

CHAPTER 1 The Childhood Years

The earliest memory and awareness that I have of myself began on a beautiful summer afternoon. There was the humming and buzzing of fast-paced commotion all around me as everyone anxiously awaited the arrival of a very important visit from my godparents, Mr. and Mrs. Erhard. I was dressed in my best little boys' outfit and sent outside so as not to be a bother while my mother helped my brothers and sisters get ready. So, there I was... standing and watching intently as I could see our guests quickly approaching the farm, vigorously riding their bikes down in the valley, still some distance away. Then it happened. All of a sudden, I felt an urge followed by a warm sensation down my legs. As I shifted my gaze downwards I saw my very own urine leaking from the bottom of my pant leg and spreading on the ground. I just stood there and started to cry. My mother gave me a look of disgust as she noticed that I'd just peed my pants, grabbed me by the arm, hauled me away and changed me out of my wet pants. In no time at all I was decent again and our godparents arrived. They always brought delicious candies and chocolates so I remember the rest of the afternoon turning out quite well.

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Such a beautiful day marked by such great expectations, plagued by crisis, discomfort and panic, and then concluded with candies and chocolate. This is how I summarize the very first day in my memory and it appears as though it may actually have been an early taste of what was to come. The year was 1935, and I must have been about three years old. There is nothing that I remember of my life before that incident, nor do I remember wetting my pants ever after that. There are, of course, unlimited flashes of memory from that earliest episode and onto the Second World War, where I grew up in a rather large family on a small but idyllic farm in Slovenia¹. The farm was bought by my parents in 1930, before I was born. My mother, who came from a large and prominent farming family, insisted that her family too should grow up "properly and respectfully" on a farm. In those days, unless you had your own land, with cows and pigs and chickens, and produced your own meat, dairy, vegetables and fruit, you were depending on somebody else. My mother would have none of it.

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My father, on the other hand, was not a farmer. He was a builder who employed his own group of masons to develop homes and other community buildings in a small nearby city called Sostanj. It was here where my father built a rather modern two-story house for our family, even though it was never actually occupied by our family and rather was sold to [sold to who?] when they spotted and fell in love with our farm in the neighboring parish and decided to buy it in 1930. My parents committed themselves to a sizeable mortgage and moved the family to a dream farm up on the hills of a parish called Skale. A few years later, things turned ugly. The Great Depression hit hard and my father's business went down the drain. In order to carry the new mortgage and support his family, which at that time consisted of three children, but soon grew to six, my father accepted a masonry contract job in a large tannery called Wosnjak Tannery in Sostanj.

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I was born on June 5th 1932, the fifth child in a family of six children. Before the family moved to the farm in 1930, my eldest sister, Marica, followed by my brother, Frank, and then my sister, Angela, were all born in Sostanj within a year of one another. We used to call them "the old generation" because once my parents settled themselves on the Skale farm, after just a one-year break, a "new crop" of three babies was born, again within a year of one another. First, there was my brother, Anthony, (Toni), then I, and finally my youngest brother, Edi. So my mother gave birth to six children within seven years, all between 1927 and 1933.

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Our farm was located on an elevated plateau atop the hills above a beautiful and prosperous Salek Valley, which stretched between two towns, Sostanj on the West side and Velenje on the East side. In between the two towns and on the Northern slopes of the valley is where our home was situated. The distance between the two towns was less than ten kilometers and the farmland in between was speckled with small villages of ten to twenty farmers apiece. A ring of low and high mountains, some as tall as 3000 feet, surrounded the entire valley. Sostanj was the larger of the two towns, and by far, had a more influential civic and cultural center, and even carried with it a "city" status. This is where the most affluent people lived and worked. The city had a county court, a junior high school, a community theatre and a huge tannery. Close to one thousand people worked there, including my father, for several years during

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¹ Slovenia is a South Alpine country, which in the seventh to ninth centuries, was an independent principality (known as Carinthia and Carantania). Later and for many centuries, it was part of the Austrian Empire. It became part of Yugoslavia in 1918, after the First World War, and is now an independent country, part of the European Union.

the Great Depression. On the other side of the valley was Velenje and before the war it was a much smaller and less influential community. Having said that, it did have a prosperous coalmine and it was home to Slovenia's first-ever thermo-electric power plant. The power plant was built in the early years of the twentieth century and depended on the local coalmine for fuel supply. The coalmine was the major employer of the area, not only for Velenje but also for all the neighboring farming communities.

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Deleted: The northern slopes of the Salek Valley, which stretched high and wide above the valley, were all part of the parish "Skale", including our farm, which was located about ½ hour walking distance west of the parishes center . Every parishioner in Skale was very proud of the beautiful and historically famous church named St Jury, which was one of the earliest catholic churches built in Slovenia. It was prominently located on top of a hill, thus overlooking a large part of Salek valley. The church was also known for its high and prominent bell tower with its huge bronze bells that could be heard from all corners of the Salek valley when they were tolling. Behind the church, there was a public square with a huge linden tree right in the middle of the square, where people would gather before and after the mass, or some just stayed there during the mass. On the east side of the square there were two school buildings, where we went to elementary school. On the north side of the square was a pub and restaurant, a grocery store and a community hall. Right beside the church, on the south side, was a very imposing parish building with parish offices and living quarters for the priests. In those days, the Catholic Church- which was, and still is, the dominant church in Slovenia- was running schools and most of the social life in the rural areas of the land. The parish with its church, communal hall and school, was the focal place for all farming families in Skale and so it was for our. ¶

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To reach the school, we had to first walk through a forest, than cross several neighboring farms, cross a small river (Lipenja), walk along¶ an un-ending field and then up a steep hill through the parish orchard, full of overgrown apple, pear and cherry trees. The smell of the blossoms in the springtime is deeply engraved in my memory still today. So are the winter scenes and the scenes from the fall when the fruits were ripe and ready for free picking. This was the scenic shortcut that took us some 30 minutes to reach the school and, of course, twice as long to get back home after the school, because there were always distractions, fights or great battles with the neighboring kids.¶

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Life in late thirties, in Slovenia was tranquil and happy. Everything seemed to be so orderly, peaceful and meaningful- at least from children's perspective. Although we had to start helping on the farm when we were quite young, our childhood was cheerful and happy. We were always singing, laughing and poking jokes with each other. When we were singing, people would say that we sound like angels. That made us feel proud and we would try harder. We learned all kind of songs and my sister Angela, who really was quite gifted, came up with unique performance ideas that made people laugh. Our dad of ... [7]

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