

Part One

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DANCING ON A VOLCANO



# 1. Pampered Child

## The Roaring Twenties in Europe

*RAYMOND FLAMMANT: When you were born in 1924, Europe was already feeling the impact of the so-called "Roaring Twenties" in the United States. Can this be compared to the literally furious drive to enjoy life in all aspects practically to the last drop of blood in our veins, as featured magnificently in the fifties in the legendary movies with James Dean?*

*EDMOND ISRAEL: I only know the Roaring Twenties by hearsay, but according to what my parents told me, they were sometimes delirious, excessive in many respects. The young generation, deeply bruised by the First World War, was thirsting to recuperate a youth which had been stolen from it by World War I.*

When, for instance, in 1925 a rather difficult period of reconstruction started, our regions were still quite wealthy. This was the time when the people, at least those who could afford it, were literally soaked with pleasure, dancing the Charleston, listening to jazz, but also, listening to the Negro spirituals by the gospel singers. Fashions changed. Women were wearing short

dresses above the knee and hats which resembled flower pots turned upside down. They cut their hair short, the so-called “Bubikopf,” or in French “la garçonne,” a female boy. Evening and night parties lasted to the early hours of the morning, and popular balls and cabarets, particularly in Paris and Berlin, awoke many phantasms in men, to a lesser extent in women. They were signs of freedom in expression, behavior, and attire, sometimes unbridled and without a limit. Preachers and priests called this a new Sodom and Gomorrah. Personally, I rather feel that it was a drive to break the walls made of taboos too often hypocritical in their essence. Yet, it was not the rebellion of the generation of James Dean in the fifties. It was rather an exalted drive to regain lost time.

After all, this generation was not so wrong. Since 1929 the time of dancing, singing, and hunting for pleasure soon came to an end. In October the New York Stock Exchange stumbled and crumbled and the famous “Black Friday” irreversibly drew the world economy into the depression of the thirties.

*Just staying for a brief moment with the Roaring Twenties. There was at that time a shining star of the French Music Hall, Josephine Baker. Men were literally thrilled when she appeared on stage: she was sensual, highly attractive, and danced with a G-string of bananas. She received thousands and thousands of love letters and proposals of marriage. You once told me that you met her after the war in a different context here in Luxembourg.*

But the Josephine Baker I met personally after the Second World War was a different person. She was by that time already over fifty years old and felt that she had to fulfill the dream of a “universal family.” A remarkable idea! She bought some sort of a castle in France and adopted seventy or eighty children of all races, colors and nationalities. At the end of the fifties, she came to Luxembourg following the invitation of the Jewish association,

“B’nai B’rith,” the “sons of the Alliance,” in order to deliver a multiracial and multiethnic testimony and at the same time collect some funds for her humanitarian activities. I rarely, if ever, have been in the presence of a woman so radiant and charismatic. She was filled to the brim with charm and energy and beaming with sensuality.

Later, her plan met with failure because of financial difficulties. This is a pity because it was an admirable initiative which exemplified an exceptional woman with a noble heart and an ever enticing body. Let me also recall that during the last war under the Nazi occupation in France, she played an important role in the French Resistance movement.

*During the Roaring Twenties, how was it in Luxembourg? Was it a bit more calm and quiet than elsewhere?*

Sure, and fortunately so. You know, we in Luxembourg are rather balanced and we do not indulge in excesses, neither good ones nor bad ones. In Luxembourg, the “Roaring Twenties” were rather the “Buzzing Twenties.”

An annual event of major importance was an international circus, which opened its tents for several weeks in our capital. I remember quite well a rather exceptional attraction. A certain number of pygmies were presented to the public.

In order to attract a maximum number of spectators, the circus paraded the pygmies on the main avenue of Luxembourg City, together with a number of wild animals locked up in cages on wheels, rolling on the pavement of the Avenue de la Liberté. The pygmies danced and rotated their hips to the tunes of African jungle rhythms. For us children, bordering the streets, this was a rare treat and so it was also for the adults. The pygmies appeared as well to be quite happy with the success they met by the enthusiasm of the onlookers.

It was only later that I had a perception of the indecency of this spectacle, which did not appear to shock the people at that

time. Human beings were exhibited in the circus in the same manner as exotic animals. I even asked myself to what extent these human beings from Africa were not held overnight in cages or had to sleep on straw like apes and leopards. But I might be a bit unkind and unjust now.

*But the Roaring Twenties were not only made of amusement and entertainment. Human endeavor is to reach always higher and faster: for instance, Lindbergh crosses the Atlantic alone in plane for the first time in 1927. Two mountain climbers, Mallory and Irvine, died close to the summit of Mount Everest. By the way, it's not known whether they have reached the summit as did Edmund Hillary some twenty-five years later.*

But don't forget science: Einstein, Hubble, Bohr, Heisenberg, relativity and quantum mechanics. Keynes published his first works on economics. Broadcasting started to completely change the process of disseminating information.

And then there are the painters like Kandinsky, Kokoschka, Klee, Münch, Chagall, Picasso, Miro, just to mention a few who come to my mind spontaneously, and in music, the everlasting "Rhapsody in Blue" by Gershwin. In the movies, the admirable achievements of Charlie Chaplin and Eisenstein. In literature Thomas Mann publishes *The Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)*. Tucholsky, Kästner, and Gide are very fashionable. And this reminds me of the literary encounters organized at the castle in Colpach, Luxembourg, by the wife of Emile Mayrisch, Aline de Saint-Hubert, where André Gide was a frequent visitor. Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier started to revolutionize architecture.

I am always astonished at the artistic creation of the Twenties. I often asked myself how a period as creative as the one I just mentioned was gradually engulfing itself in the blackest of all human tragedies, the Holocaust, the final milestone on the road of horror and abomination. I still have not found an answer to my question.

*Coming back to artistic creation, you once told me that as a small child, when you were three years old, and were not able to write, you scribbled on paper letters intended for an imaginary person. These scribbled notes had been detected by your mother when she was cleaning the floor under the rugs where you were hiding these notes.*

Yes, this is true. I still have a vague memory of this. I even gave a name to the recipient of my notes. I called him “Geili” and I mentally developed some kind of a relationship with him, but that’s long, long ago.

*Good old Sigmund Freud would probably enjoy this story.*

Oh, you know, psychoanalysis never interested me very much. For me, the human being primarily constructs himself and evolves in relationship with his environment and the knowledge he acquires. Instincts are a part of the animal nature present in us. They are the medium for pleasure and procreation, and that’s basically all. Furthermore, the conscious state interests me more than the sub-conscious. I never felt the necessity to indulge into speleological exercises in my innermost, my sub-consciousness, or to spend years on a sofa telling a specialist my phantasms, my dreams or what passes or appears to pass through my mind, in short, what is apparently hidden in me and must get out so that I can heal.

What fascinates me is to live, to live intensely, to construct, to be oriented and targeted to the future. Is it a personal therapy? I don’t know. Am I a neurotic or a psychopath who ignores his psychic ailments? Perhaps! But this is of no interest for me. Let me here recall the famous phrase of Dr. Knock: “We are all sick, but we just don’t know it.”

Let me come back to my taste for writing. I also wrote poems as a child. When I was ten or twelve years old, my mother and I were passing our vacation in Arosa, Switzerland because I had to

avoid chronic bronchitis. It was the first time I saw high mountains. I marveled at the sight and I expressed my wonderment and awe through probably completely worthless poems. After our return, my father felt strongly that he was the fortunate genitor of a precocious poet, and possibly of a genius. He put my poems into an envelope and sent them to his brother-in-law, my uncle Max, who lived in Berlin. And in an accompanying letter he gave free course to his enthusiasm and described what he considered an exceptional event, the making of a poet. Every day my father anxiously awaited the mail and a reply from Uncle Max. He imagined that perhaps his brother-in-law was already looking for an editor. But no letter arrived and finally uncle Max sent him a brief note, which my father read in silence and then put aside. The whole family, including my aunt Clementine and my uncle David, understood that the comments of Uncle Max were not too complimentary. By the way, neither I nor any member of the family ever found out what Uncle Max thought of my first works of art.

*I hope that this did not create a deep rift in your family?*

Certainly not. Our family was tightly knit together. It took my father some time until he got over it. At the next visit of Uncle Max to Luxembourg, there was some explaining and reconciliation. Later on, they laughed and amused themselves by evoking this event.

## **Cocooning in the family fold**

*You mentioned your parents, your uncles, and aunts. I think the moment has come to speak about them. You grew up in a family which was rather like a tribe, a clan. As a child you must have been in the center of this family. You were coddled, pampered, and spoiled. Is that right?*

Yes of course, especially as far as my parents, my uncle David, and my aunt Clementine are concerned. We all lived in one household, in one apartment and I was the only child of the family, as Uncle David and Aunt Clementine were childless. But they all brought me up, and they gave me a lot of affection, I would even say a super dose of love and kindness. This is the main source from which I derived throughout my life the necessary energy to confront many challenges and dangers.

Let me now give you a brief description of the four. On my father's side, the ancestors were of the Lorraine, the French region bordering Luxembourg. As a vagrant of history, the region of Lorraine was sometimes German, sometimes French. My ancestors felt very French. There were Francophiles, particularly my grand-mother, Jeannette. My great-great-grandparents left the Lorraine around 1810 for Luxembourg, in the wake of the French Revolution, which granted to the Jews the same civil rights enjoyed by the other members of society. As my inclination is more to anticipate and construct the future than to indulge in the past, I never made any genealogical research about my ancestors. My father was born in the Rue St.-Ulrich in the "Grund," a suburb of Luxembourg. His parents were of a very modest condition. They had a small textile business. All this has been told to me by my father, because I never had the good fortune to know my grandparents on both sides.

My grandfather apparently was quite a character. He was a striking example of an autodidact, as he had practically no schooling. He had a natural intelligence and I inherited from him both my taste for self-education, a kind of lifelong learning, as well as some sort of selective anxiety. I have been told that my grandfather was terribly afraid of thunderstorms, but he obstinately refused to go to a shelter when during the First World War, Luxembourg City and in particular the sector where he lived, was bombed.

My father, Gustave Israel, fourth generation in Luxembourg was also born in the suburb, in the "Grund," which at present

has become a very fashionable part of the city of Luxembourg, with its cultural establishments, its museums and its attraction to the younger people in a number of “bistros” and side-walk “cafés.” At the time when my father was born, the “Grund” was a poor, drab part of Luxembourg City shunned by the upper and middle class, called the *haute bourgeoisie* and the *bourgeoisie*. As a matter of fact, some people spent their childhood in the Grund and upgraded their social status when they were able to afford to live in the upper part of the city without ever referring to their birth place. In our family, this has never been the case. For instance, I am proud to recall the time when I was a factory worker in the U.S.A. In this respect, as in many other aspects, I feel very American.

But let’s come back to my parents. My father met my mother through an encounter arranged by the rabbi of Luxembourg in 1921. As a matter of fact, my father and his sister, Clementine met my mother and her brother David at the same time.

My father was enthusiastic when he first saw my mother, who was a beauty, a very quiet and cultured person. After the first meeting he asked her to marry him. He put one condition: that her brother would marry his sister. My mother was slightly amused, and said “Be patient, patience is a virtue.” But in a relatively short period of time the four concluded that they would create a family. My mother married my father and her brother married the sister of my father on the same day at the former synagogue in Luxembourg. That synagogue was later destroyed during the last World War by the Nazis, when they occupied and incorporated the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg into the Third Reich. Let me add here that my mother and her brother, David Lande, had been born in a small village called Feuerstein, not far from Lissa in the province of Posen (or Poznan in Polish). This border region between Germany and Poland was alternatively Polish and German (just like the Lorraine was at times German and at times French). When my mother was born, the province

of Posen was German. After the First World War, it became Polish.

Without going into too many details, let me just point out that my father was an autodidact, much attracted by philosophy. Professionally, he was conscientious and like his father and now me, he was selectively anxious. For instance, he worked as manager of a large furniture store six days a week, sometimes even on Sunday mornings. Very trusted by his employer, he had a key to the safe in the office of the store where valuables and cash were deposited. Quite often, my father, on Sunday afternoon, suddenly had a feeling of anxiety. He would then run to the store to check whether he had locked the safety vault. As far as I can recollect, it was never left open but he wanted to be sure.

My mother on her side, was an intelligent, quiet woman, and as I said before, a striking beauty. Contrary to my father who was very extroverted, she was a trifle introverted. Sometimes she quoted a phrase from a German novel “*Lerne leiden, ohne zu klagen,*” *You must learn how to suffer without complaining.* She had this natural dignity never to complain. It was a great lesson for me and I followed this precept throughout all my life. It is better to rouse envy than pity. The two couples rented an apartment in a rather old and not very comfortable house situated not far from the Luxembourg train station, yet no longer in the suburb where my father and his sister were born. The apartment consisted of two bedrooms, a kitchen with an old stove, and a living room. There was at that time no electricity in the apartment, only gaslight. And of course central heating was just a dream.

Quite a number of women did not go to the obstetric clinic to give birth to their child. My mother followed this example and so I came to the world at home, probably in the bedroom of my parents. The obstetrician having been on vacation when I was born, it was a midwife, apparently a very capable one, who

assisted my mother in her labors. I sometimes met the midwife, a very homely and corpulent woman with wide breasts bulging with nourishing milk, in the streets of Luxembourg. Then she never failed to shout with her stentorian voice "Oh, here is the sweet little boy who was dead when he came to the world! I plunged him alternatively into hot and icy water and then suddenly the first cry came out of his mouth and from the innermost of his lungs." She reveled at evoking this event.

Reflecting on this, I still have a little pang in my heart. Coming to life, entering the stage of the human comedy is both a miracle and a coincidence. Indeed it takes so little and it won't happen.

*So your uncle David and aunt Clementine never had children.*

Unfortunately not. I say unfortunately because it is a tragedy for a couple not to give birth to a child. I know that out of my personal experience.

Under one single roof, in one household there were two women, one of them having a child and the other one, not. Even though the two couples felt very close to each other, this situation sometimes created strains and stress. My mother silently suffered from this situation but according to her principle she never complained. As a matter of fact, as far as I can remember, she never said anything which could have disrupted the harmony of the family. My aunt was of course frustrated; she was an extrovert, quite different from my mother, but in her heart she was a very good person. As a child I enjoyed the fact that I received attention and love from two women and from two men. I had two mothers and two fathers. In every human being there is quite a dose of egoism and in children, it is more apparent. Only later, I was dimly aware of what my mother sometimes had to support. But, and this is very important, the four of them gave me a lot of affection and love.

*Did it occur to you in one or the other phases of your life that perhaps in your upbringing you had not been sufficiently prepared for the rough and tough moments in a human existence and that the education which was given to you was too soft?*

Later in my life I recognized this. Some of the bruises of my soul, bruises which the French author, Françoise Sagan, calls “*les bleus à l’âme*” would not have been so painful if my education had been different. But what was important was the love, the affection, and the warmth I received as well as the solidarity and harmony in our family. This, I believe, allowed me to weather successfully many storms, many difficulties in my own existence. The treasure of love is what makes life livable, developing in many people a passion for life.

Just two examples of how concerned my father was:

In summer, in spite of his high professional conscience, he sometimes slid away from the store to rush to the municipal park where my mother was promenading me in a baby carriage, just to find out whether the child was sufficiently covered in order not to catch cold.

Before my entrance to the primary school there was a family council, as a matter of fact many councils, and on the particular insistence of my father, the family unanimously decided to move nearer to my school so that I did not have to walk too far. Where we lived it was about a five minutes walk to my school. But they all moved to an apartment just across the street from the school. It is difficult to realize today that four adults changed their apartment, implying expenses and all the unpleasantness of moving from one place to another, just for the sake of more comfort and security of their common child. It was an irrational decision and at the same time an act of solicitude and love.

In the context of my childhood years, let me add that my father, who had a passion for literature and philosophy, tried, when I was six or seven years old, to convey to me the beauty of

poetry, particularly of Goethe, whose works he admired above all. He also patiently explained to me the basic thoughts of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Leibniz. I of course did not understand anything. But he succeeded in awakening in me as early as possible a taste, if not a passion for philosophy, for the search for a meaning of our existence as well as of the universe of which we are part.

I also recall with delight the school free Tuesday and Thursday afternoons I spent in the pastry stores of many towns of Luxembourg, when I was allowed to accompany my uncle David, who was a traveling salesman. While he visited his customers, small or medium-sized textile stores, I ravenously devoured apple pies, cheese pies, chocolate cakes with vanilla coatings and lots of whipped cream. I must confess that throughout all my life I continue to crave philosophy and sweet pastries. But as in my later years, I have become a weight watcher, and pastry ranks more and more in the category of unfulfilled desires. This is also the case in my search to unlock the mystery of the Universe.

## School and self-education

*You have not yet spoken of your schooling. You probably forgot it.*

Let's say that my years at school have not left me with a lasting impression.

It appears that I was a rather gifted pupil and student. At least that's what my respectable teacher at primary school, Mr. Medernach, communicated. He encouraged my father to let me pursue my studies at high school as well as at the university. He predicted to him a brilliant future for me, more specifically as a university professor. I think that, in this respect, my father did not need any convincing.

Fate decided a different direction for me. In the end, school has only played a secondary role in my life. My studies at the

Luxembourg High School, Athénée de Luxembourg, were interrupted by the invasion of our country by the Nazis in May 1940. After the war, I successfully passed the final high school exam, called in Luxembourg “baccalauréat,” thanks to an accelerated process and a number of facilities granted to the boys who had been drafted by the Nazi occupier as well as those who were of Jewish faith and had to leave the country.

After the war, I had to decide whether to pursue my studies in a University. I was not particularly drawn to that, first, because my father was ill and I had to earn a living for me and the family. But today, I think that they could have coped with that and would have been willing to make sacrifices for me as they did all their life. A more profound reason is the fact that disciplined learning, which I probably wrongly perceived and still perceive in retrospect as more descriptive than prospective, does not correspond to my mindset, endowed with an irrepressible imagination pulling me into multidirectional mental peregrinations. Some rather painful experiences at school confirmed this attitude in me. I recall that I was not too good in arithmetic. That’s why I probably became a banker. Not successfully finding a solution to a problem, I was called to the blackboard by a rather primitive teacher who hammered my head at the blackboard, each hit a phase in the process towards the solution of the problem. This experience left a ripple on my soul alongside the many bruises, which I already mentioned before.

I was a fat child and my physical condition did not allow me to practice sport or even to participate in the games requiring a certain physical fitness and agility. Added to that, my parents decided, when I was six years old, that for the first year a teacher should give me private lessons so that I did not need to be exposed to the constraints and disciplines of a school. Added to that they were afraid that I could catch an infectious disease presenting great risks in view of my fragile health. So after the first twelve months of private lessons, I started at school and I

was immediately considered an outsider. I developed a natural timidity as well as a great sensitivity at being mocked. The French poet La Fontaine said, speaking of children, “*cet âge ne connaît pas de pitié,*” this generation has no pity. If he lived today, he would have extended this statement to all ages, but that’s not the point.

*Do you think that being scoffed at and mocked at was at least partly due to the fact that you were a Jew?*

I don’t know. As a matter of fact I don’t think so. At the time of my childhood the different religious communities, of which the Catholic one was by far the most important, lived in separate spheres. I never experienced any aggressive or violent anti-Semitism. Not at that time, and certainly not today, and that’s to the honor of Luxembourg, which is a country of immigration. For a number of reasons, mainly economic ones, we accept people immigrating to Luxembourg without too many difficulties. We had a major influx of Italians at the beginning of the twentieth century, and in the midst of the twentieth century, around 1960, a new wave of immigrants from Portugal entered our country. At the present time, more than eighteen percent of the Luxembourg population are Portuguese or of Portuguese origin. They keep their cultural traditions but at the same time integrate in the social and cultural fabric of Luxembourg. This is true, particularly for the younger generation. As far as the Jewish segment of the Luxembourg society is concerned, the painful experiences suffered both by Gentiles and Jews during the last World War, created new and very strong bonds of solidarity and even friendship between the two components of our population.

*Beyond the pleasant and nourishing moments you passed in pastry stores, thanks to your uncle David, how did you spend your leisure time?*

I liked to read. I devoured books. Particularly those of Erich Kästner, a German author who wrote detective stories for children like *Emil und die Detektive* (*Emil and the Detectives*), *Das fliegende Klassenzimmer* (*The Flying Schoolroom*), and *Pünktchen und Anton*. At the same time I was fascinated by the adventure stories of another German author, Karl May. He situated his novels both in the far west of the United States and in Middle Eastern countries. He wrote with an astonishing imagination, because apparently he never set foot in these regions. Some of his heroes remain vivid in my memory, like Old Surehand, Old Shatterhand, Kara ben Nemsi, Winnetou, Sam the Trapper, and a colorful figure, he called Hadschi Halef Omar Ben Hadschi Abdul Abbas Ibn Hadschi Dawud al Gossara. They were real persons for me and sometimes I thought that I would meet them around the corner of the Rue de Strasbourg where we lived.

And then there was the passionate initiation into philosophy by my father.

After school, I also liked to accompany my mother and my aunt to a coffee shop, a “Kaffeehaus,” called “Paris Palace.” There was a pianist, a violinist, and a cellist interpreting melodies of that time. I listened to them in silence and my thoughts were migrating to imaginary worlds. I sometimes sat at another table, alone by myself, because the conversations of my mother and my aunt with friends were boring me and alone I prepared my lessons for the next day. I still very much like this atmosphere, which is particularly characteristic of Vienna and Prague. When I am in these towns, I am very fond of having a cup of coffee in a “Kaffeehaus” and I imagine that Kafka or Max Brod or Stefan Zweig will open the door, sit down at a table, sip an espresso, and write the novels which are an important part of the European literary heritage.

*Let's come back to your studies. After primary school it's high school, isn't it?*

Yes, I was admitted at the Athénée of Luxembourg and I signed myself up for the Latin session. One of the immediate consequences was that my parents, aunt, and uncle moved again from the Rue de Strasbourg to the Rue Adolphe Fisher, where my father had bought a house, which was nearer to the Athénée.

Competition in the Latin section was quite keen. I love languages and I have a particularly fond memory of my Latin teacher, Ernest Ludovicy. He was very adept at motivating students and he explained to us that Latin is an unequalled mental exercise to learn how to think clearly and logically. He continued in his praise of Latin, stressing that it helps you to understand and learn foreign languages. Ernest Ludovicy was a timid man, but he had a great heart and a high sense of justice. When we were refugees in France and I wrote to him to get a certificate of scholarship, he went to see the Nazi director of the Athénée, who shouted at him, "Why do you want to help this dirty Jew?" Since Ernest Ludovicy insisted, he obtained the certificate and sent it to me. This was quite daring, very courageous of a man who gave the impression of being shy and timorous.

We met again after the war and founded an interconfessional committee which soon was transformed into an association. For the first time in Luxembourg, dating back to 1965, we co-organized a Jewish-Christian public conference. The speakers were the Reverend Father Riquet, well-known as an eminent member of the French Resistance movement and a preacher of Notre Dame in Paris, a Protestant pastor, Mr. Lacoque, as well as the chief rabbi of Luxembourg, Emmanuel Bulz. The topic was the man of today and his attitude toward God. The three speakers dealt with this topic in the light of their own religion. This event drew a large crowd. The younger people were especially interested and there were not sufficient seats in the conference room of the Casino of Luxembourg which normally seats three hundred persons. Thus the younger people were sitting on the floor. This was a very encouraging sign for all of us for our future activity.

*I could imagine that the question of if there is God after Auschwitz, occupied an important part of the debates.*

Naturally. It is a difficult and painful question.

*And what was the conclusion? And if I may also ask, what is your personal reply to that question?*

I shall come back more in detail to this later, in the course of our conversation. Let me just say in the context of our present conversation that God or the transcendental reality, is timeless but that the way of speaking about God is changing in time.

*You were brought up in a religious and practicing family conscientiously following the precepts of Moses. Does this religious education leave you with many memories?*

Of course, quite a number. My religious upbringing constitutes an important part of my education. I remember very well the first time my parents brought me to the synagogue. I was impressed by the chief rabbi on the altar (at that time it was Robert Serebrenick) and I looked continuously at him. At the end of the ceremony, he shook hands with each and every one of the members attending the service and then he gently stroked my cheeks and in a firm voice said: "You were not too noisy, that's good. But the next time, don't stare so much at my face, but rather look into your prayer book."

A more lasting memory goes back to the celebration of my Bar-Mitzvah which, in the Jewish religion, is the day when a boy reaches the age of thirteen years, and therefore of maturity, becoming a full-fledged member of the community. My Bar-Mitzvah was celebrated in 1937. According to the prescriptions, I was called to the altar to read an excerpt of the Torah, which in Judaism is the book of learning, of wisdom and ethics given by

God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Every Saturday morning, a small part of the Torah written on parchment scrolls is recited by the Chasan, the cantor, and on his Bar-Mitzvah, the boy takes the place of the cantor for some minutes by reading aloud these excerpts written without vowels. This makes the reading quite difficult. The recitation has to be made in a specific melody; each syllable has its own intonation from which one is not allowed to deviate. I prepared for this exercise six months before and my parents transported a piano to our house where the cantor instilled into me each intonation. It's one of those memories I don't like to be reminded of, because I was not particularly gifted at reading from the Torah with the right intonation. Anyhow, according to what my family and my friends told me, my performance was not too bad. Of course my father and uncle thought it was of the highest quality.

In the evening, the family and friends assembled for dinner at a boarding house, or let's call it a "restaurant" which was situated in the lower part of the city of Luxembourg. This restaurant most definitely had no star in the Michelin, but instead it had a label of "kosher," which means only food in accordance with the Jewish prescriptions is served there. The quality of the dinner, as far as I can remember, was quite good. It was a menu in the Jewish tradition: the Jewish fish, carp, then chicken broth with dumplings as well as goose with all the traditional stuffing and trimmings filled the plates up to the brim. At that time, nobody paid attention to the number of calories but our stomachs certainly had to work overtime on that evening.

On the intellectual side, my father had hired a literary entertainer. He was a well-known German writer of short stories and gave brilliant performances on the stages of literary cabarets in the Berlin of the pre-Nazi period. His name was Karl Schnog, and in my view he ranked very high in the category of the German so-called "Feuilletonists" such as Heinrich Heine, Kurt Tucholsky, and Erich Kästner. Karl Schnog was a German blend

of Mark Twain and Bernard Shaw. He had to flee Nazi Germany because he was very outspoken in his humorous remarks against the Nazi dictator. Wit and peppered humor are the sworn enemies of Nazis and fascists, in particular if the author is Jewish. Therefore, he risked the concentration camp, even death, if he had stayed in Germany. So, as a refugee, he was hired to bring fun and amusement at family gatherings. Later in my life I realized how tragic this was for such a talented and brilliant man.

The family of the youngest brother of my mother, Alex, who lived in Breslau, Germany, also attended the Bar-Mitzvah celebration, along with his wife, my aunt Margot, and her daughter Eva, who was six years old.

My father suggested to them, in fact to my mother's whole family still living in Germany, that they come and establish themselves in Luxembourg. This was one more testimony of my father's generosity. But the German family knew better. They suffered the trials and vexations of the Nazi persecution, which, as known today, led to the Holocaust. For them Luxembourg was too near to Germany. Not only did they refuse to establish themselves in a more permanent manner in Luxembourg, but they also strongly advised my father and his family to leave Luxembourg. If their advice had been followed, we would have been spared from many tribulations and dangers and my life would certainly have taken a different turn.

*Before evoking the ordeals, you went through during the war, let us now close the chapter of your educational itinerary.*

I don't know really what to add. My schooling ended abruptly on May 10, 1940, the date of the German invasion. When I left the Athénée on the afternoon of May 9, I had of course not the slightest inkling that this was my last day at this school. In the evening I went to bed neither more nor less worried than the other days. Waking up in the morning, everything had changed.

*And you were becoming an autodidact like your father . . .*

Indeed, most of the things I know, I learned by myself. As time goes on and now, at the dusk of my life I realize more and more how much I am a replica of my father. First, physically when I look at some of his photographs, I see myself in these pictures. He has also transmitted to me a certain dose of professional conscientiousness, and above all, his taste for philosophy and also his anxieties. Just like my father, I select my anxieties. I am strong and calm in front of great dangers and I worry a lot for matters which are rather futile and do not constitute the slightest cause for concern. Later in my professional life, when I was confronted with a really serious problem, I kept my composure and usually asked my collaborators to describe to me in a few words the worst case scenario. And then I set myself to devise an appropriate solution and took a decision. Another proof of my selective anxiety: I never hesitated to take a plane to regions presenting some dangers. On the other side, I am terribly tense when I have to take a blood test until I get the results.

In Luxembourg the laboratories work very fast and it takes them twenty-four hours to deliver the results. Waiting for them, usually in the afternoon, when the clock shows 3 P.M., my nervous system takes the form of a violin on which the strings are too tight. And at each moment, I risk a nervous breakdown. This was also the cause in 2001, when I had a very bad fall while rushing down from my office to the fax machine to check whether my blood results had been sent. I tripped, missed a step, and fell down the wooden stairs from the second to the first floor. Blood was running all over my face, my head had a large wound, and my neck was completely out of place. It took me three months to be presentable again. I still suffer from this fall and regularly need special treatment by a physical therapist. Later at the hospital, where I was transported by an ambulance, my first question was “How is my blood test?” The nurses were amused, the doctor

had a smile on his face and he answered “In this respect, no worry! You better take care of your spine and neck.” He could have put it in a different manner, but that is another chapter to which perhaps one day I shall refer in a short story which could be entitled “The Doctor and the Anxious Patient.”

Let’s get back to your question.

As an autodidact, you may have noticed that I follow to a great extent the trend of our time by practicing lifelong learning.

*In this line of thinking would you recommend to young people today to follow your example of self-education?*

Really not. It’s a very difficult road. Whatever one’s talent and gift, one is disadvantaged with regard to those who have completed higher education with one or several diplomas.

The principles of lifelong learning should, however, reset the scales in favor of the autodidact who practices this system right from the start. Perhaps, but I am not so sure of this, the autodidacts are a bit more creative by not being burdened by lots of details and technicalities taught in schools.

## **The first signs of a devastating blaze**

*Reviewing the years from your birth until the end of the twenties, one has the impression that everything is for the best in the best of worlds. Fun and pleasure instead of blood and battlefields. On the major stock exchanges, particularly on Wall Street, prices keep on soaring. Markets were basking in the sun of “irrational exuberance,” a definition coined by Alan Greenspan, for the market’s behavior in the late nineties. Was it so really?*

I couldn’t tell out of experience because I was too young at that time. Yet, if I peruse newspapers, magazines, or books, what you just said appears to me quite correct. Mankind was dancing

on a volcano which rumbled but did not yet burst into flames, sputtering its hot lava down its slopes. The rumbling volcano induced far-sighted and visionary politicians like Coudenhove-Kalergy to call even at that time for a United Europe. The president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, perhaps too idealistic to be followed, proposed the creation of a League of Nations on a worldwide scale, a premature initiative which only many years later, after the “blood and toil and tears” of the Second World War, became a reality with the creation of the United Nations.

In Italy, fascism was in power since 1922, under Benito Mussolini. Hitler, after he failed to gain power in 1924, and after having completed his book *Mein Kampf* in 1926, finally succeeded to become chancellor of the “Reich” in 1933. This was the start of a reign which caused not only the Second World War, but also the Holocaust, an unprecedented genocide in recorded human history.

*Yet already in the thirties, from time to time some ripples on the flat ocean of optimistic complacency awoke feelings of anxiety. After Hitler came into power and in his strident hysteric voice proclaimed a policy of Blood and Soil, “Blut und Boden,” it appears strange to me that the principle democratic powers were not reacting directly and did not see the danger which was looming on the horizon, soon engulfing practically the whole world.*

Yes, it was some kind of blindness. The great nations were led by politicians, who desperately tried to find ways and means to compose with the paranoiac of Berchtesgaden. You know I am not a historian, therefore I am not competent to analyze the causes which led Hitler to seize power leading to the Second World War. Some people mention as a major cause the failure of the democracies, too weak and inconsistent to cope effectively with the threats. Others said that Germany was humiliated and

confronted with a major economic crisis leading to a staggering inflation and high figures of unemployment. In that nation, hunger prevailed and when Hitler came into power he created jobs with the assistance of the German “War Lords.” Some were powerful “steel makers,” others bankers. They all earned a lot of money and thus let Hitler pursue his goals of murder and devastation. There is a thought, coming to my mind or rather a statement made frequently: “History repeats itself.” My own personal philosophy does not accept this: “Nothing is permanent but change.” So history does not repeat itself but sometimes political leaders, when confronted by great dangers, take similar positions. Lacking a better definition, I would call this phenomenon the “Chamberlain-Daladier effect.”

Let us, for a moment, jump over seventy years. Today we are confronted with the worldwide threat of terrorism. One can make subtle analyses of the causes of terrorism. The fact is that a major catastrophe can hardly be avoided if the democracies continue to turn a blind eye to this threat and even attempt some sort of appeasement and compromise with those who want to enslave the civilized world, who are driven by many forces, such as the search of power and wealth, or the fanatical belief that they act in the name of God. Instead of cooperating and coordinating their efforts on a worldwide scale, some nations follow the policy of Chamberlain and Daladier. But this, my dear friend, would be the topic of another book.

*Yes, let's come back to Luxembourg. Have you some recollections of the period of time preceding the invasion of Luxembourg on May 10, 1940?*

Not many as far as the overall political and economic situation in our country are concerned. Of course, the progressive deterioration of the economy on an international scale did not leave Luxembourg unscathed. As our economy was based primarily on

steel and iron, ARBED, the most representative company in this sector, was continuously laying off people and so this had a negative impact on the overall situation.

*How was life in your family?*

My father had a rather comfortable professional situation as manager of a flourishing furniture store. Financially, we were not affected much. In my family, existence continued with all the features of a Luxembourg middle-class family of Jewish faith. We scrupulously respected the dietary laws of Moses. Only “kosher” meat was on the table. Pork and ham were just abominations. In a family like ours, the main meal consisted of meat or fish with lots of potatoes, some vegetables, and bread. My mother and aunt bought the fish in the open air market, not in specialized seafood stores or supermarkets like today. Like many women, they examined the ears of the fish in order to find out whether it was fresh. As already mentioned, our apartment had no electricity and was lighted through candles and gas. The streets were also lit by gas. My mother and aunt washed their linen in cauldrons in the cellar. I sometimes went down to watch the proceedings, but I did not like the smell which came out of the cauldrons. The dirty linen was washed in boiling water mixed with some sort of soap powder. It was a strenuous physical effort for the women. I watched and did not help because I have a propensity to be a passive onlooker when physical efforts are involved.

*Leaving your family a moment, from what point in time did people in Luxembourg become seriously concerned with the danger which could lead to war?*

After the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the incorporation of Austria in the German Reich, anxiety grew at an increasingly fast pace. However, hope still prevailed that the worst could be

avoided. And even the Jews, though they were threatened by Hitler to be erased from the face of the earth, had the hope that Daladier and Chamberlain could bring Hitler to reason. In Luxembourg, anxiety permeated all strata of society and some sort of solidarity emerged in the face of the common danger. The government still tried very hard to appease the dictator across the border, believing that the traditional neutrality of Luxembourg could be preserved even in the case of war. Bolshevism in the communist Soviet Union was considered by many as the greater threat and this was so until the so-called non-aggression pact signed by Hitler and Stalin, a pact which came to an end when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941.

In 1939 Luxembourg celebrated with great pomp and festive parades the hundredth anniversary of its independence. This was obviously a manifestation of self-delusion. In reality neither great parades nor appeasing statements could restrain the Nazis across the border from invading Luxembourg, if this proved a necessity in the strategy devised by a pathological mind such as the one of Adolph Hitler. The facts proved a few months later that this indeed was the case.

### **The dilemma: die or die in trickles?**

*What was the situation like at this critical period time for the Jewish community as well as the majority of Luxembourgers of Catholic faith? But first, what about anti-Semitism in our country? Was it a serious problem?*

I can only refer to my own experience. Anti-Semitism in Luxembourg was not a dominant feature. In essence anti-Semitism and racism are diseases for which conclusive remedies have not yet been discovered. AIDS is an organic disease; racism and anti-Semitism are mental illnesses. If the conditions, preventing the outbreak of these diseases are not met, then they

have the tendency to spread like wildfire on barren land. In both cases preventive measures have to be taken. As far as the mental diseases, racism and anti-Semitism, are concerned, I think that in our time it needs “new thinking” to be implanted in the minds of people, even in their childhood. This new thinking, which I will elaborate more amply later in our conversation, calls for the dismantling of preconceived ideas, for recognizing the dignity of the other, regardless of his creed and culture. At the same time sound social and economic conditions are essential to avoid the outbreak of racism and anti-Semitism. Let me repeat that in Luxembourg, perhaps because of the size of the country and the mentality of its people, anti-Semitism was never a dominant feature in the fabric of the society. Furthermore, the common threat of Nazism affecting all the Luxembourgers of all creeds and traditions, whether Catholics or Jews, gradually became a binding factor between the various religions.

In the thirties, Luxembourg, like most of the Western European countries, felt a dual danger, the first one coming from the Soviet Union, defined as Bolshevism, the other one from Germany, Nazism. That was the time when the governments of the Western European democracies thought that there was a possibility to co-exist with the dictator in Berlin. Perhaps some people of great influence thought that Nazism after all was the lesser evil, as compared to Bolshevism. Such people existed in many countries including Luxembourg. For the Jews, however, there was no choice: their sworn enemy was Nazism, which systematically fulfilled the plan of Adolf Hitler to eradicate the Jews from this planet. The establishment of the first concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald as well as the “Reichkristallnacht” of 1938, when practically all the synagogues in Germany were burnt and demolished, were threatening signals of doom and death for the Jews.

Therefore, the time approached for us when we had to prepare ourselves to leave our country if the worst should

happen. We were strengthened in this attitude when the Second World War broke out in September 1939. On a more personal note, both my uncles Alex and Max in Germany who felt the danger in their very own existence, never ceased to admonish us to leave the country and to take refuge in places at a reasonably safe distance from Luxembourg.

Uncle Max lived in Berlin. He was an industrialist, quite successful in his business and a respected member of the Berlin society. Like a number of German Jews, he thought that when Hitler came to power, somehow things would work out, that a democracy like Germany, a nation which produced the most brilliant representatives in culture, in literature, in science could not maintain in power the brutal and primitive bunch of criminals like the Nazis. But he was wrong. He was married to my aunt Alice, who came from a Protestant German family. After the racial laws of Nürenberg prohibited under the threat of jail and even death the marriage between what the Germans called pure Aryans and Jews, he was condemned to a prison sentence, because of "Rassenschande" (shameless violation of racial laws). Thanks to some connections and a costly lawyer, he was freed from prison and immediately left Germany. His wife preceded him and took a job with an English family in London as governess. Both established themselves in Brussels where they stayed until the invasion of Belgium. On May 10, 1940 they fled to the South of France.

My uncle Alex and his family left Germany in 1938, passing through Luxembourg and then going to South America, Chile. My uncle Alex had fought gallantly in the German army during the First World War. He even received the Iron Cross, second-class, for acts of courage and bravery. In a tramway in Breslau where he had a haberdashery store, he was insulted by a Nazi. He got up and vigorously slapped the face of this Nazi on both cheeks. Afterwards, it was too dangerous for him to stay and fortunately he and his family were able to leave in time.

All this, as well as the increasingly disquieting news coming from across the border, induced us to make the necessary preparation to leave Luxembourg. As a youngster at that time, fourteen or fifteen years old, I was particularly insistent in this respect. I listened to the speeches of Adolf Hitler on the radio and I was convinced that he would consistently and relentlessly execute his plan to kill all the Jews. I thought that it was essential to go on living and not to be killed prematurely. I was young and even for the older people, I think, it was worthwhile going on living. It was just as simple and fundamental as that, and so I kept on insisting and even harassing my parents, my uncle, and aunt not to hesitate, not to wait too long. My mother was in complete agreement with me in her own way. Quietly but persistently she kept telling my father that we had to leave Luxembourg as soon as possible, that there was no alternative. My father devised plans for departing from Luxembourg once the worst would happen, but while staying in Luxembourg he hoped that somehow things would not turn out as badly as feared. He was not the only one thinking like this. Many Jews in Luxembourg and all over Europe had a similar view. They were basking in illusions. That is a human feature. We find such attitudes practically throughout all the recorded history of mankind. Even today in the twenty-first century, many people feel that the United States is overreacting in its fight against terrorism, that the dialogue should be pursued with the so-called rogue nations, that in the last resort those nations fomenting terrorism could be partners in a constructive dialogue with democracies. This is what I call, and I repeat myself, the “Chamberlain-Daladier” effect.

### The “Arlon” plan

But let us return to Luxembourg and to preparations made by my own family. My father was convinced that if the war broke out and France was attacked, the Maginot Line, an iron wall

along the main borders between France and Germany, would hold and would repel the German invaders. Thus, my parents rented a small apartment in Arlon, a town situated in Belgium, across the border of Luxembourg. We even bought a used car, model 1920, which was placed in a garage in a suburb of Luxembourg and my father had an agreement with a driver to bring us across the border to Belgium whenever needed. Indeed, neither my father nor my uncle had a driver's license. My father strangely believed that Belgium would be spared, even if Luxembourg were invaded. After the pounding from the French Maginot Line, under the command of General Gamelin, the Germans would retreat and would be defeated within a very short period of time, possibly after several weeks. Then we could return to Luxembourg. That was, to quote the title of a famous French movie picture "La grande illusion," *The Great Illusion*. I understand my father now more than in the past. He painfully constructed a career which he did not want to abandon. This illusion was shared by many Jews in Luxembourg, by many people all over Europe.

This situation of the state of hazy uncertainty prevailed until May 10, 1940, when my father early in the morning received a call from a friend living in a bordering town between Germany and Luxembourg: "D'Preisen sin do!" *The Germans are here!*

