

### 3 On the roof

‘Come down, I won’t clout you!’

I hesitated for a moment. Did I hear correctly? My mother repeated her appeal: ‘Come down, I won’t clout you!’

The word ‘clout’ was familiar. After all, I was already four years old. It meant getting a beating. They threatened me with one every now and then, but usually they were put off until next time. At times I was owed a lot of beatings.

But why did she say ‘I won’t clout you’ this time? I looked down puzzled. Had I gone too far? I didn’t want to get down, not immediately anyway.

My dad had put me up on the roof. I was supposed to feed the pigeons. He was proud that I had grown big enough to be able to do this. He continued to argue with my mother. ‘If he falls down, it’s your fault!’ she screamed at him.

My dad came to my help. ‘Come down and I’ll give you a clout’, he said. I quickly realised that I had nothing to fear. He would put it off until later, by which time he would have forgotten about it. My dad was really forgetful about that sort of thing. Raising children was women’s business.

I walked a few more steps and sat down. My sister, Leni, was screaming hysterically: ‘He’s falling down, he’s falling down!’ Then she was gone. She was only four years older than me, but she was already acting like my mother.

My grandpa shouted: ‘The tiles, the tiles!’ He passed me a stick. I continued climbing. Then Juli-Oma also came out of the house and looked up at the roof. She simply shook her head. She hardly ever said a thing and I never saw her angry.

It quietened down below. I had already climbed past the flat part above the summer kitchen and the pigeons became more and more trusting. I think they were able to see the corn grains, which I held tightly in my fists. I continued climbing, grasping them tightly.

‘Jakob! Don’t go any further up!’ my father shouted. My father always called me Jakob when he got excited, although my name is Walter. His younger brother is called Jakob. I have always called him Jakob-Pat to differentiate between us. The pigeons did not fly off. They coo-ed and blocked my way. ‘The tiles, the tiles!’ my Juri-Ota continued shouting. We both knew that pigeons could break tiles. He had told me so himself. He called them Patschfuß which means ‘slapping feet’. They were big, magnificent pigeons with feathers on their legs.

Then the pigeons started to fight for the food. Soon I had reached the ridge tiles. I could see my dad on the other side of the house, whilst the rest of the family was in the yard below. I was happily feeding the pigeons. I loved feeding the pigeons especially the carrier pigeons. Although they flew off one day, never to return. The ordinary pigeons stayed on the roof. Not even being tempted by the field. All they wanted was to get fed by me. It saved their lives. Back then, people used to spray the fields with a rather poisonous weedkiller. So the government’s five-year plan could be completed in four and a half years. They called ours a centrally administered economy or a socialist economy.

As a result even the rabbits were covered in deadly growths from the weedkiller. We had no more rabbits after that.

The corn grains rolled down on both sides of the roof. The pigeons chased after them. I can't remember whether they broke the tiles. And I can't recall how I got down from the roof. Nobody ever talked to me about it.

But as far as I remember, I never got that beating.

## **Glossary**

**Clout** – a slap or blow, typically with the hand

**Leni** – Pless Magdalena, maiden name Wilhelm, my sister, four years older than me, born in 1950

**Juli-Oma** – Wilhelm Julianna, maiden name Dassinger, my paternal grandmother, born in 1899

**Juri-Ota** – Wilhelm Georg, my paternal grandfather, born in 1900

**Ota** – grandfather

**Jakob-Pat** – Wilhelm Jakob, brother of my dad, born in 1930

**Pat** – uncle, godfather (originally)

**Patschfuß** – slapping feet pigeons

**Five-year plan** – planning instrument in a centrally administered (socialist) economy

**Centrally administered economy** – Economic system in socialist or communist countries; also known as Socialist Economy