

Harz Mountains

I do not know just what it was that makes me think back on our trip to the Harz mountains after more than half a century. The ride was but a short forty or so miles, and the "mountains" were anything but mountains, not more than a thousand feet or so. But then I guess anything not flat would be something new to a flat land type like us. We had always stayed within bicycle range, no more than four or so miles of our home. It had been war, although not right around us, but there was simply no reason to go very far from home.

Looking back it was probably the trip itself, going somewhere in a group, seeing for the first time, and the ride rather than always walking or riding a bicycle. I guess it was also my first personal experience with the war in the sense that something really bad had been going on there. What we saw from the "mountain" was the Russian zone, out in the distance, and we might just as well have been looking at the other side of the Moon. It was really the first time that I realized that there were places where one cannot go, and does not want to be. Maybe it was this lesson.

Our outing must have been two years or so after the end of the war since I cannot conceive any rational person sending children on a bus tour until things had gotten at least somewhat more stable, so I must have been about the first year of middle school, somewhere around the fifth grade, maybe 1947. I do not remember the ride itself, but I surely remember the "mountains", the castle with its thick walls, the medieval armor, and the soda pop and the ice cream, of each of which we had nothing. It was my first ice cream, vanilla, at the ripe old age of eleven or twelve.

We scampered up a path, then up another and another. There were actually places one could fall down. Before that it had only been places one could fall in. (like the stinky ditch). The walls of the castle were massive, rocks mortared together, at least six feet thick. And as we went in, there were the inside walls, again massive rocks, with all kinds of armor, swords, chains, spears, battle axes, and who knows what all kind of stuff hung on the walls, and stuffed knights in armor all over the place, and displays of who all knows what. There were racks and pinions they used for "stretching" people, dungeons with big gates, kettles for pouring hot lard down on the enemies below. Here was the brutality of war, as it had been waged centuries ago, experienced by one who had somehow escaped all the horrors of modern warfare, and did not even know how lucky he had been.

So far the closest to the setting of the real war had been when I had seen some of the older boys play "war", arguing about who would be "Hitler", who would be "Goering", etc. I strangely remember the name "Goering", if only for a strange context, namely somebody letting a big "Hermann Goering" pfort, and everybody laughing about it. Herman Goering was of course the real big fat guy commanding the Luftwaffe, the German air force (Luft=air, Waffe=weapon). As I found out much later as I was trying to bone up on some education books while doing some teaching, Hermann Goering, with his picture at the Nuremberg war trials, made it as an example of what a psychopath is, i.e.

one who has a capable brain, but directs it in destructive directions. His name even now comes up frequently as the major "art collector" (thief) of the war.

Standing there at the look-out point, something touched me. Russia, snow, and wolves were deeply embedded in stories and fairy tales (Little Red Riding Hood). So when someone pointed out over there, said that was the Russian zone, that was all it took. More than that, the line he was pointing to was all bare, no trees at all. Every other place I had ever seen was either trees or farms or places with houses and people.

Perhaps this was my first introduction to freedom, or rather the lack of it, and that I, or all of us, were going to have to live in this world as it was, but also how lucky we had been to have wound up in the British zone, not in East Germany under the Russians. But I am also sure that all these thoughts were not fully in my mind at that time and place, but rather that this place in time found a full place into my thoughts and thinking.