Eva and Otto

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Part II.

Otto’s Path to 28 Boulevard Poissonnière

*It was spring when I reached Paris, and spring in Paris is overwhelming.*

— Otto recalling his move to Paris in 1927
5. Childhood in Munich (1900–1920)

Otto was born in Munich, Germany, in 1900, “the first year in a brand-new century,” as Otto put it.¹ His parents were Catholic. His father Jakob was a bricklayer and his mother Martina delivered newspapers to help with the family’s meager income. Otto had an older sister Rosa and three younger sisters: Dora, Tina, and Lina.²

Jakob was twenty-three years old when he met and married Otto’s mother. They started their young family in a poor suburb of Munich where Otto was born as their second child. The family then moved to a tiny flat in Schwabing, a borough in the northern part of Munich. Otto recalled,

The earliest memory I have of my childhood is when we moved from Haidhausen to a new place in Schwabing. I was about three years old. My mother pushed me in one of those old-fashioned high-wheeled baby carriages along the cobblestone streets. It was a long walk, and it must have been tiresome for my sister Rosa who was only five, and who went with us alongside the carriage.

The tiny flat at Schleissheimerstrasse 73 had only a kitchen, two bedrooms, a very small “Kammer” [room], and a toilet. This was to be the home that saw all of us five children grow up, and where our mother still lived alone at the time when her life came to an end. As a bricklayer, my father did not earn much, and it was hard to pay the rent; so, one of the bedrooms and the little “Kammer” had to be sublet. I still can hardly believe that at one
time, the five of us children and my father had to stay in one room. My mother slept on the kitchen sofa.

Otto recalled his father’s humble background: “My father, Jakob Pfister, was born in 1875 in Gerolzhofen, a small town not far from Schweinfurth, in Lower Franconia. He was the oldest of the seven children of Kaspar Pfister, a day laborer (Tagelöhner), and his wife Margarete. The small house in which the family lived . . . leaned against an old, massive, round tower that was part of the town’s medieval fortifications.” Observing and experiencing hard physical work dominated Otto’s memories of his early childhood—including his summer visits to his grandparents:

Grandmother had a vegetable garden, and she kept, besides a few goats and chickens, half a dozen geese. It was one of my chores to drive them every morning to a stream running through nearby meadows, when I spent my summer vacations there. Another chore was to take lunch to grandfather who worked not far away at the railroad station, shoveling coal day in and day out from freight cars into horse drawn carts. It was a backbreaking job.

The life of Otto’s mother had even more humble beginnings. In a brief account of her early life, she wrote, “Was born a poor Christ child on December 29, 1871, and half a war-child, and because of that born out of wedlock—so three times poor.” She suffered hardships as a child, including injuries sustained when she became stuck in the snow while delivering bread during a severe winter storm. The injuries caused bone splinters and open sores that nearly resulted in the amputation of her legs. She recovered and later became a salesgirl at the Marienplatz in Munich, where she met Jakob Pfister; they married in 1898. This did not end her struggles: “Then the worries began again, until one had brought up five children while also having to go to work. And when I thought that finally better times would come now that the children were grown—the hardest thing hit me: the husband left me.” Otto recalled his mother’s burdens:

Life was hardest for my mother. To add to her household money, she had taken on a job of delivering newspapers. At that time,
that was done by women. The paper had to be carried to the subscriber's door, often three or four flights up, twice a day, even on Sunday mornings. She left the house at 5:30 a.m., and came back only after we had already left for school. At night, she did not get home until after 5:00, when she hurried to get dinner ready. A grueling task that had to be done day in and day out. In winter, father sometimes helped her, carrying the pouch through heavy snow.

I also see her scrubbing the clothes on the kitchen table, after they had been boiled on the kitchen range. To dry the wash, she had to carry it two flights up to the attic. Once a week, she went down on her knees to wash and scrub our bare wood floors. In the evenings, she sat for hours darning our socks and stockings, and mending our clothes. We children did not always realize how hard she worked all the time.

Otto closely observed and admired his father’s work and training as a bricklayer:

For a while, he was an apprentice with a cobbler, but he decided soon that this was not what he wanted to do with his life. At fifteen, he set out for Munich where he had a cousin who was a builder; and he became a bricklayer. At night, he went to trade school. I remember being very impressed as a boy when I discovered a big roll of drawings he had made at school, all executed meticulously in China ink. I also remember how proud I was when his cousin, Baumeister Michael Reinhard, who was my godfather, told me once that Jakob was a very hardheaded fellow, but surely he was the best bricklayer in town.

Otto’s father was stern—a man of few words. Yet Otto was filled with pride on weekends as he walked to the flea markets by his tall father’s side, without talking, through the streets of Munich. And during the week, Otto looked forward to his father’s return home from work: “I see myself standing at the kitchen windowsill, eagerly waiting for my father to come home for lunch, pushing his bike across the backyard. We had window boxes with geraniums, and sturdy iron crossbars, to keep us from falling out the window—the flat was on the third floor.”
Otto especially admired his father’s ability to repair things. “On Sunday mornings, we kids had to go to early Mass. Often, when we came home, father was busy repairing our shoes. He had even learned how to fix half soles with wooden pegs. He taught me how to insert a hog bristle to the end of a pitched twine. In the afternoon, then, he sat sometimes for hours to clean and repair watches that he had bought at the flea market.”

His father’s interest in literature deeply influenced Otto. “Father liked to read. He also liked to memorize, and to recite, long ballads, such as Schiller’s ‘Die Glocke.’ From auctions, he came home with hauls of books that he had bought for little money. Although he was not active politically, though he was a union man, he read liberal publications such as the Simplicissimus and Die Jugend.” Otto inherited his father’s love of reading and memorizing. Throughout his life, Otto would recite poems by Goethe, Schiller, and others that he had memorized as a child.

Otto had only eight years of formal education, from 1906 to 1914. He was anxious about attending school at first. “Shortly before school started, I was filled with great fear—as though a big dark wall was falling onto me, and I could not escape. By that time, I was six, and really was in great distress.” But Otto did very well academically. “All that fear turned out to be groundless: I liked school! And I liked it all along, and always had excellent grades, through the eight years of Volksschule (elementary school). I loved geometry and drawing, and I liked to read. My playmates teasingly called me der Leser (the reader).”

Otto developed a craving for learning. He was fascinated by nature and history and by the achievements of human beings. As a child, he stood on the hills outside of Munich and watched young men attempting to fly in contraptions similar to those used by the Wright brothers in America. Otto loved to read about Greek and Roman history and about art and architecture. He would have loved to continue his schooling beyond his eight years at the Volksschule, but his family could not afford it. “One great disappointment came when I could not move to the Realschule, as did many of my friends. At that time, higher education was reserved for the well-to-do. We had no money, and I had no access to any of those rare token scholarships given to the poor. The only alternative was to learn a trade, which I started to do when I was fourteen.”

It was Otto’s father’s decision that his son should learn the cabinet-making trade as an apprentice. Otto recalled, “Already as a little boy, I
had loved to make doll furniture for my four sisters—out of cigar boxes. So it was easily decided that I should become a cabinetmaker.” Otto was not happy with this decision. “I wanted so badly to be something ‘better.’ So I begged and begged my father to find a place for me with a friend of his, a wood carver. His friend was willing to take me on but advised strongly against it: with the modern trend in furniture styles, carving was out; there was no future. So, cabinetmaking it had to be.”

Otto began his apprenticeship “that fateful August in 1914 when World War I broke out.” Too young and frail to serve as a soldier in that war, Otto worked as an apprentice from 1914 to 1918—not learning to craft beautiful furniture but instead making ammunition boxes:

Those were hard years. Soon, the boss took in defense work. We toiled up to 60 hours a week, making ammunition boxes by the never-ending thousands. Working conditions were most unhealthy—no dust exhausts provided on the machines. I still marvel how I made it without getting tuberculosis.

Since we did not often get our hands on a piece of furniture, I did not learn too much of the trade. But dovetails [hand-crafted corner joints], which we used on the boxes, I could do almost blindfolded! Added to all the hardship was the scarcity of food through the war years. As a growing youngster, I seldom got my fill. Sundays, we went out to tramp from farm to farm to gather some eggs, some butter, some meat here and there. And I was always tired.

Despite his long hours of work, Otto still found time to read. He borrowed books from the library and read newspapers. What he learned began to test his views of the world:
At sixteen, a friend gave me Darwin's *The Evolution of the Species*. I had already felt a growing alienation from my Catholic upbringing. Although I could not fully follow Darwin's writings, to read him made me abandon the dogmatism of the Church. At random, I discovered writers like Hoffmannsthal, Chamisso, Kleist, among others, and even Poe, Maupassant, and Shakespeare. My early patriotism, nourished by our chauvinistic textbooks, petered out, and when I came across writings about the Socialist movement in Germany, I read them with strong interest.

When World War I ended in November 1918, the so-called November Revolution swept away the German monarchy. As Otto recalled,

A revolutionary regime was formed by the homecoming soldiers, the workers, and the peasants, all over Germany, and also in Munich, the capital of Bavaria. Civil war came to our homeland. Conservative officers of the old army had gathered enough disgruntled veterans and adventurers up north to march towards Bavaria, to wipe out the revolutionary government. After a few months of fighting, they prevailed. A regressive democratic government was formed as part of the Weimar Republic.

Otto was not involved in the fighting. As he explained, “My political outlook had not crystallized enough to drive me to active participation.” But his future in Munich was bleak. He continued to work as a journeyman cabinetmaker in the old shop where he had apprenticed until he too joined the growing masses of the unemployed. Facing a shortage of food in Munich and economic collapse in the form of runaway inflation, Otto dreamed of immigrating to America and even began to study English on his own. Then came an opportunity that would change his life:

When, at the end of the war, a coworker had departed for Italy where his father had reopened an icebox factory, I begged him to look for a job for me. I had forgotten all about it when, in 1920, a letter came for me from Rome, inviting me to come to work for his father and also, to bring along another fellow.
Seldom had I felt so exhilarated in my life! To escape the shortage of food, to be able to work again, to see Italy, the traditional yearning of the German Wandersmann [wanderer]—it seemed a dream too good to be true. My father encouraged me; my mother was sad but did not try to hold me back. While I was waiting for my papers, I set out to learn Italian, with intense application. And come fall, I started out with a friend for the Eternal City.