NICHOLAS RESCHER COLLECTED PAPERS

Supplementary Volume
Nicholas Rescher

Autobiography

Second Edition
Table of Contents

Preface

ONE: Family Background 1

TWO: A German Childhood—Hagen: 1928-1939 (Age 0-9) 11

THREE: An Immigrant Boy—Beechhurst: 1938-1942 (Age 10-13) 19

FOUR: High School Days: 1942-1946 (Age 13-17) 31

FIVE: Queens College—Flushing: 1946-1949 (Age 17-21) 45

SIX: Princeton University: 1949-1953 (Age 21-23) 55


EIGHT: The RAND Corporation—Santa Monica: 1954-1956 (Age 25-28) 97

NINE: Lehigh University—Bethlehem: 1957-1961 (Age 28-32) 121

TEN: Pittsburgh—The First Years: 1961-1966 (Age 32-38) 135

ELEVEN: Pittsburgh—The Years of Change: 1966-1971 (Age 38-42) 149


THIRTEEN: Squirrel Hill: 1975-1980 (Age 47-52) 185

FIFTEEN: Active Years: 1985-1989 (Age 57-61) 211


SEVENTEEN: At the Dawn of a New Millennium: 1996-2001 (Age 68-73) 245

EIGHTEEN: Moving On: Squirrel Hill to Regent Square: 2003-2007 (Age 75-79) 265

NINETEEN: Sunset Years: Regent Square: 2008-10 (Age 79-81) 277

TWENTY: A Philosophical Retrospect 287

APPENDIX 1: Autodoxography 297

APPENDIX 2: Fragments of Rescher Family History 301

APPENDIX 3: The Landaus of Neukirchen and Goddelsheim 375

APPENDIX 4: Reference for Work by and about Nicholas Rescher 377

NAME INDEX 395
This autobiography has been many years in the making. It began in an endeavor to record for the benefit of my children some information about their own parentage and antecedents—information which would otherwise go to the grave with me, leaving them with an empty familial past. Gradually, however, a sea-change came upon the project. It took on a life of its own and became an endeavor in self-definition and self-comprehension. And so what we have here is a complex amalgam of autobiographical material produced in stages over many years.¹

Aging brings retrospection and retrospection creates a vivid sense of change. Precious little in the world stands still. The America which I arrived in 1938 was not the same country as that which exists about us at the present time. It is instructive to divide the history of the USA into three seventy-six year stages: 1781-1857, 1857-1933, and 1933-2009. And it is instructive to consider these—each the lifespan of a healthy human—in terms of its wars, every one of which profoundly changed the nature of the country:

I The War of 1812 and the Mexican War

II The Civil War and World War I

III World War II, the Korean War, the Viet Nam War, and the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan

Over each of these lifetime-length intervals America emerged as something almost irrecognizably different from what had exited at the outset. And a it happens, my own life has spanned the whole of period III in this chronology.

Autobiography is not just history writ small but also, in a way, history invented. For history focuses on the impact of people on events, while autobiography tends to focus on the impact of events on people. In retrospect things always look simple: we know with the wisdom of hindsight just where the twists and turns lead. But the book of an autobiographer is in-
complete. It ends in medias res—there is no saying how matters will evolve.

In the preface to his Autobiography, the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood wrote that “the autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought.” I do not believe this for a moment. For autobiography should tell the story of a life, and the worker generally lives neither in nor for the work alone. Moreover, an author should not have to speak for his books—they should speak for themselves. I have tried to write here the biography of a person who happens to be an “intellectual” of sorts, but not to produce an intellectual autobiography. To be sure, the conscientious autobiographer of a philosopher cannot leave his opinions entirely out of view. But with a philosopher what matters is always less the opinions than the cogency of the reasons for them, and an autobiography affords neither the space nor the place for argumentation of this sort.

A biography should inform one about the subject’s actions, thoughts, and feelings. And an autobiography has a special obligation here, with a particular focus on its subjects interior life. It is here, I think, that the special responsibility of an autobiographer lies even though discharging this task can be difficult—and sometimes also unwelcome.

After the publication in 1983 of the initial version of the book (through chapter 13), updated revisions were issued at intervals to continue the story through the years. To the best of my knowledge and belief, none of these earlier redactions of my autobiography has ever been reviewed in a philosophy journal—a phenomena virtually unique with the hundred-odd books I have written. I find this truly puzzling. It is not that they have gone wholly unread seeing that they have all had a reasonable if unspectacular sale. Why it should be that, despite the not unreasonable unconsiderable in my philosophical work no-one wants to express a reaction to the life that lies behind it, is something I find a bit puzzling. Perhaps the problem is that I am yet among the living. One does sometimes hear it said—and not utterly as a joke—that dying can be a good career move.

Be this as it may, the reader who looks here for “the life and times” will certainly be disappointed in the latter regard. For one thing, I am too small a fish in too large a pond for this sort of enterprise. For another, it has been my practice to go my own way insofar as possible and let the times go hang. By temperament I am not a joiner or promoter of causes. I have generally found my own allotted share of the world’s work quite enough to handle. Without hiding my head in the sand regarding the great issues and
developments of the day, I have concentrated on the tasks that confront me on the agenda of my personal and professional life, leaving the larger contextual matters to the histories where they belong.

Ideally, a “life”—be it written or lived—should have a certain plan, a plot that endows it with some coherent structure. It should have a tale to tell—a rise to riches or power, a failure to realize great expectations, a story of impressive achievement or of tragic decline and unmerited degradation, perhaps even a conquest of great obstacles by sheer force of character. In my own case, there is indeed such a plot, although one that lacks the great drama of the preceding sketches. Its story-line revolves about my finding myself in the career of a philosopher and especially as an author of philosophical books. In reviewing one of my publications, a German scholar once spoke of my “beängstigender Autorenfleiß”—fearsome diligence in authorship or scriptomania, to put it less kindly.² It is this aspect of my make-up—the gradual emergence of an inveterate writer of philosophical books—that is the recurrent leitmotiv of these pages. Paradoxically, the book is, in a way, my Apologia pro libris suis. To be well received as an author, one must be in harmonious synchronization with the problems of one’s day. One must address—and perhaps even anticipate—the contemporary “hot topics”. To underrate, or, even worse, ignore the currently agitated problems is to invite obscurity and neglect. All the same, there remains the consideration that even the most commonplace life of one generation is destined to appear rather strange and intriguing to the distant retrospect of its eventual successors.

For the present, I suspect that only philosophers will have any interest. At this writing (2010), sixty years have passed since I began teaching philosophy as a preceptor at Princeton in 1950. And next year, fifty years will have passed since I came to Pittsburgh as a full professor in 1961. My working life has been long, and the whole of it has been dedicated to philosophy.

Biography may be an acquired taste, but among English speakers it has become a fairly common one. Some thousand such books are annually published nowadays in Britain alone and over two thousand in the US. There seems to be an insatiable desire to peer into the lives of other people. We want to look into the dark corners—to discover the clay feet of our idols and to learn the deep dark secrets which shows that the rich and famous are even worse scoundrels than we ourselves. To be sure, an autobiographer is not likely to satisfy this craving—rare is the individual who sets out to debunk himself. All the same, a biographical book—autobiography
included—should not be grossly misleading. While even with the best of us there are perhaps always episodes that should be consigned to silence—perhaps everyone has something to hide—still, the overall impression should give a true picture of what one is actually like.

No man is a hero to his valet, none is a villain to his autobiographer. Yet pretty much everyone’s life involves some episodes that occasion subsequent regret—transactions from which he does not emerge as the sort of person he would wish to be. The reader can scarcely expect to find all of them chronicled and detailed in an autobiography. The amazing Pepys aside—for in human affairs every rule has its exceptions—the autobiographer whose candor knows no limits has a boor for a subject. This said, I think it nevertheless fair to add I have endeavored to produce an honest work, one that portrays a real and thus an imperfect person, endowed with an ample quota of human failings and foibles.

It is sometimes said that biography is virtually fiction because the author cannot resist reworking factual material into a fanciful creation of his own. And this is likely to be all the more true of autobiographies. All the same, I am persuaded that a reasonably accurate picture—not necessarily of the sort of person I would ideally like to be, but of the sort of person I actually am—can be drawn from the data presented here. The watchful reader will find that I have pictured myself as Cromwell wished to be painted, “with the warts on.”

Still, a biographical work is bound to wear a somewhat unrealistic aspect. Its subject is constantly at the center-stage. Such exclusive focus upon oneself suggests a false importance and centrality. Life, of course, is not like that. Almost always and everywhere we are but one among numerous others who feature no less prominently in the scheme of things. However, exactly because such distortion of emphasis is unavoidable in a work of this nature, the reader should be generous enough not to impute automatically to an autobiographer a narcissism that is not necessarily there.

Because it is a writer that is at issue here, perhaps a word about the writing itself is not out of order. I must say that I have found it harder to write this book than anything else I have produced. The heart of autobiography is anecdote, and this is something foreign to the philosopher’s concerns. A philosopher, after all, is trained to be an abstract thinker who concerns himself with ideas rather than persons and events.

Autobiography is nonfiction. Its author owes the reader the effort to present the subject as the person he would like to be. And in one’s own
case this endeavor is not without its occasional pains. After all, I am a person who is naturally reticent about his personal affairs almost to the point of secretiveness, and the idea of admitting others into the inner precincts of my life is antipathetic to me. But having embarked on the project as a matter of obligation I have pressed ahead. However, I have found this sort of writing possible only in very short bursts, usually lasting for only a paragraph or two, as an unusual mood conducive to this sort of candor was transiently upon me. For me, this writing project has been a harder-won victory over blank pages than most.

\[ \text{NOTES FOR PREFACE} \]

1. The reader may well wonder why an elaborate family history should be appended to an account of my philosophical career. The prime reason is simple: without it that career would never have existed. For it is plausible to suppose that my parents emigration from Germany was at least in part occasioned by my father’s Jewish antecedence. And it seems highly probable to me that—had we remained in Germany and survived the war—I would not have become a philosopher, but would instead have followed in my fathers’ footsteps and become a lawyer.

2. Here is a quote from *The Philosopher’s Dictionary* by Daniel Dennett: resch, (1) v. To evince an extravagant of pathological degree of intellectual energy in many directions. “He is always rescheing into print—one can’t keep up with his stuff.” (2) rescher, n. A unit for measuring the venue of printed pages, equal to the collected writing of Francis Bacon (e.g., a rescher of Bacon). 1 rescher = 10,000 sheffers. “The new wing will increase the library by over a thousand reschers.” [[H. M. Sheffer was a Harvard logician whose publications were proverbially sparse.] However while my written output is indeed substantial, it lags far behind the masters of productivity. For example, Georges Simenon, the detective-story writer who wrote the Inspector Maigret stories, produced over 500 books.
One

FAMILY BACKGROUND

FATHER

My paternal grandfather, Otto Rescher, left his native village of Schrozberg around 1870 to seek his fortune in the nearby metropolis of Stuttgart—as did his younger brother Adolf. Their father—a rural doctor based in a small Swabian village—had hard work of it to support the growing family of his second marriage on a modest medical practice of a rural village, and could not afford to send his sons to the university. However, the lads were apparently endowed with business acumen, and both ultimately prospered. Otto Rescher became a dealer in textiles (largely wools imported from England). By his late forties he had made a substantial fortune. He subsequently sold his business, invested the proceeds, and went into retirement, living in an apartment in the Bad Cannstadt section of Stuttgart. He devoted himself to the maintenance of his supposedly delicate health, pursuing the then-common hypochondriac routines of vegetarianism, bottled waters, and extensive spa visits, and so continued pretty much hale and hearty until his death at almost eighty years in 1932. (The only occasion on which I can recall meeting him was a family visit in Stuttgart in the previous year.)

Around 1880 Otto Rescher married Emilie Harburger, the daughter of a prosperous Stuttgart manufacturer. Born in 1861, this young lady bore the name of his own mother, Emilie, but was nicknamed Emmy. They had five children in all, of whom only two survived childhood—my father Erwin Hans, born in 1890, and his sister Gertrude, born in 1903. I remember Aunt Gertrude well from my boyhood. She was a charming, somewhat flighty woman—married three times, with all of her marriages ending in divorce. As to grandmother Rescher, she died at the age of eighty in 1941, having outlived all of her children except for my father.

Father was born in Stuttgart on April 21, 1890. He had several siblings, of which only his younger sister Gertrude also survived the diseases of in-
fancy. They grew up amidst a prosperous, bourgeois, Forsyte-like family circle. One fact I know about his early youth is that his uncle Adolf was a great favorite of my father who as a child loved to go on long rambles with him in the woods around Stuttgart. My grandfather was apparently not much given to small-talk, and so it was from Uncle Adolf that my father learned about the struggles of the Rescher brothers for business success in the Stuttgart of the 1870s and 80s.

After completing his schooling at a humanistic Gymnasium in Stuttgart, my father enrolled in the academic year 1908/09 as a student of law (Recht, jura) in the nearby University of Tübingen. During the period from the academic year 1908/09 to 1912 he there lived the life of the typical university student of Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany: hard work, good companions, beer, and, of course, a dueling society (called the “Allemania,” I think). Throughout his life, father wore across his left cheek the dueling scar that was the characteristic badge of such a fraternity. His studies at Tübingen completed, father transferred to the Humboldt University of Berlin, where he enrolled in the Faculty of Law. He completed his legal studies in 1914, just in time to join the ill-fated throng of young men being herded over the first world war’s precipice of death.

In the autumn of 1914 my father received has commission as a lieutenant in the army corps which the Kingdom of Württemberg contributed to the military cause of the German Reich. He trained initially for the cavalry, and after mastering such splendidly obsolete skills as the use of a lance on horseback, spent four years in the trenches of the Western Front. Amazingly, he survived the war, emerging from four years of trench warfare as a senior grade lieutenant, the holder of the Iron Cross (second class) and some lesser decorations. I remember well the tale of father’s Iron Cross. One day the commanding general of his division inspected his unit. He commented on father’s lack of decorations and father replied that he had no deeds of special valor to his credit. The general asked how long the young lieutenant had been in service at the front and father said he had been there for some two years. “That’s valiant enough,” said the general, and ordered the award of an Iron Cross.

The majority of my father’s school friends and classmates were devoured in the senseless slaughters of the Western Front. When I was a boy of five or six years, we visited Stuttgart and walked in the cemetery where my father’s own father had recently been buried. There father showed me the great cenotaph for local victims of the war, many of them the companions of his youth. (Fewer than one in ten in father’s Gymnasium class
survived.) Though a generally genial and outgoing individual, my father was in some ways rather reticent. He almost never talked about this experiences in the trenches of the western front of World War I, nor yet about the history of his family before the time of his own father. These were matters about which I eventually had to find out from other sources.

After his demobilization, father returned to the law, serving as “assessor” with a law firm in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder. With this training completed, he settled down in 1922 to practice law in Hagen, in Wesphalia, a mid-size industrial city with a history going back into the 13th century. Initially he was in partnership with another attorney (one August Fischer), and they maintained an office in the “Hagener Zeitung” Building. However, after a couple of years he set up on his own. No doubt he had a strugglesome time of it at first, but by the late 1920s he had built up a flourishing practice.

My mother entered this picture in 1923 when she came to work in my father’s office as his secretary. She was a young woman of great beauty and charm, and it is little wonder that they soon fell in love. They were married in September of 1925, when father was 35 and mother just under 20.

At first they lived in a small flat in the Hohenzollernstraße (at the corner of the Körnerstraße), but shortly before I was born in 1928 they removed to a larger apartment in the Ruhrstraße, which then became my birthplace. Not long afterwards they purchased a family-sized house in the more suburban Leibnizstraße.

The early 1930s must have been “the years of wine and roses” for my parents. Father was building up a thriving law practice. Mother busied herself not only with child and home, but also with an active social life, and, above all, with athletics. At this stage mother was an enthusiastic gymnast and sportswoman, who, weather permitting, spent part of each day in exercising at the local sporting ground.

My parents’ good fortune came crashing down in flames with the onset of the Nazi regime in 1933. Father never troubled to conceal his dislike of the Nazis and what they stood for—imprudently, for a practicing attorney. As the Nazification of the judicial system proceeded in the aftermath of the Reichstag fire trial, lawyers known to be unsympathetic toward the Nazi cause simply stopped winning cases. In consequence, clients, of course, went elsewhere. By the middle 30s my father’s law practice was kaputt. Economic hardship, dismay at political developments, and the approach of the day when, on reaching the age of ten, I would soon have had to join in
the compulsory activities of the “Hitler Youth,” combined to set my parents to think of emigration. In 1936 they sold the house on the Leibnizstraße, and that summer father went to the U.S.A. for an exploratory visit. He returned permanently the next year to arrange for a place to live and a means of livelihood. Thereupon, after a circuit of farewell visits to our relations, mother and I crossed the Atlantic to join him in 1938.

The transatlantic migration was financially ruinous for my parents. One could bring only a modicum of personal possessions, and the Nazi regulations further prohibited emigrants from taking more than 100 marks apiece in cash (then some $25). Fortunately, father was able to transfer a modest sum of around $1,500 surreptitiously through Switzerland.

And so my father, now over forty-five years old, became a cultural castaway living in straightened circumstances in an unaccustomed environment. Yet he did not let his spirits sag. The most immediate problem facing my father was clearly that of earning a living for himself and his family. He was unable to resume his career as a lawyer, the differences between the German and the Anglo-American systems being so substantial that this would have required several years of preparation in a law-school, which was out of the question for financial reasons. In an America still caught up in the slump of a yet unconquered depression, the obstacles to the useful employment of an immigrant aged almost fifty were formidable. So father turned for a career to his hobby, photography. With the money salvaged via Switzerland, he started a small photographic business in 1939.

Father shared a small storefront—at 161-11 Northern Boulevard in north Flushing—with a friend who operated a sporting goods shop—a somewhat curious arrangement! This business went on in a modestly adequate way. (By 1940 we were even able to afford our first car, a 1936 vintage Studebaker, whose acquisition for some $300 impressed me greatly, since in Germany we had never owned—nor indeed needed—an automobile.) Mother would sometimes help out in the studio, and father brought home to her all pictures for coloring, which in those days was done by hand-painting.

Catastrophe struck in the wake of America’s entry into the war upon Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. As part of the military security precautions launched after America’s entry into World War II—measures which most notably included the internment of Japanese-Americans—a regulation was instituted prohibiting all “enemy aliens” who lived within 300 miles of the seacoast from owning cameras. The point, it seems, was to prevent their taking pictures of military installations, war plants,
shipping, troop movements, and the like. At this time, however, father was still a German-national—he did not acquire U.S. citizenship until late in 1942. Overnight, his photographic business was finished, and he had to sell his equipment and stock at a substantial loss. For the second time in a decade father’s vocation had been pulled out from under his feet and his livelihood destroyed by the rude intrusion of political developments. Now over fifty years old, he once again stared economic disaster in the face—this time in a still unfamiliar and unaccustomed environment.

What to do? Father met with courage and good humor the difficulties of a man no longer young confronting the task of making his living in a new homeland. He turned to being a self-taught bookkeeper and accountant—first at Bloomingdale’s large department store in Manhattan, and then as the war-economy expanded in a small shipyard in Whitestone. After 1946—when it became clear that the shipyard, a wartime product now transformed into the “Whitestone Woodworking Co.” could not survive during peacetime conditions—father’s place of employment shifted to the head office of Drake’s Bakery in Long Island City. The work was doubtless tedious, but it provided a modest and secure income.

Father’s spare time was always devoted to reading and writing. Amidst the routine and largely uninteresting occupation which had replaced his shattered career, he turned to the development of inner resources. Gradually my father made himself over into something he had never had the time to be in Germany—an intellectual. He spent his leisure hours (and very little money) building up a small but solid library of German and English literature—especially his favorite Goethe. And he even turned out a couple of rather amusing short stories. His reading covered a wide range of English literature, with 18th century authors among his favorites—Sterne, Goldsmith, and, above all, Boswell’s Johnson.

The 1940s were a time of much financial stringency for our family, but they were also a time of security and stability—a comparatively happy period after a decade of turmoil. Around 1950 circumstances were eased slightly by the onset of a modest monthly compensation payment to those who had lost their professions in Germany during the Nazi era. Now finally—when he was some sixty years old—the family’s finances were once more relatively comfortable.

However, it was too late. In 1951 father began to show the signs of a distressing and dangerous heart condition (angina pectoris). Though occasionally painful, it did not stop him from getting about, for example on a final visit to Germany that August (the first and last time father revisited
his native land after emigrating in 1937). But suddenly one evening in late October of 1952 he died of a heart attack just after turning in for the night. His body was cremated a few days afterwards, as he had requested. Not until a decade later did his ashes find their final resting place—in the peaceful little cemetery by the newer Quaker meeting house on Middletown Road at Lima PA near Philadelphia (where my mother’s ashes were eventually to join his, some quarter century later).

Curiously, success in life requires exactly the same factors as success in murder, namely motive, means, and opportunity. But now the motive is a matter of motivation—of drive, commitment, dedication, “hunger”, for achievement in some way or other. Means is a matter of natural endowment—of ability, know-how, intelligence, and talent along the relevant lines, willingness to work, staying power, and patience included. Finally opportunity is just that—of opportune situations and timing, the level of contrivances of being at the right place at the right time, connecting with the right chance, the right mentor. The motive is generally provided by one’s own nature, the means by the world’s developments and the opportunity by Fortune and Luck. Almost all of these functions come be by circumstances beyond our control: we do not control our motives or our opportunities. It is only in the area of measure that deliberate choice and control come into it. Whenever success in life is concerned, no-one gets more than a modicum of partial credit. And the same very often holds for failure as well. On the side of opportunity, in particular, fate served my father hard. Repeated career derailment in World War I, in Nazi Germany, in the wake of emigration to the U.S., and in the wake of World War II was enough to try even the most resilient of spirits.

Father lives in my memory as a man who, though strict, was warm-hearted, kind, and endowed with a sense of humor. When a new client came to him who began his explanation with “I have a business in Datteln,” this being the name of a nearby town but also the German word for dates. Father immediately responded: “Can this be sufficiently profitable?” (Aber lohnt sich denn das?). Father could also “take a joke”—as when I, as a small boy, would jest with him about flies scatting on his bald pate. (In due course, alas, the tables were turned on me when my own children heard about this.) When my interests turned to mathematics and technical philosophy, they diverged increasingly from his, but we nevertheless were always close—especially during the latter 1940s. Father was unquestionably an officer and a gentleman, and in various ways a rather admirable person. I still find it surprising and impressive that he was able to keep up his
good spirits and even temper throughout all those upheavals, at any rate as far as all external appearances went: his resilience of spirit must indeed have been substantial! He was rather “unflappable,” as the English put it. The experiences of World War I had impressed his personality with a degree of Stoicism. “Kommt Zeit, kommt Rat” (roughly, “we’ll cross that bridge when we get there”) was one of his favorite sayings, and another was the Roman legal maxim Ultra posse nemo obligatur (“No one is obligated to do more than is possible”). The strength not to lose heart in the face of adversity is among the most difficult of human accomplishments. It is to my father’s great credit that he managed to achieve this.

MOTHER

Born in 1869, my mother’s father Wilhelm Landau, hailed from the village of Goddelsheim in Kreis Waldeck, where his father had a sizeable farm. Her mother, Adele Kemper, came from a family of ironsmiths in the valley of the Volme river. My mother was born in Gevelsberg near Hagen, Westfalen on 14 December, 1905, her parents’ second daughter (and last child). Even in childhood she was always lively and engaging. When she visited the Goddelsheim farm at age six or so, she climbed the fence into the garden next door to get some apples. When confronted by the irate neighbor, she pointed to some overhanging branches from a peach tree and said “Oh, I’ve just come over to collect some of our peaches.”

Mother and her sister Luise (“Ise”) had a typical German childhood of the period, unhappily including the deprivations of World War I and the very difficult immediate post-war period. Upon completing her schooling in the early 1920s, she first spent a year in a finishing school for girls that principally trained them in “home economics,” including the mysteries of Hausfraudom. Then she spent another year or so in secretarial school. At the age of eighteen, in early 1924, she completed her training and was ready for her first employment, which she found in my father’s law-office. She must have made a deep impression, for she was a strikingly beautiful young woman, as the photographs of this period attest.8 A little more than a year later my parents were married (in September of 1925). Some three years after that came the birth of their only child, myself.

The period up to 1933 must have been a time of ease and happiness for my mother. But the next 25 years were a period of constant difficulty and anxiety for her. She had to support her husband through a steady stream of catastrophes: the collapse of his career in 1934-35, the transatlantic migra-
tion in 1937-38, the struggles to gain a foothold in a strange country during 1938-40, the collapse of father’s photographic business in 1942, the economic stringency of the war years (when mother held down one makeshift job after another to help keep us afloat), the war’s severance of all contact with her parents and relations, a time of ill health around 1944-46, my father’s period of (ultimately fatal) illness during 1951-52, and then the difficult readjustment to living on her own. One after another the hammer blows of ill fortune came down on mother. Yet, nothing daunted, she carried on throughout it all cheerfully and constructively. Her own inner spirit somehow equipped her with resources to cope with difficulties for which her early years of secure girlhood and affluent matronhood must have left her utterly unprepared.

After 1942, until her “retirement” at the age of sixty-five in 1971, mother held a varied succession of jobs. During World War II she worked for a time as a saleslady at Macy’s Department Store in Manhattan. From 1944 until the time of my father’s death she worked in the same capacity at Henri Bendel, a fashionable ladies-wear shop on West 57th Street. After moving to California in late 1954, she continued in this line of work for some months in a similar establishment in the 400 block of Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica. But then she changed gears. In 1955 she became assistant to the director of the Friends (Quaker) International Center at UCLA. Then from 1957 to 1958 she directed a Quaker work-camp for young people at Tlaxcala in Mexico, and then spent another year there helping to run the Quaker hostelry, Casa de los Amigos, in Mexico City before returning again to Santa Monica. Thereafter, from 1962 until her retirement in 1971, she served as the “Official Hostess” of Westtown School, the Quaker boarding school near Philadelphia. After her retirement she stayed for another year at Westtown, living until the Fall of 1972 at “The Farmhouse” on the school campus. Then mother moved to Illetas near Palma in Mallorca, where she lived for almost two years. (Her time in Mexico had given her a liking for Hispanic culture.) After 1974 until her death three years later she lived in our house at No. 6 Cunliffe Close, Oxford. She enjoyed Oxford where she kept busy with activities in the North Oxford community center (The Ferry Center), with volunteer work—especially for the little Oxfam Shop on Oakthorpe Road in Summertown—and with participation in the Quaker Meeting. And the proximity to Germany made possible frequent visits to her sister in Hagen.

Mother died in Germany while on a visit in Freudenstadt in the Black Forest, where she and father had sometimes vacationed before the war.
Their ashes are buried in a shared grave in the peaceful cemetery on the grounds of the Quaker Meeting at Middletown, not far from Westtown School, where mother had spent some happy and constructive years.

As this brief account shows, my mother was a versatile and resourceful woman, with great powers of adjustment to varied settings, and equally at home in a German, English, or Spanish environment. A warm, enthusiastic, outgoing person who made friends easily—she was gregarious on the surface, though not without some reserve and attachment to privacy underneath. A lady of enormous charm and great practical good sense, I always loved her dearly and with the passage of years I came to admire her as well.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER ONE

1 On family background and genealogy see Appendix I.

2 The internet mentions a Rosalie Haarburger (b. 1862), who may have been her sister. She had, for sure, a brother Ludwig Haarburger, who touched my life more closely than most of my other distant relatives, because in 1958 I came into a small legacy of about $3,000 under a will he made in 1889. It struck me as amazing that anything at all should be left by 1958 to be inherited under a will made long ago by a man who died in 1903—notwithstanding the passage of several generations, two world wars, and the catastrophic inflation of the 1920s. The father of Ludwig Haarburger’s wife Flora (b. 1868) was Jewish, a circumstance that was to bring home the most despicable aspects of the Hitler period. For while Ludwig himself had died in 1903, Flora survived long enough to end her days in 1942 in the “concentration camp” at Theresienstadt.

3 Apparently thinking that the “roaring 20s” were designed for her benefit, Aunt Gertrude took three husbands in rapid succession in the course of the decade. Her first husband, whom she must have married at around 1921, at age 18, was Franz Siegelse (1885-1955) of Starnberg, a then well-known landscape painter. (See Hans Vollmer, Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler des XX. Jahrhunderts, vol. 4 (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann, 1958, p. 177.) He was, I take it, a charming but undomesticable man—a typical artistic bohemian. After divorcing him around 1926, Gertrude married again with a Herr Keuffele in Gersthofen, but this marriage ended in divorce after a matter of months. Gertrude’s third husband, whom she married in the late 1920s, was a physician, Dr. Hermann Neussell of Gersthofen. He was a ra-
ther authoritarian type, and became an ardent Nazi. Gertrude divorced him around 1937—no doubt a sensible move. But she did not live to enjoy her restored independence for long. Becoming melancholy and despondent over the collapse of her personal and public worlds, she died a year or two later in 1939 (according to reports, of an overdose of sleeping pills made conveniently available by her hired lady companion, who had gained ascendancy over her, and had talked Gertrude into making a will naming herself as sole beneficiary).

4 University of Tübingen records available on the internet indicate that father enrolled in the academic year 1908/9 as a student of law (Recht, jura). He lived that year in the house of O. Beumeister at 31 Grabenstrasse.

5 By the terms of the convention of 1871, the troops of Württemberg constituted the XIIIth (“Royal Württemberg”) corps as a distinct element of the imperial German army. Erwin Rommel also then served as a young lieutenant in this corps, which saw extensive service on the Western front.

6 The legal principle of the new order went by the precept: “Ask not what the law requires but rather what is the will of the Führer.” The Nazis had been particularly incensed by the acquittal of five defendants in the Reichstag fire trial in 1934. The crackdown on the judiciary proceeded apace thereafter.

7 One of the Kempers fabricated iron in Solingen, where the family continues in this business to the present day.

8 She long kept her youthful good looks. Throughout my boyhood, people took her for my “big sister”—somewhat to father’s chagrin.

9 I had moved to Santa Monica, California in 1954. Mother came for a visit, and liked the place so well she decided to stay, which she did for some years, even after I myself moved “back East” in 1957.
Dr. Nehemias Rescher
Great Grandfather as a medical student in 1849, age 21

Otto Rescher
(Grandfather ca. 1885, age 32)
PICTURES

Meta Landau Rescher
(Mother at the time of her marriage in 1925, age 19)

Father and Mother in 1925
Klaus Helmut Erwin Rescher
(The author in 1936, age 8)

Nr. 3, Leibnizstrasse, Hagen (Boyhood home, ca. 1934)
A Family Portrait (2007)
Clockwise: Nicholas, Catherine, Mark, Erika, Owen, Elizabeth, Dorothy, Myles
[Pittsburgh: Stan Franzos]

Nicholas Rescher
(The author in 1971, age 43)
Nicholas Rescher: 1999
(Photo credit: Lee Hershenson)

Nicholas Rescher: 2002
After their marriage in the spring of 1925, my parents lived in an apartment on the first floor of a large house on the Ruhrstraße, in a pleasant residential district in the hilly suburbs of Hagen in Westphalia. It was there that I was born on Sunday, July 15, 1928. I am the only person I know of among my contemporary acquaintances who was born at home rather than in a hospital. My mother’s obstetrician believed in this if the parents could arrange to hire the necessary help—an idea nowadays sporadically returning to favor in Europe. I was christened Klaus Helmut Erwin Rescher, becoming Nicholas only in 1938, after our emigration to the U.S.A. (The Germans, abbreviate NIKOLAUS = NICHOLAS to KLICK from the second half of the word, while the English shorten it to NICK from the first.)

When I was about a year old, our family moved to a two-story family-sized house with a many-gabled roof of brown tiles, “standing in its own grounds,” as the English say, at the top of the nearby Leibnizstraße (No. 3). I remember well the pleasant, gray-green stucco covered house with its large garden, for we resided there until I was seven years old. There was a school across the way, but the neighborhood was then an attractive suburban area, and I enjoyed roaming over it on exploratory rambles with my friends and relations.

This period of my early childhood was the era of my parents’ greatest prosperity. My mother was very active at this stage and greatly devoted to sports and gymnastics. She spent much time at such activities, and until I was three or four years old I was mostly committed to the care of a nanny. Thereafter, mother did many more things with me, and for a time I became her steady companion. Father was generally away at his law office, and so remained somewhat on the periphery of my life. Until 1934, his legal prac-
tice thrived and he joined an active social life to his busy professional one. His yet extant photo-albums from those years bear witness to regular holiday trips both abroad and in Germany ranging from the North Sea to the Black Forest.

As a small child I spent much time with my Grandmother Landau who lived in a spacious apartment in the Bergstraße at the other end of town. Grandmother and I would often make long excursions across the fields and meadows of the nearby countryside. I fancied “found objects” and invariably brought home various treasures—bits of rusty old iron and the like. I was, of course, less close to my paternal grandparents, who lived in far-off Stuttgart. I recall only very dimly a visit to them in 1931, the last time I saw my grandfather Rescher, who died the next year. (I remember somewhat better a later visit to Stuttgart in 1934, when we left flowers at his grave.)

My memories of early childhood are for the most part happy ones. Much of my time was spent in the large, sloping garden of the Leibnizstraße house, digging in some unused corner, building rock constructions, playing games with my little friends, and the like. I was basically a good child but also mischievous. On one occasion in 1933 or 1934 a friend and I came upon some catechism books left by some pupils from the neighboring Catholic girls’ school who, their classes over, were playing near a pond in a local park. We promptly threw the books into the water while the girls were busy at their games. On another occasion around this time, while mother and I were on holiday at Bad Honnef on the Rhine, I released the numerous occupants of a rather large rabbit-hutch, and appeared in our hotel room with my apron full of little bunnies.

In the fall of 1933, at the age of five, I was enrolled in a kindergarten—a small, privately run affair under the care of Fräulein Irmgart Ritter, a pleasant young lady who struggled three or four mornings a week to channel our youthful energies in such constructive directions as drawing and paper cutting.

At this time, I also began to read—apparently quite spontaneously. I had learned the alphabet when four and a half years old from an alphabet picture-book that my parents had given me. (It still remains in my possession!) After this I would amuse myself by spotting letters on store-signs, placards, and the like, having taught myself how to put letters together into words. One day, aged just over five, I surprised my mother by reading her all the signs along the trolley-route into town.
One little episode that occurred around this time left a long resonance. My parents and I were visiting with Grandmother Landau when grandfather returned in a state of excitement occasioned by some occurrence or other. He barged in, asking “Ist meine Frau da, ich meine die Oma, ich meine die Tante?” (Is my wife here, I mean grandma, I mean auntie?). For years afterwards this query provided the family with an humorous code-expression for excited confusion.

In the fall of 1934 I began the first grade of school at the public (state) elementary school in the neighborhood. Little about my initial school year now remains in my memory apart from two things: that I rather liked school itself, but that during playtime in the schoolyard I was regularly oppressed by the class bully—an obnoxious little boy a year or so older than I, who had somehow managed to lose the first joint of one of his thumbs. I was not displeased when we moved away at the end of the school year and I was transferred to another school.

Increasingly after 1933, the shadow of National Socialism lengthened across Germany—and across my father’s career. The Nazi movement made itself felt on every side. No opportunity was lost for holding a parade or rally or comparable physical demonstration of political presence. Uniforms sprouted forth everywhere—and makers of brown shirts and leather straps and jackboots must have made a fortune. It was known in legal circles that father was decidedly not a Nazi. One small but symbolic episode sticks in my mind. In 1933-34 many boys—even the little ones of my own age—started to sport swastika armbands in imitation of the members of the Brown-Shirt brigades who were always strutting about. I launched an agitation with my parents to be allowed to have an arm-band like the other boys. Finally they gave in and let me have one—but with a difference. Instead of the Swastika, the arm-band mother made me a small-scale version of the old three-striped black-white-red German flag. I was disappointed and felt that this was “just not the same thing.” And I’m sure that that’s exactly what other people thought.

Though my parents kept their worries about political developments to themselves, I could not help learning that something was amiss. I still recall various signs of this. The summer of 1934 we were to take a holiday in Switzerland. We started out with a visit en route to my grandmother in Stuttgart, where we were also to pick up some travel documents. When these were not forthcoming, we went for a (very pleasant) visit to Baden-Baden instead. (The affluence of the place, with its profession of Rolls Royce cares, still sticks on my mind.) Again, later that year my father was
called in for the extra-thorough tax audit—a device used to annoy persons deemed unfriendly towards the Nazi regime. I recall his spending some anxious days at home worriedly compiling his records and documents. On another occasion, my father received a summons to attend a meeting in the Town Hall, and he and mother were greatly concerned about this. It transpired—to my parents’ great relief—that the occasion was merely one of distributing some medal being awarded routinely to those who had served as officers during World War I.

Behind all this loomed one crucial and crushing fact. After 1933, my father’s law practice was increasingly moribund as members of the bar who were known to be cool to the regime found fewer and fewer clients. (After the Nazification of the judiciary in the wake of the Reichstag fire trial acquittals, it was difficult for non party-member attorneys to win cases before the party-enthusiast judges.) And so the spring of 1935 saw a development that was truly momentous for my parents and for me—the decision to emigrate to the U.S.A.

As the first preparatory step, my parents sold the house in the Leibnizstrasse during that summer. Thereupon we went to live in two rooms of my grandparents large flat in their house in the Bergstraße. I attended the local elementary boys’ school (Volksschule) in the fall of 1935, and continued there until early 1938, with various interruptions for travel on farewell visits to relations. As best I recall the system, the class kept its same teacher from year to year. I remember my teacher well—a kind, intelligent, and sensible Herr Feist, who was subsequently killed as a soldier on the Russian Front. Only a handful of school incidents of this period remain in my mind, most prominently my first caning in the office of the school principal for some trivial offense. At the time, I regarded this punishment as unmerited by the minor transgression that occasioned it. Only later did I learn that it had actually been instigated by my own mother, who suggested to Herr Feist that the experience “might be good for me.” We spent many hours playing games in the schoolyard, and I recall that at the time—like my classmates—I was very enthusiastic about soccer.

My various playmates of this period are now dim in my memory. They included Dieter Nölle whose father was, like mine, an attorney; Günther Alles whose parents owned a leather-goods shop, and Günther Grote whose father owned a photography shop. One boy in particular remains vividly in my mind because of an amusing incident often retold in my family. Wolfgang Maier, a friend of my own age (then 8) whose father was an agent for a pharmaceutical company, in my presence once asked mother in
a very serious grown-up sort of way, just making polite conversation, “Ha-
ben Sie viel Last mit dem Lümmel?” (Does the good-for-nothing give you much trouble?). I cannot say whether I was more shocked by his nerve or impressed by his maturity.¹

The things I principally enjoyed doing as a small child were the usual ones—play with my friends, outings with my parents, games with adults at my grandparents’ place. Perhaps only two of my interests were developed beyond the level of the ordinary at this stage: woodworking, which I soon gave up altogether, and reading, which has remained my prime avocation to the present day. The stories of Wilhelm Hauff were among my favorites. And I still have in my possession the copies of Robinson Crusoe, Dr. Doolittle, and Little Lord Fauntleroy in the German versions in which I first read them at age seven or eight.

The Hagen of my youth was a town much like any other, with many good people and doubtless some bad. It afforded ample opportunities for a youngster to make friends and learn the rudiments of civil living. The place was no doubt all-right, but the times were truly bad as the horrors of Naz-

In early 1936 my father made a short exploratory visit to New York. And the next year he crossed the Atlantic for good, mother and I traveling to Hamburg to see him off. Hamburg impressed me greatly as a beautiful, prosperous seaside city, liberally sprinkled with greened copper roofs. The year 1937/1938 was largely given to preparations for emigration. I at-
tended school rather intermittently at this stage though various attempts were made to assure that I did not stop doing school work altogether. My mother arranged with a young nun from a local convent, who had lived in England for a time, to tutor me in English. She used Mother Goose as a text, and for some reason thought it well to begin with “Humpty Dumpty.” I found it most strange that the English would use the word for egg (Ger-
man Ei being pronounced just like the pronoun I) as a term meaning myself (I).

One vivid recollection of that last year in Germany relates to the plebis-
cite of 1938. In April of that year, a month after the Anschluss of Austria, Hitler appealed to the citizenry of the new Gross-Deutschland for a re-
newed four-year mandate of power. (He won it by over 99 %.) Among the last memories of my childhood in Germany is my going with mother to the voting place on this occasion. Although the two different styles of ballots (yea or nea) were supposedly preprinted, only the affirmative ballots were
made available at the polling stations. This struck me as silly. What, I thought, could be the point of holding an election when there were no alternatives for a choice? Young innocent that I was, the deeper ramifications of the political process were quite beyond me!

Among the things I remember from those days were the frequent parades and marches in the street to give the “brown shirts” a chance to show off their uniforms and their dedication to Nazism. Then too there was the monthly “Ein-Topf” (single pot) day to teach people the domestic economies useful that would be useful in wartime. (Some enterprising manufacturers made compartmented pots so that the Hausfrau could prepare a diversified meal in a single pot. The Brown shirts made a house to house inspection—in pairs like Mormon missionaries—arriving just before mealtime to make sure that kitchen practice conformed to the rules.)

The two years between father’s first exploratory trip to the U.S.A. in the spring of 1936 and the summer of 1938 when mother and I joined him there were spent in a sort of limbo as far as our own family life was concerned. Mother and I became planets orbiting the family of my grandfather and grandmother. I am now surprised that this did not seem strange to me, but as I think back to my early years, I am struck again and again by a child’s ability to take things in stride and adapt to drastic changes without thinking anything amiss.

After our emigrating to the U.S.A. had became a settled issue, it transpired that a development of significance for our lives had taken place more than a decade before. In the 1920s my father’s father had made plans to emigrate to Switzerland. Among the preparatory steps, he had transferred the bulk of his fortune to the care of the Schweizerscher Bankverein in Basel. However my grandmother dug in her heels. She had lived in Stuttgart all her life, and most of her friends and relations lived there. Understandably enough, she was reluctant to move away to a new and strange city. Though natural, this was also unfortunate. For the Nazis eventually forced the repatriation of these assets and ultimately confiscated them as the property of a refugee when my father inherited them after grandmother’s death. (But for grandmother’s stubbornness, I might today be a wealthy man—and perhaps a Swiss one as well.) Yet even a black cloud can have a silver lining, for grandfather’s Swiss fund made it possible for father to have a modest sum slip past the fiscal controls imposed by the Nazis.

One day in early July in 1938 mother and I made the trip by train to Bremen, accompanied by grandmother Landau. There we boarded the U.S.S. President Roosevelt to embark on our transatlantic voyage. I left my
native land without much sorrow or regret. Life on a big ship was an adventure and too many new and interesting things were going on for me to give much thought to the past. My thoughts dwelt wholly on the adventures that lay ahead—the reunion with father and life in a new country about which I knew little more than I had seen in the Keystone Kops movies, which were popular in the Germany of my childhood.

What sort of boy, now nearing ten years of age, was crossing the Atlantic? I was (I do believe) good natured, and of a friendly, outgoing disposition, reasonably alert and intelligent, rather fond of reading, and fond also of sports and physical activities. (I made the error of taking my never-to-be-used soccer equipment along.) But there was nothing whatever to indicate special ability in any particular direction, such as art or music, which children so often manifest at a tender age. My work at school had been mediocre—not egregiously bad, but by no means outstandingly good. I was an altogether ordinary youngster—good of heart, but quite average in abilities. And I certainly lacked any crystallized ambitions or aspirations—all that came along years later.

Was our leaving Germany for a fresh start in a new and foreign land a wise step or a foolish one? I have never hesitated for a moment to regard it as eminently wise. One of the most sensible things a person can do it to exercise judicious control over one’s environment. With prudence and luck one can manage to settle in an area that affords some advantages in point of conditions and resources, living in a district where the incidence of crime is comparatively low, working with people who are civil, and associating with people who are congenial. And above all one can do a great deal to keep out of harm’s way. Someone who fails to act with due care in these regards is either a paragon of selflessness or a darned fool (and possibly both). Conceivably, our lives might in some ways have run a smoother course in “the old country,” for there is no doubt that a time of very real hardship lay ahead for my parents. But the actual likelihood is that things would have been far worse in Germany. The Nazi pestilence was a present and worsening reality, and a major war loomed in the foreseeable future—a war in which, young though I was, I might well have been caught up, as many of my contemporaries actually were.

Over the years my thoughts have often dwelt on that factor in human affairs to which the Romans gave the name of fortuna and that we call fortune, luck, chance, or the like. Its role becomes paramount in extraordinary circumstances such as war, disaster, or revolution, when the “normal” circumstances of normal life are ruthlessly abolished. The whole experience
of emigrating from Germany and placing an ocean between ourselves and the Nazi catastrophe and its concomitant warfare left me with the strong conviction that it is safer and wiser to sidestep rather than grapple with world-historical disasters. The sensible policy in such circumstances is not, alas, that of valor and heroic confrontation, but that of prudence and discretion. When the cattle stampede or the avalanche thunders down, there is no point in standing firm. It is wiser to follow the course of prudence and get out of the way than to undertake a hopeless struggle against potent and malign forces that are wholly beyond one’s control.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 9

1 My attempts in 2010 to establish contact with these old friends via internet-provided address information regrettably came to nothing.

2 Actually, matters might have taken a far more serious turn. At the time of writing this, I did not realize that owing to my father’s antecedence I would have counted as a part-Jewish Mischling under the Nuremberg laws. Some of those so classified were engulfed in the Holocaust, although father’s front-line service in WWI might have averted such a fate.
Three

AN IMMIGRANT BOY
Beechhurst: 1938-1942
(Age 10-13)

Mother and I sailed on the U.S.S. President Roosevelt from Bremerhaven on the 8th of July, 1938. After brief stops at Le Havre in France and Cobh in Ireland, the ship crossed the Atlantic on a smooth voyage of which I still have pleasant recollections. As any boy would, I loved roaming about the large vessel, breathing the sea air, sensing the unaccustomed motion of the ship, and being awed by loud blasts of its great horn. At the time I had no idea that the S. S. President Roosevelt had a significant claim to fame. For just a decade ago in 1928 she had been the agent in one of the most dramatic sea rescues of the era, saving the crew of the British freighter Antinoe when it was foundering off Newfoundland amidst a North Atlantic gale of monumental proportions. So heroic were the actions of the Roosevelt’s crew and her captain, George Fried, that New York City mounted a ticker-tape parade up Fifth Avenue in their honor. By contrast, our own voyage was, mercifully, the very model of quiescent routine.

At the synthetic “horse races” in the ship’s lounge one evening, a kind elderly gentleman placed a 25¢ bet for me, and I won a dollar or two, which I saw as a good omen. I recall the thrill of first sighting the Statue of Liberty and the impressive view of the New York skyline. We landed in the early morning of July 16th, the day after my tenth birthday. This new year of my life was to see a fresh start in an altogether new place. For as fate would have it, we were now to settle in New York City—in Queens Borough on Long Island to be specific. In doing so, we followed in the footsteps of those many immigrants who landed in New York and simply stayed there. No doubt the fact that some friends of my parents lived in the area helped to constitute the choice.

It felt exciting—and somewhat strange—to be in a foreign country with a strange language. But I was happy to be reunited with my father, whom I
had not seen for over a year. We soon cleared through customs and made our way by taxi out to Long Island. I was glad to leave Manhattan behind. It seemed overpowering to me: intimidatingly massive, overcrowded, and—after the tidiness of German towns—rather unkempt and dirty. Still, an aura of excitement hung over the hustle and bustle of the place, and a mixture of wonder, apprehension, and hopefulness filled my mind.

The America we reached was very different from that of the present day. The very month of our arrival witnessed the last reunion of veterans of the battle of Gettysburg. And the Depression was still a daunting reality whose end had to warrant the military build-up in preparation for World War II.

This year or 1938 as it turned out was a pretty memorable one in the 20th century’s affairs. Germany seized Austria and Czechoslovakia, Italy Ethiopia and Japan much of China. The world was en route to war. But America was decided at peace, and in our own backyard in Flushing a World’s Fair was calmly getting under way as though nothing was amiss. With the Depression now approaching its end, a brief period of normality opened up before the waves of war engulfed America. This brief period was just enough for my family to gain a foothold in its new homeland.

Our first residence in the U.S.A.—where we lived for some six months after our arrival—was a small apartment upstairs in a recently built duplex which father had rented in a newish, red-brick, residential suburb on the outskirts of Flushing. My recollections of that summer form a kaleidoscopic series. I particularly remember working in the garage to make various things out of orange crates including a small boat which, hauled to a distant beach by public transportation on a very hot August day, sank instantly upon launching. Then too I recall the excitement occasioned by a succession of hold-ups at a local bar. Proximate criminality was a new phenomenon for me. With America still recovering from the Depression and wartime boom still to come, most honest people lived very frugally—ourselves certainly included—but there were evident exceptions.

The New York World’s Fair, which took place virtually in our own backyard, was now in full swing and we often went there. By and large, the national exhibitions made relatively little impression upon me. The industrial ones were a different matter, however. Several of them had a futuristic orientation, and I was fascinated by the robots, the fanciful automobiles, and ultra-modern houses, and other accoutrements of twenty-first century cities as seen from the vantage point of 1938 modernism. This vista of a
different world reinforced the sense of new horizons and challenging possibilities opened up by our transatlantic move.

That fall I took my place as a student at the local public elementary school conveniently located a few blocks away from home. The first day of the new school year came on a hot day in early September and I reported with an open shirt—without a tie. The school rules required boys to wear ties, and I still remember vividly how the teacher’s vain attempts at explanation were followed by the vista of a surrounding sea of boys and girls, pointing at their necks or mine, tugging their ties, some enthusiasts even taking theirs off to wave in the air. I got the idea, and henceforth appeared duly equipped with a necktie.

The school made a special effort to help me—a foreigner virtually bereft of English—adapt to the grade into which I had been placed according to age. I was excused from some of the usual classes to have special lessons with one of the reading teachers. Though she knew no German, she helped me to work my way through the whole curriculum of readers, beginning with the “baby-books” used in the first grade. After a time she left me pretty well to my own devices, just giving me books and doing what she could to resolve any questions I might have. I made good progress—heaven knows how—and at the end of ten or twelve weeks was getting pretty well caught up in reading. And so, gradually, I began to settle into the routine of the school.

But another change was in the offing. Early in 1939 we made a further move—this time to the then small village of Beechhurst on Long Island Sound. Here father had found a larger and more pleasant apartment, not far removed from the house of Dr. Egon Wolff, a refugee physician who, with his family, had been friends of my parents in Hagen.

Located a bit further out than Whitestone on Long Island Sound, Beechhurst in those days was a small, virtually rural hamlet of some six thousand souls, with only a few shops—a grocery, a drug store, a dry cleaning establishment, and perhaps one or two others. The only residential structure of larger than domestic size was our new home—a large apartment complex known as “The Beechhurst Towers,” located at 160-65 Seventh Avenue (later renamed more grandly as Powell’s Cave Boulevard). Built in an euphoria post-war decade, this apartment building itself was a somewhat pretentious brick pile, with pseudo-Tudor touches here and there had offered a good deal in its prime, but had soon fallen on hard times with the Depression. The Towers’ main claim to fame was that it had provided the first American home for Charles Chaplin when he came to this country
around 1920 as a contract player for Keystone Films. And even in the late 1930s the place still afforded an amazing range of amenities, albeit now in a state of ongoing decline. There was a pair of tennis courts, a beach with a pier extending into Long Island Sound (as well as a dilapidated and already virtually useless water-front pavilion), a recreation room equipped with ping-pong tables, and a private bus service which linked the Towers to the subway railhead in Flushing and also took the children back and forth to the local school. All this erstwhile grandeur of the place was slowly decaying from lack of upkeep in the new era of financial stringency. But my playmates and I did not require the splendors of well-maintained facilities—the old tennis-courts, the ping-pong tables, and the beach provided us with endless hours of pleasure, notwithstanding their increasing decrepitude.

When we arrived in Beechhurst, my knowledge of English, although progressing, was still rather imperfect. I distinctly recall being somewhat hampered by language difficulties that spring during a birthday party for Jack Beddell, one of my Towers playmates—my very first peer-group social occasion in the U.S.A. But my English now improved by leaps and bounds, and I soon managed “to pass for native.”

The Beechhurst Towers was important to me not just as a dwelling, but as the social microcosm on which I drew for most of my friends and which provided the stage-setting of our communal activities (tennis, ping-pong, swimming, etc.). Being an inhabitant of the Beechhurst Towers provided the first bit of community identification that I achieved since our American migration.

Times of trial bring people’s inner nature to the fore. Some reveal themselves for the worse, and one is then badly let down by individuals of whom one deserves better. But what surprises me in viewing our transition to the U.S.A. in retrospect is the not insubstantial number of people who went out of their way to be helpful even though they “owed one nothing,” so to speak. In most instances their names have long faded from my mind—if indeed they were ever there—but they have left an indelible residue of a diffuse gratitude.

After we settled in the Towers I began to attend P.S. 30, the local public elementary school. Housed in a little red brick schoolhouse that accommodated only the first six grades, it afforded a rather modest physical plant, and an unkempt, minimally equipped schoolyard. The human element was, happily, more auspicious, for the staff was both dedicated and competent. Miss Jones, the principal, was a petite, red-haired lady who, despite an in-
clination to school-marmish imperviousness, looked kindly on the red-haired immigrant boy being committed to her charge. She placed me in Miss Sabbathé’s class, the fifth grade, which suited my age, though not quite yet my language-skills. This class was just one year from the top of the school, since only one further class, Miss Ferber’s sixth grade, followed within this school itself. Our home-room teacher taught us all subjects except for penmanship. This was Miss Ferber’s specialty, and I fear I must have taxed her patience sorely when trying—never with full success—to convert my Germanic hen-scratches in the old-style handwriting into the smooth loops and whirls of Palmer penmanship.

The thing that impressed me very much about P.S. 30 can be summarized in the expression good will, for a great deal of it prevailed throughout this small and modest school. It seemed to govern the relationship of all concerned, of teachers to students, students to teachers, and teachers to one another. Miss Sabbathé was a most kindly and helpful person. She began each morning with a reading from the psalms (the 23rd was her favorite), and the majestic verses of the King James Bible were the first piece of English prose I learned by heart. (I have never come to sympathize with the idea of excluding the Bible from schools.) One of my favorite times each day was the brief period allotted to free creative activity. (I was particularly fond of modeling with clay.) The fastidious Miss Ferber—who taught the sixth grade—seemed to me rather severe at first, but I came to like her immensely once she became my home-room teacher in the sixth grade. It was her custom to spend that last 15 or so minutes of each day reading us a story on the installment plan, and listening to her do this was always one of the highlights on my day. The entire period I spent in this school from early 1939 to June of 1940 was a thoroughly happy time for me and it taught me the useful lesson of looking at schoolwork as a challenge rather than a nuisance.

The majority of people whom my parents befriended during these early years—the people whom we visited or who came to our house to visit with us were fellow immigrants from Germany. Some were old-timers who had come to escape the grinding poverty of the years immediately following WW I. Others came later to escape Nazism. New York was full of such people, and their common background drew them to each other. My own friends, by contrast, came from the broader spectrum of young neighbors and schoolmates. And, strange though it may seem, not a single other immigrant was included in this group—the result, I do believe, of accident rather than design.
Like all times since the age of the Industrial Revolution this intra-war era was a time of transition. The milkman still made his house deliveries—though now by truck. And the ice man also made his deliveries by this means, for some people still had “ice houses” rather than electric refrigerators. But the “junk man” still made his rounds by an open horse wagon, with ropes strung across poles from which pots and pans and utensils were suspended that set up a clatter which could be heard from a considerable distance. The telephone had not yet made its way into every house, and many people still relied on public “call boxes.” While radios were ubiquitous, television was nonexistent, a circumstance that contributed to the popularity of the “movies,” which were still invariably in black and white. In New York City, local public transport was standardly provided by the subway, which cost just 5¢ irrespective of the distance one traveled. Nevertheless the age of the automobile had irreversibly dawned and virtually every family had a car, though it might only be put into motion on weekends and special occasions.

One Beechhurst friend who made a deep impression on me was Thomas Floyd Buckley, whose family lived in a large detached house around the corner from the Towers. Our friendship deepened only gradually, for Tom was some two years older than I, and in boyhood even two years makes a big difference. With his two somewhat younger sisters, his charming mother, and his bluff and imposing father (a professional actor whose gruff voice served for the radio-characterization of Popeye the Sailor), the Buckleys formed an attractive group which I have always regarded as the archetypical American family. Tom was a very bright and gifted lad, with a remarkable gift as a public speaker and as a writer. (He eventually would end up on the staff of the New York Times.) Tom was something of a hero to me because there was about him an aura of easy assurance, of secure place in the fabric of the society, which I myself certainly lacked. (The destabilizing experiences of my family had instilled in me a trace of uneasiness that no matter how well things seem to stand, circumstances beyond one’s control can always create disaster.)

My other close companions of this period were three occupants of the Towers, the two Merwin brothers, Donald and Philip, and John Beddell. Jack was the only one of my boyhood friends with strong scientific inclinations. He was a dabbler in chemistry and biology, tinkerer with electric gear, and devotee of science fiction, and eventually went on to study engineering in college. A blond, lanky, and somewhat moody lad, he tended to be more of a “loner” than my other friends. Of the Merwin brothers, Do-