

Just a roll

Wolfgang Janisch

When a war is over, when no shot is being heard any more, then this war is not yet over at all. What remains is need and misery, destroyed villages and cities, ruins, ruins, once and again ruins. To live in them, having them in sight permanently and yet to bring up the will to survive, to overcome all dejectedness which befalls your soul time and again, is an achievement not comparable to any other power and ability. In good times much is easier to master than the bare survival in times of great need. Further inheritance of such an inferno, sometimes hidden in the ground, buried under rubble, left behind carelessly, given up as useless by the withdrawing military forces to save their own skin – that are incredible masses of ammunition. Out of the best materials, once snatched away from the earth, developed with great ability and knowledge and produced just for destroying. Such an enormous schizophrenia.

We boys discovered the burnt-out walls as an adventure playground. Up till today I remember the warning red letters: Take care! Munition! Like a menetekel it was there written on the ruin wall. However, children underestimate danger. The fascination born by prohibition is too big.. Mostly it changes into to the opposite. In this context I think about a tragical story of those post-war days: the twelve-years-old son of our female disregarding all interdiction, out of the window of the first floor of the house onto the pave. One boy threw, he next one brought the projectile up again, and so on. A game, that amused increasingly. As the twelve-years old boy wanted to bring up the seemingly harmless toy, it exploded. It tore open his abdomen.

Full of despair he pressed the welling intestines with his hands against his belly. Without a word he stood in front of his mother. So many times she had drummed into his head, not to play with found munition. So many times! He stuck to his word! He died silently after a short time.

A young, promising life had been extinguished. And war had been over long before. But all this evil is accompanied by a further overwhelming ally. That's hunger. It's bowels-wracking like a never ending torture. It slowly destroys the body, kills the spirit. A simple watery soup out of weeds and stinging nettles without salt, without fat, without a dime of meat seemed to us a feast in Paradise in those days. A dry slice of bread, if you got one, tasted like the best cream cake. To satisfy the mere necessities of the body demanded all power, time and a lot of invention. Once the physical strength had been regained, the soul, too, found comfort again. One can hardly better understand the narrow ties between body and spirit as in times of unintended abstinency, in times of bare misery. All gold in the world is just trifles compared to one simple roll, when hunger comes along as a shaky fellow.

An alderly woman, still a child in those days, told about the first rolls, which were distributed in school. If there was a child missing, one roll remained. It would be given to another child. Hoping to taste such a precious delicacy a second time, the body got disciplined in a strange way. The spine were stretching and pressing on. The children were sitting straighter, higher and higher they grew above their benches. Their hands were folded firmly and their attitude of being good kids became extreme. Their eyes widened and widened longing for one roll more, for a single peace of bread, which just ment less hunger. It was the happiest moment, when the teacher rewarded so much honesty and put the roll into the reaching hands. Next time another child would be lucky. In those days the perception of righteous sharing had not yet been wasted away as it did in later years of satiety, when rolls were thrown into the gutter.

May those times never come back!

But the need was a great teacher to us. It did not only make us inventive; it also helped us to keep in mind that the most simple things are of high value.