

5 On the ice

I can't remember how exactly I got to the middle of the frozen lake, which had appeared in front of our doorstep one day. The Kanalschanz had bursted its banks. The ice was still fresh and tender. But it sustained me. I walked around on it in my slippers. Mine were from Darova. Like my Juli-Oma. Grandma Juli. I can remember all the things they offered me to get off the ice. Among those was blow. My grandma Juli just shook her head and went to fetch a blanket.

My sister was especially involved. Leni. She offered to read everything to me that I wished. Even "Max and Moritz" for the 27th time. Back then we slept together in one bed. She also offered that I was allowed to turn off the lights. The Lord of the Lights! Maybe that's the reason why I eventually came off the ice. Or maybe because my sister Leni was suddenly gone.

Certainly Leni had run off to see her best friend Lutzi. She had to hear all about it right away. They put their heads together for days and whispered. Even though we just lived three corners away, they could tattle for an hour on each corner. When that wasn't enough, they started all over again. Like geese. Later, when the boys were starting to chase after them, I began to understand. They suddenly flattered me as well. Sometimes they let me ride a moped, sometimes they gave me a lift on the bicycle. Just to tell me that I had a pretty sister. As if I hadn't known already. I had even asked my mother. She didn't say yes right away, but she also didn't say no. Now she was gone. Leni. Probably off to see Lutzi.

The ice was bending, but it didn't break. I slid back and forth a few times and surrendered. Without a crowd watching it was only half the fun. My mother said that I was old enough to see the danger. Strange! Even years later I remained dull-witted on that matter. Sliding over the razor-thin ice with skates was a compulsory exercise in our hood. Bending, but not breaking, was the slogan. The only times it actually broke was when we were playing ice hockey against the Romanians. Or if ten guys ended up on top of each other during a brawl. It was nearly impossible to keep it a secret. That fell into my mother's jurisdiction. She was the highest authority in the house, in terms of raising the children. She wasn't very strict, but consequent. If you deserved a punishment, you got it. You deserved a punishment, when you got yourself into mischief. My sister Leni never did anything like that. I didn't have any other siblings.

I had the punishments all to myself. And the ice.

Glossary

Kanalschanz – goit, water ditch, near Dreibruppen-Gasse

Darova – former German village in the Romanian region of Banat, located 40 miles east from Temeswar/Timişoara

Temeswar/Timişoara – town in the western part of Romania, capital of the Banat region, 6 miles from Sackelhausen

Banat – situated mainly in western region of Romania, where Romanian, Hungarian, German people and a few more nationalities live since centuries together; parts of Banat are nowadays as well in the eastern region of Hungary and Serbia

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

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

Lutzi – Lutz Katharina, Leni's best friend, born in 1951

Max and Moritz – is an illustrated story in verse of seven boyish pranks in German language; written and illustrated by Wilhelm Busch and published in 1865