



*Excerpts from*  
**THE WONDERFUL YEARS**

*by Reiner Kunze*

**PEACE CHILDREN**

**Seven-Year-Old**

He holds a pistol in each hand, he has a toy tommy gun hanging on his chest.

"How does your mother feel about these weapons?"

"She bought them for me."

"And why?"

"Because of the bad people."

"And who is good?"

"Lenin."

"Lenin? Who is he?"

He thinks hard, but does not know what to answer.

"You don't know who Lenin is?"

"The captain."



**Eleven-Year-Old**

"I've been elected to the group council," says the boy, skewering cubes of ham onto his fork.

The man who ordered the meal for him is silent.

"I'm responsible for Socialist defense training," says the boy.

"For what?"

"For Socialist defense training."

He sucks macaroni off his lower lip.

"And what do you have to do?"

"I prepare maneuvers and stuff like that."



**DEFENDING AN  
IMPOSSIBLE METAPHOR**

**Fifteen**

She wears a skirt. It beggars description, for even one word would be too long. Her scarf, however, is like a double train: casually slung around the neck, it drops full-width over her shin and calf. (She'd love to have a scarf which at least three grandmothers have knitted on for two and a half years—a kind of woolen Niagara Falls. I think she'd claim that a scarf like that perfectly matches her philosophy of life. But who could have known two and a half years ago that such scarves would be in, today?) Along with the scarf, she wears sneakers, on which all her friends, boys and girls, have signed their names. She is 15 and doesn't care beans what ancient people think—that's anyone over 30.

Could any of them understand her, even if he tried hard? I'm over 30.

When she listens to music, the door panels vibrate even two rooms away. I know this volume means greater pleasure for her. Partial satisfaction of her need to protest. Supersonic blocking of unpleasant logical conclusions. Trance. Nevertheless, I always catch myself short-circuiting. I suddenly feel an urge to ask her to please turn down the radio. How, then, could I understand her—with my nervous system?

An even greater handicap is my tendency to try and ground all-too-lofty thoughts.

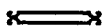
The dust snows on the furniture in her room. It surges underneath her bed. Scattered all over are hairpins, a pocket mirror, remnants of wet-look leather, loose-leaf binders, apple cores, a plastic bag that says "The fragrance of the big wide world," heaps of half-read books (Hesse, Karl May, Hölderlin), jeans with legs turned inside out, sweaters pulled half and three-quarters inside out, panty hose, nylons, and used handkerchiefs. (The foothills of this mountainous landscape branch right into the bathroom and the kitchen.) I know: she doesn't want to abandon herself to the trivia of life. She fears any cramping of the view, of the mind. She fears any deadening of the soul through repetition! Furthermore, she weighs activities against one another according to the displeasure they might involve and regards it as an expression of personal freedom to ignore the greater displeasures. But not only do I secretly clean her room every now and then to protect her mother from heart spasms—I also have to resist the temptation to move these trivia into her field of vision and contribute to the development of internal obligations.

Once I gave in to this temptation. She's horrified of spiders. So I said: "There were two nests of spiders under your bed."

Her lilac-shadowed eyelids vanished behind popping eyeballs, and she started shrieking: "Eeh! Yechh! Ugh!" so that her English teacher, had she been present, would have fainted at this wealth of glottal stops. "And why do they have to build their nests under *my* bed?"

"No one ever bothers them there." I didn't want to hint any harder, and she *is* intelligent.

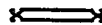
By evening, she had regained her inner equilibrium. Lying in bed, she had an almost supercilious air. Her slippers were on the piano. "I'm keeping them up there from now on," she said. "So the spiders can't crawl in."



#### Wire

She regrets that her vision is not impaired. If her vision were impaired, she could wear wire-rimmed glasses. The parents of a student who wore wire-rimmed glasses to school were warned: wire-rimmed glasses are an imperialistic fad, decadence. To prove it, the teacher presented illustrations from a Western magazine showing long-haired males wearing wire-rimmed glasses.

The morning she could go to school in wire-rimmed glasses would be a day she'd be glad to go. Her great-grandfather had worn wire-rimmed glasses. He was a miner. Her grandfather had worn wire-rimmed glasses. He was a miner. To prove it, she would display the photos.



### Image of Man

*Scene of dialogue: Expanded high school in G.*

*Time: Two hundred thirty years after the demise of Friedrich Wilhelm I, King of Prussia.*

*Teacher:* You always come to school in such dingy sweaters.

*Pupil (female):* I beg your pardon, but you're insulting my mother.

*Teacher:* I don't mean that your sweaters aren't washed. But you wear such dark colors.

*Pupil:* I'm blond.

*Teacher:* I want the students in my class to wear optimistic colors. Besides, your long hair looks untidy.

*Pupil:* I comb it several times a day.

*Teacher:* But the part down the middle isn't straight.



### Order

The girls and boys who sat down on the corner bench in the empty railroad station were coming from a jazz concert. Their conversation quickly faded. Each in turn put his head on his neighbor's shoulder. The first train was at 4:46 A.M.

Two transport policemen, with a German shepherd on a leash, appeared in the entrance, headed toward the bench, and tugged on the sleeves of the sleepers. "Either sit up straight or leave the station. Order must be maintained!"

"What do you mean, order?" asked one of the boys after straightening up. "Can't you see? We all know

where our heads are at."

"If you don't button your lip, you'll get thrown out on the spot. Understand?" The policemen walked on.

The young people leaned the other way. Ten minutes later, the patrol came back and ordered them out of the station.

Outside, it was drizzling. The hand on the big clock whipped to one like a rubber truncheon.



### Element

#### 1

In the apprentice dormitory, Michael put the Bible on his bookshelf. Not because he's religious, but because he finally wanted to read it. The teacher, however, pointed out to him that a Bible has no business being on the bookshelf of a Socialist dormitory. Michael refused to take the Bible off the shelf. What apprentice dormitory is not Socialist, he asked. Given that in a Socialist state every apprentice dormitory is Socialist, and given that it is not one of the duties of the Church to train certified chemical technicians, ergo, he concluded, if the teacher was right, then no one who insisted on being allowed to put the Bible on his bookshelf in a dormitory in a Socialist state could ever become a certified chemical technician. This logic, delivered behind the shield of the medal that had been awarded to Michael at the end of 10th grade (A+ average), quickly brought him under the principal's eyes. The Bible vanished, and Michael continued to think logically. The civics teacher, however, began classifying him as one of those elements not foreseen

in Mendeleev's periodic table, called "unstable."

## 2

One evening Michael was summoned to the factory security office. A man in plainclothes produced a statement in which an "I" agreed not to set foot in the capital [East Berlin] during the World Youth and Student Festival, and asked him to sign it. Why? asked Michael. The man looked at him as though he hadn't heard the question. He would be on vacation during the World Festival, said Michael, and under his bed he had brand-new mountaineering boots, which he certainly hadn't gotten to climb the TV tower on Berlin's Alexanderplatz. He wouldn't even be in the country during the World Festival.—Well, then he could sign, said the man, reaching across the table and moving the ballpoint pen that lay by the paper to the middle of the page.—But why? asked Michael. The statement, he said, sounded like an admission of guilt. He was not aware of any guilt. At worst, he had once nearly hitched a ride in a VW beetle with a West Berlin license plate. The security organs had inquired about him at school. But that, he said, was no reason for him to sign an agreement not to go to Berlin during the World Festival.—What was or was not a reason for him was not the issue here, said the man. The only issue here was his signature.—But they would have to provide grounds, said Michael.—Having to do something here, said the man, was solely due to the fact that in this state the workers and peasants wielded the power. It was therefore advisable not to make any trouble.—Michael began to fear they might not let him

hitch to the High Tatra. He stifled a remark that he took the last words as a threat and signed.

Two days before the start of his vacation, his I.D. card was confiscated, and he was handed a provisional pass that did not entitle him to leave the German Democratic Republic and bore the invisible words: unstable element.

## 3

With the topographical image of the High Tatra in his head and mountaineering boots on his feet, Michael set out for the Baltic Sea. Since it wouldn't have made sense to hitch from Z, he took the train to K. At the station platform at K, when he stepped down with a guitar on his shoulder, a patrol asked for his papers. "Aha," said one of the transit policemen upon seeing the pass and ordered him to come along. He was handed over to two city policemen, who brought him to the People's Police District Station.

"Unpack everything!"

He unpacked.

"Pack up!"

He packed up.

"Sign here!"

For a second time, he signed a statement in which an "I" agreed not to enter the capital during the World Festival. Around 12 P.M., they released him.

In the morning (Michael had just stationed himself at the roadside to thumb a lift), a squad car halted unbidden. "Your papers, please."

A short time later, Michael was back in the People's Police District Station.

"Unpack everything!"

He unpacked.

"Pack up!"

This time he was taken to a com-

munal cell. A small rally of guitars for the Festival was off limits: they had been caught with a Biermann number, or with the slogan SEIZE THE TIME. His name was called.

"Where to?"

"A Swiss band needs a guitarist," said the policeman sarcastically. He took him back to Z. Michael faced the music at the People's Police District Station.

"So you wanted to go to Berlin."

"I wanted to go to the Baltic."

The policeman ripped off Michael's headband. "If you lie again, I'll give you a solid feeling of the power of workers and peasants!"

Michael was photographed (with headband, without headband) and released.

To avoid any further suspicion that he wanted to go to Berlin, he decided to hitch east first and then down the Oder River to the coast. In F, a driver offered to take him unmistakably far beyond the latitude of Berlin the next day. "7:30 A.M. at the station."

At 7:30 A.M., the square in front of the station was blue with shirts and flags: people were gathering for the trip to the World Festival in Berlin. A marshal with an armband asked Michael whether he belonged to a 50-man group. "Do I look like I do?"

The marshal came back with two station policemen.

"Your papers!"

Michael refused to go along. He explained. He pleaded. They grabbed his arms. Railroad station cell. Interrogation. The policemen advised him to buy an express ticket and go back. He protested. He had the right to spend his vacation wherever his pass allowed him to.

He didn't have to go all the way back to Z, said the policemen, just

to D. But if he caused any problems, he would force them to notify the People's Police District Station, and then he wouldn't be let off so easily. Two guards and a dog escorted him to the ticket window and to the train.

"If you get out before D, you'll be taken into custody!"

At every station, there was a guard with a dog. In D, two policemen were waiting for him, they ordered him to buy a ticket for Z immediately and go to the train. He gave up. On the platform in Z, he waited for the policemen to come up to him. After comparing his photo with his face, they gave him back the pass. "You can go."

"Where to?" asked Michael.



#### Literature Class

She was beside herself. The teacher had called Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn scoundrels. "Can you imagine?" she said. And then again: "Just imagine!" You could see what the Nobel Prize was worth by the fact that scoundrels like Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn had gotten it, the teacher had said. She had pretended to be sick and left the classroom. "You can't just sit there," she said.

I said, "But a book by Pasternak was published here."

"Which one?"

"*Initials of Passion.*"

"When?"

I took the volume of poems from the bookcase and opened to the title page.

"1969? Here? Scoundrels are published in *our* country?!" She grabbed

her forehead with both hands. "And to think I didn't know!"

She was crushed.



### At Least

A party, probably lasting till morning so that it wouldn't be worth coming home to sleep? In the middle of the school week? I advised her against it. "The next day you'll barely get through classes, which will only hurt you," I said. "Besides, one of the teachers could make an issue of it."

"No skin off my back," she said.

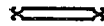
I shot into orbit around the desk, "What do you want? . . . Knowledge!" I said. "At least you ought to want it, for not wanting to tell lies with the others isn't enough. And when I say *knowledge*, you know I mean exact knowledge, which the teachers possess, too. When will you all finally understand that those teachers who are not interested in denying you their knowledge should not be forced into a position in which they would have to agree with the ones who'd rather get rid of you as soon as possible? And the ones who see you as dangerous—whether to the salvation of the world as they picture it, or to their careers, for which they will wreck the life of any young person whose sincerity gets in their way—you should never provide these teachers with arguments against you—on a party platter, so to speak!"

She stood there, her head bowed.

"And think about Born," I said. Born counted. In 1968, he had been the only teacher in the school who wouldn't sign a declaration hailing the invasion of Czechoslovakia. After

that, he had retreated to a sanatorium for a few months. She also knew that he had repeatedly taken her side. Just recently, a new teacher had seen her sitting on a curb and brought it up at a faculty meeting. This was beatnik behavior, unworthy of a high-school student. Born had asked: Would it be unworthy of a young worker? "Every argument you provide against yourself you also provide against him," I said.

Suddenly there were tears in her eyes. Before leaving the room, she said: "If only you were like Sibylle's parents, pigheaded, saying no to everything, then I could at least do something against you!"



## CAFÉ SLAVIA

### But Heroes

(Motto of M, motorized artilleryman)

First alert, late July.\* Three days, then over. All leaves canceled. Explanation: Black Lion NATO maneuver. . . . At the next alert, gun and ammo on the cot. Camouflage uniform. In the afternoon, Red Meeting. Every day, loading and unloading. . . . First scuttlebutt: Czech movie troupe wanted to make film with the help of West German Army, which West German Army used as pretext to march into Czechoslovakia. Disturbances in Prague. . . . Officially confirmed at Red Meeting. Policy: Since we have to reckon with West German Army's refusal to

\*When East German and other Warsaw Pact armies mobilized in response to the "liberalization" of the Czech regime, summer, 1968.

stop at our border, we may be forced to attack. . . . Our radio—big superheterodyne—is jammed. All we can get is GDR stations. Dial sealed with adhesive tape. Higher alert phase. 8/19: Early alert. No more Red Meetings. 8/20, 0330: Fall in with battle gear. Military gas masks passed out and Jumbo—nickname for antinuclear tarpaulin. Some guys had had target practice only eight times. Another advance—a quickie—except for officers and staff sergeant. Then: Forward! Without being told the destination. And without rest. In P, tank regiment on trailers. Morning of 21st: Reconnaissance on the car. Printed leaflets: Czechoslovakia asks the Warsaw Pact for help. Fulfillment of obligations. First test. Reminder of oath. Not a word on the reason for the call for help. . . . Most men view the whole thing as a change of pace. Only worry: getting back by October. Concerned only the discharge candidates, whose hitch is up in October. . . . Through North and Central Bohemia, 30 kilometers before B: Halt. Woods. The *Führer's* bunker. Five tents. Every soldier has to dig himself a hole, pup tent over it, that's all. Gap between troops and officers huge. Still. But mood: normal. Not much to do. Two to four hours of political instruction daily. Same rationale: West German Army invasion, Black Lion NATO maneuver near the border. Tape lectures, some with slides. Brilliant lecture on the Beats with textual analysis of *I Set Fire*. I set fire, that's my fate. Political aspect: Person doesn't think further. Lots of Beat poetry. Also discussion on Beatles. Again with lots of music. Masses calmed down. Politically, too. The disturbances in Prague caused by rowdies. Everything under control. The military

action not aimed at the Czech people. . . . Insulated from the outside world. No newspapers. Just *Neues Deutschland*\* once. Mail: Just open cards with army mail number. Model texts suggested: "Don't worry, I'm fine." By chopper to Berlin. Postmarked there. . . . Next to us, Poles, white stripe on helmets. Next to the Poles, Soviets. Each in a separate camp. . . . Suddenly, new information about call for help: Disturbances in Prague were against Dubcek,† and the police couldn't keep the situation under control. Arms caches discovered. . . . Truckdriver brought along a story: Buddy swapped army property for booze. Courtmartialed and shot. . . . Panic, Red Meeting. Question: How is that possible in a Socialist army? . . . Printed hand-out: What Is My Fatherland? Commentary on oath of allegiance. Stress on seriousness of oath. Anyone taking it is under military jurisdiction. Severest punishment because of martial law. First indication that martial law was declared. We crapped in our pants! Terrified for our bare lives. Every step, every word could mean death. For instance, when plastered. No morale. . . . Raw weather. Clothes clammy, dirty. The discharge candidates saw black: it was already mid-September! . . . Till then, normal movies: East German, Soviet. Nothing political. Entertainment. Now movies to juice up morale. French-Italian co-productions. *Tiger of the Seven Seas*, *The Three Musketeers*. When they didn't draw anymore—sex. Swedish flicks with English subtitles. Silent movies for

\* Daily newspaper published by the East German Socialist Unity Party.

† Alexander Dubcek, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, January 4, 1968-April 17, 1969.

us. But flesh. One was called *Black Gravel*. English, I think. Woman—mid-thirties, fairly well off, picks up guy on the street and exploits his manhood. Leaches him, wipes him out. Then throws him back into his asocial milieu. Only bed scenes. With fore- and after-play. The warriors roared. . . . Gradually—through truckdrivers—things trickle in from outside: abortive attempts at contacting Czechs. Big awakening: “I thought *they* called *us*?!” Now it was clear why the Soviets were in Prague, and not us. We would have stirred up memories. . . . Squadron demoralized. Every other word is “home.” For “Hi!”—“When are we going home?” Some officers almost chummy. Especially when a soldier on duty had a heated vehicle at night. . . . Finally it was announced that Dubcek had been thrown out. He hadn’t shown the necessary severity towards the class enemy. . . . From now on, every time something went wrong, there was only one pet phrase: Dubcek’s final revenge!—If you cut yourself on a can-opener: Dubcek’s final revenge!—“Third Company—peel potatoes”: Dubcek’s final revenge! One question more pointed than the other. No one afraid any more. The men would have shot only to protect their own lives. I grew up

more in this time than in years! . . . Finally: alcohol. Official prohibition. Now a big bottle of beer every day. Hard stuff on the sly. If you had the bread. There was always someone. . . . We went back on October 28. Stopped in every large town. Young Pioneers. Scarves. Tea. Mayor. Factory delegations. Pictures. Albums. School classes with flags. “Maneuver Ball” in the marketplace. The only women: Free German Youth girls. Finally something to hold onto. The whole thing—four days. The soldiers—pissed off. Looked like pigs. Underwear changed three times in two months. They stank. But they were heroes.



#### Note

- I am grateful to my wife for her selflessness.
- I am grateful to Marcela that she never denied her father even during the years when she had to find herself.
- I am grateful to our friends for their sympathy and their help.

