paying back the loans he took out to finance the boxing club. The bank and the brewery halted the line of credit and demanded immediate repayment of the outstanding amount. Eventually, the bitter moment came when

the boxing club was forced to shut down and Herr Esswein had to give up the bar. The brewery did not want to go along with him and began looking for a new lessee. The Heroes Boxing Club was finished and so was Herr Esswein's lease. This was terrible because Esswein had a mountain of debt and now had no idea how to dig his way out. My father's job as administrator of the boxing club was finished also.

In addition my parents now had to worry about what would become of them and their jobs with the bar. Would the new bar manager want to keep them, or would he want to start over with new staff? These concerns got resolved very quickly.

To this boxing theme I should add that I, too, got caught up in the boxing craze and wanted to become a boxer. My parents welcomed my enthusiasm and I became a member of the Boys Squad. I wanted to be a boxer, but my enthusiasm for the sport did not last long. After I took a couple of hard hits from some big boxing gloves, my interest went quickly downhill. I decided to make a final exit from the ring after suffering a possible broken nose, the typical trademark of a real boxer. My mother was pleased, she let on that she was never very happy with the whole idea.

The best part of my flirtation with boxing was the respect I got from classmates when I told them about my experiences. This was only possible because none of them were in the club and only knew what I told them. But my stories about the punching bag, sandbag and jump rope (that I was never any good at) weren't mere exaggerations, I actually did that stuff. I had also been in boxing matches with other kids. That is where I took the hard punches. But now my career as a boxer was over. I had to live with defeat. I would never rise to the top and emulate my boxing idols.

The Esswein's were hardly out of the house when they were replaced by a new couple, the Beckerwirth's. They were originally from Westfalen and the area around Schötmar, which my mother considered to be practically her hometown. My mother considered anything even near the Rheinland and Westfalen to be practically her hometown. My mother quickly got to meet the Beckerwirth's and in her own dazzling way, countrymen to countrymen, made sure that the Beckerswirth's were glad to keep the Mork's on just as they used to be in the sports bar.

So, things would go on as usual. It was helpful that the beer supplier also put in a good word. I helped to have an advocate. The members of the Sports Club knew each other well. These relationships were very important, especially good relations as in this case. Working for the Beckerwirth's was the start of a particularly good period of time for my parents, above all for my mother.

The family had a daughter, Hilde, and she was something of a problem even though she was fairly young. Apparently she had difficulties related to her age. She was melancholy and acted like a little spinster. My mother worried about Hilde and tried to build a close relationship with her. I should mention here that the shortly before the last war the Beckerwirth family had taken over a restaurant and hotel in Worpswede. After the war it was run by Hilde and her husband for a while. On the whole she was very healthy except for the age-related depression.

The relationship was so good that the Beckerwirths treated me much like their own kid. On the evenings when I went to the sports bar I would spend time with Hilde and read to her from my books or newspapers, until I fell asleep in their sofa. I would sleep there until my mother woke me and took me home. Even at an early age I was a night owl.

## Life of the Unemployed

The clever preparations my mother had made served us well when my father actually did lose the job at the Vulkan. Now that he was not working there, he had much more time to devote to diverse tasks at the sports bar. It was not physically hard work, like he was used to at the shipyard, but it wasn't light work either. It turned out that the work was a sort of apprenticeship for what would become his future occupation. The idea of 'work' was not an unknown concept for my parents, they were both well acquainted with it. It was still rather difficult to keep the household going and also put in the late nights at the sports bar. It was particularly hard on my mother. But there was no whining or complaining. It was of utmost importance that the family get through these hard times and that we did not get caught up in the descending spiral that trapped many of the other ex-Vulkan families. My mother's prime concern was that the family stay together and we keep our heads above water.

At the beginning of my father's period of unemployment he really missed getting up and walking to work at the shipyard and then making his way home again to 1 Kirchhofstraße in the evening. He could not get used to not being up at the crack of dawn to go to work and he missed the daily chats about politics with his coworkers as he walked to the Vulkan. It also seemed odd not to put his lunch pail and tin thermos filled with hot malt coffee in the black oilcloth pouch to take to work on those days when my mother couldn't bring him a hot meal to the gate of the Vulkan. All of that just reminded him

that he was unemployed, depressed and had no idea how to make things better.



*Unemployed Workers getting their Documents Stamped*

Now he had to go to the employment office every day for no other reason than to get a rubber stamp confirming that he was still without a job so that he would qualify for his unemployment check on Friday. That was very difficult for a man who was used to hard work but now was in the street with no prospects. Conversation with his colleagues was something that only happened if by chance he ran into one at the unemployment office or in the neighborhood. The conversations were not as cheerful and friendly as they had been. They were overshadowed by fear and poverty, but also anger over the poor state of affairs in 'their' Republic. This

should be a Republic where the common worker should be doing much better than he was now. It should be more like it was in 'the old days.' They had trusted the Social Democrats that came to power after the Revolution and now seemed to have abandoned them. The anger of the workers grew and grew and it is no wonder that attitudes became more radical. Differences between old coworkers became bigger. Back then it did not matter much if your coworker were a Socialist or a Communist, or just a trade unionist. Now it was very different. Now attitudes and opinions crashed up against one another. The old sense of being part of the same profession suffered as did neighborliness as well as

mutual understanding and respect. One result of this radicalization was that more and more men went over to the Nazis. Above all, ever more appeared in uniform, which seemed to be their everyday clothes now.

Gone were the days when coworkers would pitch in together to help each other out with everyday tasks. For example it used to be common for them to help load and transport the waste wood left over from the scaffolding at ship launchings. This wood could be purchased from the payroll office for a small fee and the wood was very good for heating homes. Coworkers would help each other load handcarts and take it to their homes. That didn't happen any more, not just because the shipyard closed and the wood was no longer available, but the feeling of comradeship was gone. The sense of community and mutual assistance had evaporated.

If you were going to offer help, you only helped the people in your own living room, not much beyond there. This was due to the growing sense of resignation, that blocked all other feelings. Each person's situation was so dire that they could see no way out. You did not ask neighbors for help, unless, perhaps they were in the same political party as you. At least then you could be assured that they shared some of your same interests.

The erstwhile ideals of the Socialist Party fell by the wayside. In these times such concepts as Humanity, Tolerance and Brotherhood didn't have much meaning.

None of these lofty concepts helped you fill your belly, pay your rent, improve your standard of living or raise your children. Because of that your hate for the status quo grew and the last vestige of religious belief dissolved.

People felt themselves abandoned by God who let them go hungry and freeze and die. Pastoral babble from the pulpit couldn't fix that, it was just empty words from clerics who did not experience the poverty of their flock. The priests and pastors had an income, good food and drink, and a nice, warm home to live in.

The growing hate for the incumbents caused many people to give a new ear to the Nazi speeches which began to center on espousing a new national identity as National Socialists. Not a few people took this message to heart and began to think in a new way. When men are desperate, then any means that might offer hope can lead to new beliefs. The people then were grabbing at any straw that they hoped might get them back to the old life. After the war many



*The Sign Reads, "I will take any work."*



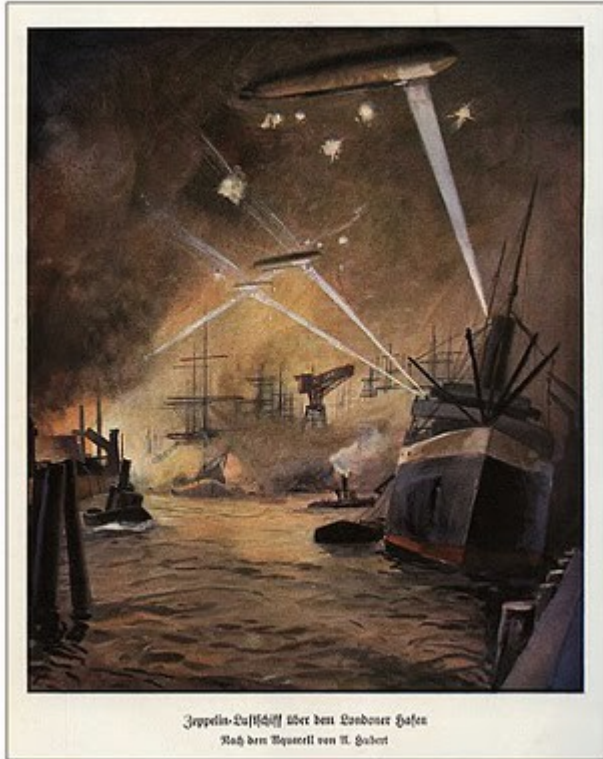
supposedly intelligent pundits looking to lay blame, asked stupid questions about how incomprehensible it was that people let themselves become collaborators and slaves of the Nazis. These writers and speakers had and have no idea of what conditions were like back then. Nor what it was like to bear such poverty and misery, and for many how unbearable it was. It is so easy to point fingers when one is convinced of ones own innocence and others have nothing but their own ignorance to wallow in.

Anger, hate and resignation increased the resentment against the State, the Weimar Republic, industry, business, the middle-class and commerce in general and last but not least, the Jews! Everyone was looking for the guilty parties that caused this disaster, and of course they found them. They did not even have to listen to the heated rants of the NSDAP, it was enough just to read the daily newspapers. They reflected the general resentments and gave multiple examples not only from the political realm but also in news reports taken from everyday life that always had a negative slant to them. No one had to go out and seek bogeymen, the newspapers brought them right to your house. According to the press everything that was happening was a result of the gross mismanagement of the Republic and the total failure of them all, especially the Socialists. The newspapers were able to put together their, usually, stupid stories, which unfortunately, were also very dangerous, without much effort. They only had to report on the bad things that were happening in society, and there was no shortage of them.

It is no wonder that this steady stream of poison affected men and became part of their opinions and outlooks. It is true that the Social Democrats remained strong and counted many loyal adherents who were loyal to the Weimar Republic and continued to believe in the old Social Democratic ideals. They believed that those ideals could still be made manifest, but many were not sure how that would happen given the current environment. But they remained true to the party. Not only did the vote for the party, they supported the election campaigns. However, now they were under attack from the Socialists and stood isolated and alone in their convictions. There really was only one ally left and that was the Catholic “Zentrum” party. The other parties in their wild diversity only had in common their opposition to the Weimar Republic. That was not the case when the Republic began. The worst part was the unexpected growth of the most dangerous opponents to the Republic, the Communist Party and the Nazi Party.

The growth of these parties also shattered friendships and personal relationships.

It was highly valued when two families could maintain their friendship in spite of all that was going on around them. That is the way it was with our family and the Gördes family in Lindenstraße. The common Rhineland blood flowing in the veins of the two wives was the strongest bond. The women clung to one another so that they could bear up under their common exile in the North German Diaspora, even though the husbands were not of the same social status. Herr Gördes was a white-collar salaried employee of Abeking and Rasumssen, and my father at that time was an ironworker at the Vulkan. Today such differences seem silly, but in those days such class differences were very significant even among the working-class.



*Zeppelins Over London WWI*

Herr Gördes had one great weakness and that was for airships, even though he could no longer be a part of it. He still carried on about the bombing missions to England that were carried out by the Zeppelins. He felt that he had distinguished himself on those occasions. During the war he lost his heart to the airships and now it had become a hopeless love. He would have loved to stay in the airship service after the war if it had been possible. Now he used any occasion to bring out his collection of photos to show to visitors and regale them with stories about the bombing missions to London. I wanted to hear them over and over again and always found them exciting. I thought Herr Gördes to be a really great guy, a war hero, and I marveled at his decorations from the glorious war years.

One of the best things was the beautiful garden behind their house. When the vegetables were ripe we would eat our fill and never were scolded for it. It was also interesting to sit in the window of their 'good room' and look out onto the hustle and bustle of Lindenstraße. The

window in this room gave directly onto the street and there was always something going on. From our perch we were able to take part in the daily life unfolding there.

Frau Gördes was from Neuwied am Rhein and my mother was from Düren. When they were together their natural Rheinland gaiety came out. When they were at home by themselves inside their own four walls they felt alone and abandoned. The two were the most happy when they could go together to one of Willi Ostermann's shows. He was a unique performer who specialized in songs and stories from the Rheinland. The two women would continue to relish the performances long after the event.

In addition to the extra income my parents had from the sports bar was the perk of being able to take home all of the leftover food from banquets and other events. My mother was able to give me big sandwiches to take to school for lunch. This was not the case with many of my classmates who had to make due with a hunk of bread smeared with margarine. But now the opportunities for extra money and food were starting to decline noticeably. The worsening economic times were being felt by the bar. Attendance and the boxing matches was falling off and the other events were not being attended very well either. The result was that my father was not able to bring home as much from the buffets as before. His income was also dependent upon these events and that was dropping dramatically. My mother was picking up much less pocket money and the leftovers from the bar's kitchen weren't as good. Even the much beloved herring feasts sponsored by the sports club, where the director splurged on Kantjes herring, suffered because people did not have the spare money to spend on beer and schnapps.

My sandwiches began to suffer, sausage and ham became rare, and soon I was bringing bread smeared with margarine. There was a true solidarity between schoolmates. Good friends would share what they

had for lunch with each other. There was also a sense of self help that was part of this solidarity. If one of us had 20 or 30 Pfenning in our pocket, they would take off during the lunch break and run to the horse butcher, Carsten Dohrmann, whose shop was near the Schiller School. Often there was some horse sausage to be had at a low, special, price and 20 Pfenning might buy two or three pieces. The sausage tasted good even when it was cold. The purchase would be divided up among friends and hungrily devoured. Carsten Dohrmann in Shillerstraße was well liked by all of us.

In contrast to most of the housewives we knew, our mother always tried to avoid charging merchandise in the shops or with the butcher and baker. Unfortunately, that was not the norm because most of the households did not always have ready cash and the wives had to use credit to make ends meet. They never considered that they were starting a long chain of debts that would have no end. The promise to pay back the full amount on the next payday, could not always be kept. But the practice spread and retailers and their colleagues in the trades had to grit their teeth and give out credit just to keep business coming in. This engendered a chain of debt that began with the households, entangled the shopkeepers and artisans and spread back to the wholesalers and other suppliers. This created a general debt that was unupportable. It angered the small businessmen that they were almost forced to give credit to their customers, while the big department stores, which were mostly owned by Jews, generally did not extend credit. The small businesses could not match the low prices of the large emporiums. The problem was further exacerbated by the growing popularity five and dime stores like EPA and subsidiaries of the US company Woolworth. The small retailers and shopkeepers felt themselves to be in all respects discriminated against, and they formed a united front against these companies that they thought were out to destroy them.

The united front, however, did nothing to relieve them of the necessity to extend credit to their customers. At some point a customer's outstanding debt would get so high that the merchant had to refuse more credit until the balance could be brought down significantly. This would bring the housewife to utter despair because she would have no idea how to do so. But it was not only the innocent folks caught in the cycle, there were also others who simply did not know how to handle money and especially how to handle a limited budget. When money ran out to pay the gas and electric bill, and when there was not enough for rent, then many were driven by despair to impulsive acts. The number of suicides jumped dramatically. The newspapers reported each dreadful story and the mood of the people continued to sink. No bills were sent for electric and gas. When the meter-reader came and took the reading, payment was expected on the spot. If there was no money in the house to pay him, he would come back later, and maybe even a third time. Failure to pay on the last visit would force the meter-reader to shut off the gas or electric, or both. It would stay off until the bill was paid in full.

When my father joined the ranks of the unemployed, it caused big problems for my mother when it came to shopping. Now she found herself in the awkward position of having to ask the shopkeepers, the butcher and the baker for credit to cover the money she was short. This was very hard on her. The humiliation was incredibly painful. She felt very ashamed to have to beg for credit, but she had no choice and shed many tears over it.

Now every little purchase had to be carefully calculated. Above all money had to be put aside for the rent which had to be paid at the Vulkan offices on time and in full. This was the top priority. We could not become homeless. Better to starve or freeze than to lose our home.

All of this is hard to imagine today, but that is the way it was in a time when there was no social 'safety net.' If you did not have a job and an income then you had to rely on a meager dole and when that ran out there was a very small welfare check that allowed no 'quality of life' for the recipients. The

millions of unemployed represented a mass of rundown proletarians that had no hope for a better life and no hope for help and support. Today it is different. This has to be understood by those who today view those times through today's perspective and have no conception of the desperate plight of those who could no longer eek out a living and for whom there were no longer any opportunities.

Clothes and shoes. Now everything was patched. The patches on our pants did not match the original fabric. Shoes were patched until they fell apart. That is when we were allowed to go barefoot again, or we were given wooden shoes so we could go to school. Old sweaters were unraveled and the 'new' yarn was 'extended' with yarn remainders, usually of a different color, to lengthen the garment as the boys grew. The hems in the boys pants would be let out as the boys grew until the boys outgrew even that. It would finally get to a point where those measures would give out and there was nothing for it but to go out and buy a new pair of pants. The best choice would be Manchester pants, because they were the toughest. This new purchase tore a big hole in the family purse and 'poof' there went all our savings. The times before 1933 were very bad times indeed.

We children had no luxuries, no designer brands that we had to have. There was no Benetton or other name-brand makers of clothes for children. We also had no concept of clothing other than what we had on our backs. There we had very few choices. Other than a Sunday-suit we might have two pairs of pants to carry us through the week and the same for tops. Underwear would be worn all week and only changed on Sunday evening. That was it. We were in no respects spoiled, but we felt cared for. We might be a little envious of other kids that we saw who were better dressed than us, but we did not hate them for it. We were content with what we had and there was no mass media advertising to suggest anything otherwise. No one had thought of directing advertising at children, and the media machine that works so well nowadays had not been built yet.

The average working-class household did not have a lot of clothes in it because an extensive wardrobe was not needed to go to work, nor did the family need much. There weren't a lot of requirements for a one to be happy. If a man had a job and an income he could be content although not rich. Working-class housewives had to make sure that they kept within the family budget while keeping a clean and proper household. In addition they were expected to provide children who would grow up to renew the supply of workers and be good citizens. The duty of the children was to attend school and to get all the accoutrements they would need to become workers, preferably following in the footsteps of their fathers. In order to live this life, you did not require very much and it was easy to be content with what you had.

My father had one good Sunday-suit for special occasions and along with it a 'good' overcoat. He had some underwear and two pairs of shoes. Also in his clothes drawer were a few shirts detachable collars and cuffs that could be switched out. For work he had a blue one-piece coverall, a pair of work shoes and a jacket to wear on the walk to work. For his head he had hat for 'good days' and a worker's cap to wear with his coveralls on normal days. That was it. That is all a worker had in the way of clothes and he was content with it, not the least because they knew no other way.

My mother tried to sew garments using patterns, but mostly she just ended up mending clothes. She had a good outfit for Sundays and special events. For weekdays she had a smock or apron that she wore over a dress that would be worn for more than one day. It was quite a day when she got a second outer coat. She rarely wore it. It was too good and had to be carefully protected in the closet. She had a pretty hat for Sundays with a matching veil, a pair of gloves for Winter, a hat and a cap for everyday and three (!!) pairs of shoes. That bordered on luxury, but only one of the pairs was good enough for actually 'going out.'

## Working-class Kids

A working-class household had to be modest and unassuming, there were no other options, none were even offered. Now, in the Weimar Republic, the worker was a sort of 'object' that the employers would use, and often as not, misuse. The worker was only there to serve the needs of employers and the workers were expected to be happy with the arrangement whenever he was allowed to work. In this new government the Social Democrats and trade unions were no longer considered unpatriotic, but they were not able to change very much, in spite of their efforts to do so. The entrepreneurs, regardless of their industry or occupation, were still the employers who 'gave' work to the employees. When they did so they did it to meet their own needs, not out of benevolence for the workers.

For me it was a big deal the one time when my mother bought me an outfit from Bleyle. This was truly a dream come true for me. It was something all kids wanted but few in our circle were able to attain. My mother had managed to save a few Marks back in the time when we were still able to do so. She took me to the well known clothing store, Mann's, in Blumenthal across from the Union Hotel. This establishment had the reputation for carrying the best and biggest selection of the authentic, rugged Bleyle outfits. The purchase was made and I got my very own Bleyle outfit. I was proud as Punch when I put it on to wear on Sundays. Bleyle clothing was very tightly knitted and wore like steel. They were rugged and durable, perfectly made just for kids.



*Bleyle's Clothes for Children*

### The Joys of Playing, Tinkering and Especially of Reading!

The truth of the matter is that we kids rarely got to put on our good clothes. What we needed were duds that could take a beating. Good clothes could not stand up to our playing and roughhousing. Particularly not when Summer came to an end and we moved into harvest time. Then the farm fields around our house would turn into dirt fields and good clothes would only be a hindrance. This was also the time when potatoes would be harvested. After the harvest potato fires would be lighted and we would roast potatoes in the embers. These would be potatoes that were left behind after the harvest. Kids and housewives would glean the fields for the leftovers. As the fires burned down we would demonstrate our courage by leaping over the flames. Sometimes we would even walk barefoot over the still-glowing ashes.

This was also the time of year when we indulged in one of our best-loved activities, kite flying. We would make bets on who could keep his kite in the air the longest. Kite construction was very important and was a science unto itself. Often the grownups would help us. They, too, got excited when kite flying season came around. It was not just a sport for kids.

Kite building was always a do-it-yourself project. That was a point of honor for the participants. A store-bought kite was not something that could be taken seriously by us 'experts.' For us, store-bought was kid stuff and we wouldn't even consider it.

When it came time to make a kite we would go to the cabinet maker's shop in the neighborhood looking for nice, thin wood strips. The ends would have to be carefully notched to give the twine a good grip. Two strips would be fitted together to form a cross. The cross-member had to be carefully placed between the upper third and the lower two-thirds of the vertical strip. The cross-members would be fastened together with small nails or bound with twine. This frame would be covered with the beautiful, brightly colored kite paper and attached using glue or homemade paste. We would have to beg our parents for a few pennies to go to the nice Bockelmann sisters to buy that wonderful kite paper. It would have to be carefully handled to prevent folds or tears.

After we had finished this part of the project, then it was time to go into production of the kite tails. The kite tail had to be in a careful balance with the size and weight of the kite. The tail was made with twine and twisted newspaper pages fitted into loops of string. Everything had to be perfect. You had to have the right weight, the right length and the right size. If the kite was top-heavy it would have a hard time getting off the ground and it would never get to the right altitude. It was also important to have the right twine. Naturally, you couldn't get twine from an 'ordinary' shop, you had to go to a specialist, like, for example, the rope maker Meyerdierks on Hafenstr a e in Vegesack. Meyerdierks was known for its high quality twine. They also had good prices so you could buy a really thick ball of it. The twine had to resist unraveling, it had to be strong and at least 100 meters in length. The ball of twine would be wound onto smooth wooden sticks joined to form a cross. The cross had to be able to play out the twine smoothly yet have enough room for us to have a good hand-grip on it. When all the work was done the moment came when the kite would be launched for the first time. This moment was full of pride and anticipation, but also a certain apprehension and fear that the launch would fail and we would be laughed at.

We would go to farmer Semken's field for the first flights. It would take two people, one to hold the twine and the other to run with the kite in the hope it would catch the wind. Usually the first attempt did not go very well. It would be necessary to make some final adjustments to the tail. Once that it was done you could settle in to enjoy this wonderful pastime. It could be very tiring to hold the kite steady against the wind which would be a lot stronger the higher up it went. You also had to be ready for strong updrafts that might be present several meters above the ground. You really had to be strong to keep the kite aloft. The game was to try and keep the kite up in the air for as long as possible and watch that the kite did not take a sudden nosedive and go crashing to earth. That would be a disaster because no one had any more pennies in their pocket to finance repairs or buy materials for a new kite. If the worst fears were realized and the kite were destroyed, in most cases our mothers would weaken and give us a few more cents because this wonderful game simply could not come to such an end.

The season of kite flying was a great time for us. It was really fun when friends would be able to get together and move beyond the normal kiteconstruction and go for something 'extra.' That means building a big box-kite. Unfortunately, they were a lot bigger, took more materials, and therefore cost more money to construct. I had the pleasure of working together with my friend, Lankenau, to build a box-kite. We went to work and managed to produce a really great working kite. My friend was a very gifted tinkerer who also made airplanes and Zeppelins. I would often help. Some of the completed models hung in my bedroom from the ceiling.

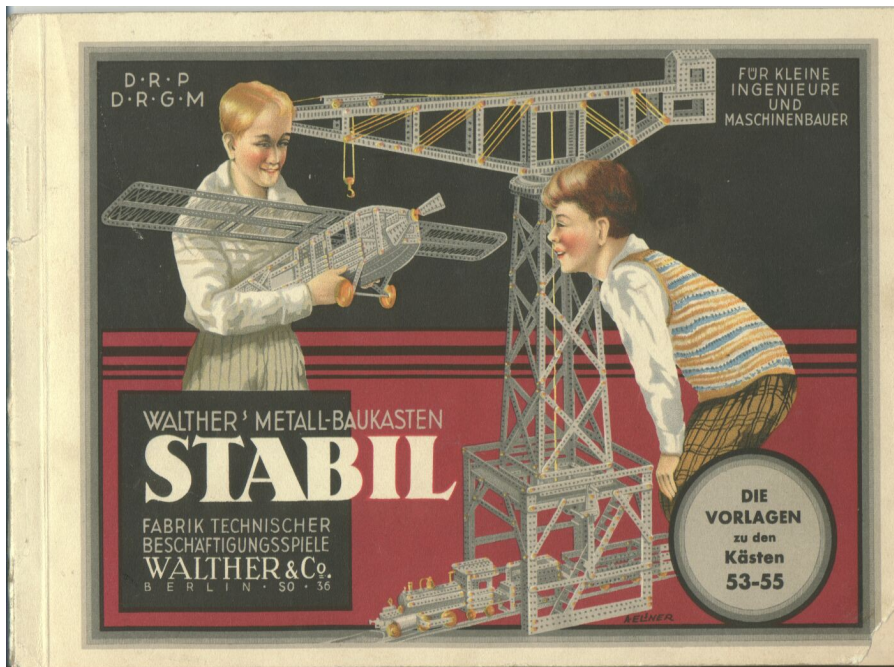
Autumn in our semi-rural village was a wonderful time. We were able to do things here that city kids were not able to do. I did not miss Vegesack so much anymore.

Autumn was also the time when the jigsaw appeared. My mother enjoyed using it to renew her collection of kitchen boards. The jigsaw would be fastened to the kitchen table with a clamp. In spite



of her efforts to keep things tidy, there was always evidence at mealtime of the woodworking from earlier in the day. The payoff was that there were always nice, newly made breakfast boards and other objects to show for her efforts. When the weather was unpleasant outside the wood work was a good

recompense for her since it gave her good reason to stay near the warm stove in the kitchen.



In addition to my tinkering with the jigsaw and with making model airplanes, I particularly enjoyed working with my Stabil building set. I started out with the basic kit, but every Christmas I would be given more additions right up to the more advanced electrical components. I was interested in anything that had to do with electricity, even if it was only powered with flashlight batteries.

With this building set one could create wonderful things like electric powered carrouseles and other things. It took real work with the help of magnets and coils you had to wind yourself. It was a real job! I would get totally wrapped up in these projects and had a hard time tearing myself away from them to go to bed. I was always moving on to the next big project, which, due to the help from my ever-growing collection of parts and components, expanded into ever-bigger constructions. They would take up a lot of room in the kitchen, but my parents were very understanding. My fiddling around with the Stabil building set eventually led to my passion for fiddling around with radio sets. I had no idea at that time that radios would become my lifelong passion and the profession I would work in for the rest of my life.

With all my other activities, I still never lost my interest in reading, if anything it grew. Anything printed on paper, regardless of what it was, if it fell into my hands I had to read it from beginning to end. My curiosity was endless, I wanted to know everything and understand everything. Even when my curiosity went a little too far and my mother said that it was not something for little boys, I was certain that I was old enough!

Even as a young child I was fascinated by political events. I read a lot about politics in the Norddeutschen Volkszeitung newspaper. A group of neighbors chipped in for a subscription then would pass it around when it arrived. The newspaper was the created by the merger of two publishers, Schnibbe and Pörtner. It was the only paper in the area around Vegesack up to Blumenthal that was not associated with a specific political party. The content was something that would appeal to a working-class family. My interest in politics was augmented by my association with the Red Falkons and our contact with the "Red" Paulenz family. I wasn't merely a Red Falkon, I was also an enthusiastic supporter of the Iron Front. I will have a lot more to say about that later.

My strong desire to read also meant that I wanted to read in bed in the evening. This was strictly forbidden by my parents because of the high cost of electricity and could not be allowed for that reason. However, I made a virtue out of necessity and put together my own light source driven by flashlight batteries. I found a screw-socket made of brown Bakelite outfitted with a big, round 4-volt light bulb that could be powered with a 4-volt flashlight battery. I made a switch from a press-button switch and used doorbell wire to connect everything. I covered the wiring with green wax as insulation.

Although this system was not really acceptable, my mother chose to shut her eyes to it because it was so well made and worked so well. However, after a while she would come back into my room to tell me that it was time to turn off the light and go to sleep. Usually I would do so, but if my reading material was extra interesting I might go on reading some more, but now with the light on and the bed covers over my head. The next morning I would still be drowsy and it spoiled my concentration in school for the day. Nevertheless, my desire to read made me do it again and again!

My love of reading and my ability to read made me the best reader in my class. When it came time for me to read out loud in class, I was able to do so without stumbling. I pronounced my words properly and handled the hardest words without problem. Maybe I was no good at gymnastics or singing, but I could read better than anyone in my class. That was my strong point. That is where I had my best childhood success. I could stride to the lectern at the front of the room where the teacher normally stood and read out loud. I would read and all of the class would have to listen to me. That was great!

My range of reading material grew and now included the works of Hans Dominik, the author of exciting science fiction stories that enchanted us children. They were about other worlds and our atomic future. I also read, or I should say devoured, crime novels and continued to read adventure stories, travel accounts and stories about explorers like Sven Hedin and the Englishmen who traversed the African continent. I also read about legends and fairy tales. The exciting stories of the Wild West, Indians, trappers, trackers and cowboys were also a staple not only of me but of all the kids.

I made more and more use of the free lending of books from the school library most of which were from the publisher Reclam. There was also a collection of books at the Union Hall where Socialist children could borrow them for free. That was a good destination for me when I was looking for literature books. They didn't carry just Socialist materials, the majority of the books were not political at all. It was a good place to look for books by German poets and thinkers.

My love of learning was the reason that I developed a very large vocabulary right from early childhood. This was a big benefit in school as well as in ordinary life. It is also the reason that I was able to



Cover for Hans Dominik's Book, "Atlantis"

express myself so well in later life. I found that I could speak well without having to have any formal training. This enabled me to not only speak confidently with others. It was of use to me as a salesman in my job, but also as a speaker for the SPD, and in our trade association and later as a trainer of sales and production staff. It was not difficult for me to talk to groups be they in a small meeting or large groups that filled an auditorium. My ability to speak was also the source of my self-confidence and assertiveness. All of that began in my childhood where I wasn't a stay-at-home, but rather a wild kid who did a lot of stupid things. I was not a dear little angel. I also had the good luck to have a lot of opportunities fall into my lap and the good sense to take advantage of them. That characteristic has continued to develop in me. The deciding factor is my boundless curiosity and my drive to better myself and go beyond what my age at the time would seem to dictate. That is why I always tried to appear to be older than I was. My physical size helped me in that regard. So, I felt older, more mature and superior to others my age, at least in this respect. Well, that's the way it was with my infantile megalomania, right?

I have always taken pleasure in being able to talk with people in a clear, polished and entertaining manner. I have been able to manage intense conversations with people of other backgrounds and opinions in such a way that both parties would find interesting and spirited. Controversial discussions of any sort were something that I was always ready to engage in. If the other argument was convincing, I was ready to change my opinion. Only, it had to be a truly convincing argument, not an accommodation just because it was convenient. That is something I have never done, even though it might have avoided problems for me down the road. This ordinary elementary school kid would one day be able to hold his own when speaking with academics. I could speak with people from all parts of the social spectrum, workers or professors and be accepted by both.

In conversation I have always valued variety and tended not to stick to fixed texts or fixed opinions. Improvisation was much more fun and I incorporated it in my speech and also in my presentations. Word play and free speaking, but without deviating too much from the given theme, gave me a lot of pleasure. There were many opportunities to misuse my speaking ability just for my own joy in the game, but I understood that this power should not be abused. I liked to use the back and forth of a discussion to gradually bring people around to accepting my views as serious and reasonable. Extemporaneous speaking without being bound to a written text is where I shined. In this type of discourse the 'thread' of the argument would be in my brain and I only had to unspool it. This was a gift that I used and nurtured. Perhaps this gift was bestowed on me by my father when I was still in the cradle and lay at first undeveloped and dormant. It was only later that I was able to perfect the skills, and I did it myself without outside instruction. The gene for public speaking was part of my DNA and I only needed to recognize that it was there to be able to use it. It helped that my parents never talked down to me and never engaged in baby talk. They were always ready to satisfy my curiosity about things even if the explanations were not simple.

Later in my speech and deportment there was a certain amount of showmanship in my gestures and facial expressions. I was conscious of my physical presence and tried to match my gestures and expressions to the effect I wanted to produce. Everything had to work together, the rhetoric and all the 'other stuff.' Showmanship was a part of me and added to my enjoyment. If the right opportunities had presented themselves to me I might have become an actor! In my many 'appearances' I was able to pull it all together, voice, projection, tone, choice of words off the cuff, gestures, facial expressions, body language and comportment. I was able to project excitement and when appropriate, and end my presentations with a melodramatic flourish. I had a rather large repertoire of theatrical tricks. I confess that I always felt good after these speeches because of the validation I got from the sincere applause I received that told me that my speech had been convincing.

My desire for reading continues to be insatiable, even up to today as is witnessed by my large library. I am still of the opinion that one can not read too much, even if I find myself reading somewhat less at the present time. One does not have to indulge in specialized, difficult or heavy reading, the important thing is to read. However, it seems like with the youth of today there is less and less reading being done.

Reading is a difficult problem in this Age. Computer games and such are more popular with kids and they rely more on graphics. This is too bad, since reading broadens one's horizons and contributes to knowledge and culture. There is less and less of both in this age and time. People are influenced and dominated by completely different standards of existence. Unfortunately, along with it goes our chances for the possibility of developing one's own independent opinions. Opinions today are mass produced by the media and special interest groups. They are planted among the populace who parrot them back as their own opinion. An outstanding example of this is Germany's leading magazine, the rag called "Bild." The dumbing down of the masses continues and there is no sign of it stopping.

From childhood on I never stopped reading. As a result my vocabulary and factual knowledge has grown quite large. This has given me the ability to talk with people of all social classes and walks of life on a equal footing with them. As I have mentioned, I have always tried to engage people with varying opinions and have true dialogs with them free from polemics. I have always espoused the motto, "Opinions are there to be changed if needed." That doesn't mean to change an opinion each time the wind blows from a different direction, but to be prepared to change an opinion if mounting logic and evidence dictates so. The give and take of debate is a lofty game that plays on the power of words, the possibilities of vocal expression and above all with the best opportunities for human understanding. I view it as a kind of spiritual humanity that, unfortunately, is rarely seen. The important thing for me has been spiritual independence, the will to develop my own individual opinions free from forces and influences of any sort. My goal was always a spiritual and personal freedom and the right of free expression. But, this always implied the acceptance of the contrary opinions of others both home and abroad.