

Chapter 2

His Youth in Vienna

Back in Vienna in 1905 Elsa Waniek rented a large apartment which was next to that of her sister Lilli and her husband Rudolf Gmeyer, a well established Viennese lawyer. They had three daughters: Anni (Anna) about two years older than Fritz, Tully (Alice) about the same age and Kitty (Elisabeth), the baby, born shortly after the arrival of Elsa and Fritz in Vienna. Both flats comprised the whole second floor of the house.

Elsa was a very intelligent, self-possessed, intellectual person that in today's jargon would be called a "liberated woman".

She settled down, organized her life and went back to school, finished the gymnasium and entered the University where she studied chemistry and biology, ending with a doctorate. The topic of her dissertation was: "Is pure water poisonous?" She had tremendous energy and enjoyed a very intense social life dominating the lives of her gentle sister, her three nieces and son. The preponderantly female environment in which Fritz grew up was only relieved by the presence of Lilli's husband. His position in the family was unique. He was adored by all as the best, the wisest, to whom everybody had to look up, if not to serve [1]. Charlotte adds in her notes: «I have never understood how Elsa, who thought herself intellectually equal to any man, could believe that men were so utterly superior, that women definitely were meant to serve them and play the part of, at best, beloved slaves»...

«During the summer months the whole family went to their country house in Baden, near Vienna. There was a large garden with fruit trees. The children loved to climb them, eat cherries, spitting the stones into the grass. Lilli discovered that soon enough, forbade it strictly and went back into the house. The children remained in the trees, went on eating cherries, but now swallowed the stones also. The result was a terrible tummy ache and, probably, some punishment too.

In the house there were frequent musical evenings. The enormous living room made the grand piano look small. Fritz and his cousins must have listened very often to chamber music, trios and string quartets.

Tully studied the piano and acquired a Ph.D in music. Fritz was not considered gifted enough, though he loved classical music all his life. Anni was the poet of the family and the baby sister was too young to be considered.

The emphasis in their education was literature and the classics. Fritz's mother had studied science. She had taught at the University during the First World War, when there was a scarcity of teachers, but later on devoted her life to the study of history of arts and philosophy. She studied Nietzsche and involved herself in Hindu philosophy. With her phenomenal memory she seemed to me (Charlotte) a living encyclopaedia. The small family estate was not large enough for her enterprising energy. She began to lecture for private groups on history of arts, combining this with tours through the museum. Her main thoughts, her main interests were Nietzsche and Goethe.

In Vienna there was a group of young women who sat at her feet and adored her. She herself was in turn fascinated and influenced by another dominating and very intellectual woman, Laura, who led a salon in Berlin, where she ruled supreme ».

Elsa was under Laura's spell for several years, but was very likely too intelligent to be dictated to. « What is still puzzling me as I write this story is the extraordinary philosophy on life which pervaded Elsa and her circle. They combined the loftiest ideals as outlined by the philosophers with the humblest notions of serenity they needed in daily life ». Charlotte remembers one tale where Laura and her disciples were in the mountains, found an empty shepherd's hut and began a thorough spring cleaning, washing the dirty shirts etc. The shepherd must have been tremendously annoyed when he returned; also he might have appreciated it.

Another "liberated woman" that had also an influence on the formation of Fritz and his cousins was Genia Schwarzwald, usually called "Tante Genia" or "Fraudoktor". She had created a circle of many people interested in music, literature, politics and economics and organized summer camps for the young people of the Viennese "elite schools" in different vacation resorts, such as Grundlsee, Ischl and so on. Karl Popper, Rudolf Serkin, the quadrefolium (Paul Lazarsfeld, Joseph Gluecksmann, Ludwig Wagner and Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski) were used to participate in these summer colonies. Fritz Houtermans and his cousin Tully went to some of them.

« When Fritz was in his teens, life became difficult, in general, because of the First World War (1914–1918), and for him in particular, because of tensions at home between the group of the four children and the three grown-up people, who had developed rather complicated mutual relations among them. These were due in part to the presence of a single grown-up man with two women, in part to the dominating nature of Elsa, who, at one time or another, made all the others feel not to be up to the intellectual standards she had set for herself. Fritz started to show such a difficult behaviour that his mother, through her friend Anna Freud, arranged for Fritz to be taken care of by Anna's father, Sigmund Freud. The sessions, however, did not last long because when Fritz realized that he had to relate his

dreams to Freud, he and his imaginative cousin Anni began to invent dreams, which Freud soon discovered and stopped the psychoanalytic treatment [1] ».

Already at the age of 8 Fritz was fascinated by stars, minerals and butterflies and a few years later, by mathematics and also by history. The literary and musical atmosphere at home left its imprint on him but he never played an instrument or wrote.

« In a way he was somewhat of an outsider: since nobody took his interests seriously. His mother realized that he was very intelligent and somehow furthered his inclinations, but he was rather rebellious and challenged her authority but never succeeded to upset her Olympian calmness. Fritz went to the Akademische Gymnasium well known for counting among its graduates many young people that later became famous in one way or another: for example the poet Hugo von Hoffmannsthal (1874–1929), the mathematician Richard von Mises (1883–1953) and the physicist Erwin Schrödinger (1887–1961). Fritz became a close friend of his classmate Paul Boschan [2], and also of Rudolf Serkin and Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski. Years later Serkin became one of the greatest pianists of his time, and Weissberg a recognized physicist-chemist, whose life-line crossed that of Fritz Houtermans again in later periods. In those years Houtermans, Boschan and a few others of their schoolmates deepened the reading of “Plato Dialogues” and “Presocratics” and discussed thoroughly “Das ideal der inneren Freiheit bei den griechischen Philosophen” by Heinrich Gomperz [3], whose father, Theodor Gomperz was the well-known author of the “Greek Thinkers” [4]. A copy of the book “Aufruf zum Sozialismus” by Gustav Landauer [5], given by Fritz to Boschan, was inscribed by him with quotes from the “Novum Testamentum, Graece et Latine” [6] rendering of the sermon of the mountain and a quote from Friedrich Adler’s “Vor dem Ausnahmegericht”. Fritz used to cite Landauer’s statement “Der Marxismus prophezeit aus dem Kaffeessatz” (Marxism makes predictions from the tea-leaves) ».

Around 1917 Fritz contributed, together with a few others of his friends, to the journal “Der sozialistische Mittelschüler”. At the time of the assassination by Friedrich Adler of the Austrian Prime Minister, Count Stürck, both Fritz and Adler belonged to the “Verein für Sozialwissenschaften” and Fritz wrote an article on “Der sozialistische Mittelschüler” supporting violence as a necessary means to obtain political changes in connection with discussing the defence of Friedrich Adler before the extra-ordinary court [7].

This gave rise to a long and rather heated discussion with his friend Paul Boschan who insisted on the need for finding more gradual means for reaching radical changes, but the « stifling circumstances which had led to the emigration of many active intellectuals from Austria, were so horrible to make him (Fritz) impatient [2] ».

The difficult life conditions, after the First World War, but even more the family tensions, had started to make Fritz’s life in Vienna not easy at all. Even forty years later, on various occasions Houtermans said: “Danke Gott wenn Du noch eine Mutter hast, aber ich hatte zwei” (Thank God if you have a mother, but I had two).

The final blow was his dismissal from the Akademische Gymnasium after he read inside the school, on occasion of the 1st May celebration, the “Communist Manifesto” in front of a crowd of schoolmates.

Thus Fritz went for the last year of school to the Landeserziehungsheim in Wickersdorf in Germany (Thüringen), which in those years was one of the best progressive schools in Central Europe [2]. Following the general scheme established by the director of this school Gustav Wyneken [8], pupils of different ages and sexes lived there in small groups under the care of a teacher who succeeded to create something of a family life for all of them.

The Landeserziehungsheim was one of the educational enterprises created in the course of the “deutsche Jugendbewegung” which appeared here and there in Germany and Austria in those years. Wyneken was involved in a dispute with the less progressive parts of the Youth Movement.

“Fraudoktor’s” saloon and colonies, the intellectual students of the Akademische Gymnasium and the educational radicalism of the Wickersdorf School characterized the general background relevant to Fritz’s life story.

At Wickersdorf, Fritz made lifelong friends, one being Irmine von Holten, the other one Heinrich Kurella. Irmine, later, married Robert d’Escourt Atkinson, an English physicist and astrophysicist who worked for his doctorate under James Franck at the same time as Fritz, and collaborated with Fritz in the late 20s. Heinrich Kurella later became Sitzredakteur (permanent editor) of the “Rote Fahne”, the journal of a rather small group of communists which included Ernst Fischer and Manes Sperber [9]. In Austria, at that time, there was a strong socialist party supported by the working class. The communists were few and in great part “crazy intellectuals”, at least in the opinion of the other leftist Austrians belonging to more or less the same circles. Weissberg most probably became a member of the communist party, at least later, but at the beginning he appeared to have a political orientation in some way in between the socialist party and the communist group.

Fritz Houtermans probably never became a member of the communist party, but at that time was extremely attracted by the “crazy intellectuals” who, in many respects, conformed to his anti-conformist views.

In 1933 the Nazi party was becoming more and more threatening and Kurella had to escape from Berlin [10]. He went to Zurich and became the chief editor of the illegal newspaper Inprecor (International Press Correspondence). About one year later, the Swiss Intelligence discovered his activity and expelled him from the country.

Kurella went to U.S.S.R. but, shortly later, was arrested and put on trial, condemned and finally executed as an anticommunist agent. He was one of the many victims of the massive and devastating political repressions that, at the end of the second “five-year plan” shook the U.S.S.R., which according to Stalin’s official declarations was entering into the socialist era [11].

References

1. Charlotte Riefenstahl (Fritz Houtermans' first wife) gave me copies of the following manuscripts she had written in various periods of her life for either her children (a, b, c) or close friends (d): (a) 26 pages manuscript she wrote for her children about the family background of Fritz Houtermans; (b) "And he was always right", the typewritten pages, dated September 1948; (c) 21 typewritten pages written after Fritz's death, during a vacation she took in July 1966 in Brione, high on the Lugano Lake. (d) 7 typewritten pages circulated among a few friends in 1981.
2. Paul Boschan, a classmate of Fritz Houtermans and later a mathematician, who emigrated to the U.S.A. where he worked for the Institute of Applied Econometrics. He gave me a number of useful information the 26th April 1980, when I visited him with Charlotte Riefenstahl in his house at 181 New Hamstead Road, New City, N.Y. 10956 and in later correspondence.
3. About H. Gomperz see in the "Michigan Quarterly Review", winter 1979, the article by Karl Popper "Three Worlds", footnote on p. 13.
4. Theodor Gomperz: "The Greek Thinkers".
5. Gustav Landauer: "Ausruf zum Sozialismus".
6. Novum Testamentum, Graece et Latine, Eberhard Nestle, United Bible Society, London.
7. Friedrich Wolfgang Adler (Vienna 1879, Zurich 1960), Austrian politician, socialdemocratic, antimilitaristic, who, for protesting against the First World War, killed the Austrian Prime Minister Stürck. Condemned to death and amnestied after the fall of the monarchy, he became a member, after the revolution, of the Austrian National Council. Exiled in 1938, he became secretary of the International Union of the Socialist Workers until 1940. From 1940 to 1946 he was in New York as President of the Austrian Labour Committee.
8. Gustav Wyneken.
9. Manes Sperber from Yugoslavia is the author of the book "Der verbrannte Dornbusch".
10. In the book "Out of the Night" (Alliance Book, New York 1941) Jan Valtin presents the history of the communist party in Germany before and during Hitler time.
11. See, for example: (a) Roy A. Medvedev: "Let History Judge, the Origins and Consequences of Stalinism, Vintage Books, New York, 1973. (b) G. Boffa: "Storia dell'Unione Sovietica", Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano, 1976.