The Education of a Canadian
My Life as a Scholar and Activist

H. Gordon Skilling

THE EDUCATION OF A CANADIAN

H. Gordon Skilling with the Order of the White Lion, 1993

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H. GORDON SKILLING

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To Sally Bright

who married me in Prague,
shared my life for more than 50 years,
and watched with me the destruction of a country,
   long hoped with me for its people's liberation,
   and shared with them and me the joy of its rebirth

and to our sons, David Bright and Peter Conard,
who also came to know and love
that distant land and its people

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

Dear Friends

I am delighted that readers throughout the entire world can now read the memoirs of H. Gordon Skilling, my friend, the well-known chronicler of August 1968 and expert in Czech history. Professor Skilling is widely recognized for his many books dealing with Czech and Czechoslovakian history. I met him a number of times before November 1989 and like to remember our long conversations concerning the failures of the communist system in Czechoslovakia and our collaboration in promoting rights through Chapter 77.

I greatly appreciate Professor Skilling's life-long work which, for the most part, has been dedicated to Czechoslovakia, the country for which he has always had a profound feeling. I am certain that this publication will help readers throughout the world to gain a deeper knowledge of our nation and its poignant history.

PREFACE

AS PEOPLE REACH, AND PASS, the proverbial three score years and ten, they inevitably look back more often on their past life and become curious about half-forgotten episodes and events, and the actions and beliefs these evoked at the time. They may be tempted to record such events and thoughts for descendants and friends, or even for a wider public. Only after overcoming doubts and inhibitions did I embark on writing a memoir devoted to the two central themes of my life: world communism and its manifestations in central and eastern Europe, and Czechoslovakia, a small country unfamiliar to most Canadians. By an unexpected twist of history — the seizure of power by the Communists in Czechoslovakia in 1948 — these two themes became interwoven and remained so until the peaceful overthrow of Communism in 1989. Together they formed a major current through much of my adult life.

This book is in the first place an exploration and explanation of one Canadian's thinking about communism in central and eastern Europe. Why was I so fascinated by a worldwide movement alien to most Canadians, and why was I destined to devote a lifetime to attempting to understand it? As a young man I experienced the Depression and witnessed the birth of Canadian socialism; as a result I became a convinced socialist. In England, faced with the threats of fascism and impending war, I, like so many students, moved steadily to the Left and became enamoured of communism. My belief was strengthened by the failure of the West to stand up to Japanese, Italian, and German aggression, especially the Western sellout of Czechoslovakia at Munich, and the enormous Soviet contribution to victory in World War II. I was not alone in succumbing to illusions about communism, but I took longer than many to awaken to its realities. During the 1950s, in the United States, I tried to preserve some degree of political detachment and objectivity and thus became increasingly out of step with the prevailing American anti-Communist mood. I grew more and more aware of the imperfections and evil feaures of the various communist systems, and became actively engaged in the struggle for human rights in the communist world.

As for Czechoslovakia, why did a Canadian-born scholar, of Scottish and English descent, develop a deep and abiding interest in this faraway country, of which the Western world knew so little? My sympathy was kindled during my time at Oxford in the late 1930s. Unlike its neighbours, this country had maintained a democratic

system and it was also the linchpin in the system of security designed to block the expansion of Nazi Germany. These distinctive features led me to enter on research on Czech history for a doctorate at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London. By sheer chance, while I was doing research in Prague on my chosen subject, I was thrown into the vortex of world affairs as an eye-witness of events that led directly to war.

My initial interest in Czechoslovakia and its people developed into a lifelong study of the history and politics of what became a kind of second homeland. When Communism came to "my country" by violent means, what remained of my sympathy for the Soviet Union and for communism was shaken to the core, while my sympathy with Czechoslovakia deepened. When the Prague Spring was crushed in 1968, I became increasingly concerned with repression in the country, and turned my attention to the investigation, and support, of the Charter 77 movement as an expression of independent thought and action, and as a rebirth of deeper national traditions. I was happy when the long fusion of Czechoslovakia and Communism came to an abrupt and surprising end in 1989 but saddened by the breakup, a few years later, of the country I had known so well.

This volume represents a conscientious attempt to trace the evolution of my thinking about communism and about Czechoslovakia over 70 years. As I review this record, I am more than ever impressed by how little I was prepared at each stage for the events that followed, and how often I had to adapt to new and unexpected situations and demands. Although my development may in retrospect appear to be a natural and logical course, with each step planned beforehand, in fact it was often the product of chance and surprise. One cannot predict or forecast the future, or even the course of one's own life; it is a constant process of education as new happenings and experiences illuminate earlier events and suggest novel interpretations of them.

For the appearance of this memoir I owe much to many people who gave aid and encouragement in the course of its development. First, I am indebted to Julius Molinaro, my fellow Harbordite, and his wife Matie, who became my literary agent, for reading the manuscript chapter by chapter and persuading me that it was worth publishing. Kay Riddell Rouillard gave me the same kind of moral support and carefully edited the original. I am grateful also to many others who read individual chapters and made comments and criticisms, and to Joan Robinson, who patiently listened to my worries during the many years

of writing and revision, made critical comments, and sustained my spirits. I am indebted to John Flood of Carleton University Press, for his initial support, Carter Elwood and Jamie Glazov for their generous praise as readers for the Press, and Jennie Strickland, its production editor, for her unflagging interest and enthusiasm.

The manuscript went through several revisions, five by my own hand, but was greatly improved by others who edited and worked on successive versions: my son, Peter Skilling, Rebecca Spagnolo, computer expert, Lilit Žekulin for Czech references, the typesetter, Lynn Julian, Jennie Strickland for the final polishing, and Jean Wheeler for the index. I owe a debt to Garron Wells and Harold Averill of the University of Toronto archives, for classifying my papers; Maria Gabánková, for the splendid portrait used on the cover; Jane Francis and her husband David Skilling, for the beautiful cover design.

For financial support I would like to thank, warmly, Robert Johnson, director of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies (CREES), for raising and contributing funds, the vice president (research and international relations), provost, and chair, political science, of the University of Toronto, for their genereous contributions, and Tomáš Bat'a and Jennifer Allen Simons, of the Simons Foundation, for their additional assistance.

The book opens with the dramatic events of the destruction of Czechoslovakia that Sally and I witnessed in the years 1938 and 1939 and then continues with the story of my life from 1912.

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I

DEATH OF A COUNTRY

IT WAS AT A MOMENT OF HIGH CRISIS, in May 1938, that the Czechoslovak Broadcasting Corporation offered, and I accepted, a job broadcasting on radio, in English. My new wife, Sally, and I left London to return to Prague.[1] We had married in the glorious central European capital the previous autumn while I was doing research there for my doctoral studies at the University of London. Somewhat ironically, my thesis topic was the Czech-German national conflict in late-nineteenth century Czech history. During a stopover in Paris we spent much of our time in cafés and parks reading the newspapers about the Czechoslovak crisis. For a time it seemed as though we might not be able to continue to Prague. We proceeded, however, stopping off at Cheb (Eger), which had been the scene of the shooting of two Germans by a Czech policeman only a few days before. Their funeral turned into a great political demonstration by the Nazis, and their shooting was depicted as an illustration of Czech oppression. Hitler sent two wreaths, which were laid by German officers. In fact Eger seemed as though it were already part of Nazi Germany. In the streets people were giving the Nazi salute and the greeting "Heil Hitler." Pictures of Henlein (local Nazi leader) and Hitler were everywhere. But there was a strong movement of resistance among the Czech minority and the few anti-fascist Germans. We attended meetings of German and Czechoslovak Social Democrats and another of all anti-Nazi elements. We also met with a number of the local leaders, who expressed their determination, one and all, Czech and German, to fight to the bitter end against Nazi intervention. We admired their courage in the face of rising Nazi terror and the danger of war and German occupation.

In Prague, with the help of two friends, Lisa and Zdeněk Rudinger, we found a small apartment — really only a single room, with shared kitchen and bath, in a modern building on Fochová třída (named after the French general Marshal Foch, renamed during the Nazi occupation

after the German Marshal Schwerin, and again under the Communists after Marshal Stalin: the Avenue of the Three Marshals, as a Czech wag later called it). Our flat was located close to the main railway station and across the street from Radiožurnál, the broadcasting station where I was to work.

My duties, shared with an English colleague, Oswald Bamborough, were to translate and record an English-language radio news bulletin for broadcast to England and North America. The items were prepared by Czech editors, but I tried to liven them up in English. The work, some three to four hours every evening, was at first not too demanding and left time for me to do the occasional translation — for instance, a speech by Prime Minister Hodža — and to read widely in the Czech and Slovak and the world press. I also prepared a special broadcast on the Czech-German question, but it was thought to be too historical to be used. During the daytime I was able to carry on my research.

In early June we witnessed a great parade celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic party. Later that month Prague was inundated with 30,000 children for the Slet, the gymnastic performance organized by the nationalist association Sokol (Falcon), founded in the 1860s. There were a number of performances in the Strahov stadium by different age groups. In absolute unison, 25,000 men and women did gymnastic exercises to music, their movements and costumes creating colourful and ever-changing patterns. On other evenings there were historical pageants representing the need to defend the country against aggressors. The stadium was usually packed with some 200,000 persons and seats were at a premium. It was a great manifestation of strength and unity in the face of imminent danger.

In mid-August Sally went with Lisa Rudinger to the Sudeten regions, where they visited Jáchymov, the site of dangerous radium mines, and several neighbouring villages where people plied the ancient crafts of lace- and violin-making at home. They were both welcomed into homes and took part in a march in support of the republic. It was a moving display of the solidarity of members of the Czech National Socialist, Social Democratic, and Communist parties and of Czechs and Germans. Later, Sally and I started out for a holiday in the mountains in the German districts of northwestern Bohemia, near Liberec. Alas, I fell ill with jaundice, and it rained day and night for six days. We remained cooped up in our hostel the whole time.

Meanwhile, secret political negotiations between the government and representatives of the Henlein party were breaking down. If Hen-

lein's demands had been accepted, Czechoslovak independence would have been gravely undermined. If they were rejected, everything would depend on whether Hitler was ready to act, and on whether London and Paris would warn him against doing so. If France honoured its obligations to Czechoslovakia and persuaded Britain to join in, the situation would be saved, probably without war. If Paris gave way to London, Czechoslovakia would be lost, and peace as well.

In August Lord Runciman arrived to study the situation for the British government. This visit provoked a German campaign of propaganda, with distorted and falsified reports on the oppression of Germans. There were concentrations of German troops along the borders. I watched a great procession of railway workers below our windows — the so-called Blue Army. Thousands of labourers in blue uniforms from all over the republic, together with peasants in bright costumes, carried banners proclaiming "We Shall Defend Our Boundaries" and "For the Defence of Democracy and World Peace." As German pressure continued, I wrote on 28 August that Hitler would surely strike now or later and would be prevented from doing so only if Britain threw its full weight behind resistance to aggression. The war had, in effect, been going on for seven years in other parts of the world, such as China and Spain, and its spread could be prevented only if London acted. Even Ottawa had a responsibility, since this was a worldwide offensive and could be met only by worldwide resistance.

A week later everyone was cheered by massive demonstrations and the formation of a new government in Prague pledged to defend the country. Suddenly, without warning, general mobilization was declared. In her letter home on 8 September, Sally described the unforgettable scenes in the streets. The women accompanied the men who had been called up, carrying their bags to the stations. Truckloads of men shouted "Long live the Czechoslovak Republic! Long live the army!" At last the long uncertainty was over, and they could go into battle for the defence of their country. That night a total blackout of the city began. We had black paper thumbtacked to our windows, and dark blue or black cellophane over all lights. We needed a flashlight but none was to be purchased, as everyone had had the same idea. We had already been issued gas masks. At the end of the month, because of the threat of war and of bomb attacks on the railways, we moved to the Rudingers' apartment in the Old Town. Zdeněk had been called up, and Lisa was alone with her two children. There was a possibility that the Czechoslovak broadcasting service might be evacuated somewhere

to the east, in which case Sally could stay with Lisa. Although we recognized the danger of war, we decided to stay on and do what we could to help.

As the crisis intensified, my radio work increased, and research came to a full stop. I was working about twelve hours every day. I was also invited to prepare several special commentaries, some for the U.S. National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). My parents at home tried desperately to track down my broadcasts and were finally able to hear my voice a couple of times. We had to help a host of radio broadcasters who descended on Prague to cover the crisis from hour to hour — the first major occasion of international radio broadcasting. In one case, on the eve of Munich, we discreetly arranged for a famous but inebriated American to read his script into a dead microphone.

In early September a fiery speech by Hitler set sparks to the incendiary atmosphere that had been created by Henlein's followers. Throughout the German districts there were attacks on government offices, on the police, and on the homes and stores of democratic Germans and Czechs; these were led by Henlein storm-troopers and endorsed by the Sudeten German party. Henlein left the republic and, in an inflammatory broadcast over German wireless, openly demanded the secession of German-speaking areas to Germany. The government crushed what amounted to a rebellion by firm police action and declared martial law in 16 townships. It was a tense time, Sally wrote home, and war was possible. Yet, in the midst of this crisis, life went on and, contrary to Germany's lying reports, an admirable order and discipline were maintained. Hitler, however, did not move his troops, probably because he feared that he would have Britain, France, and the Soviet Union ranged against him. We were confident that he would not challenge the whole world and that in the event of war the Soviet Union would be on the side of Czechoslovakia.

Chamberlain had decided to fly to Germany, and we feared that the British and the French had agreed on the cession of Czechoslovak territory to avert war. This would mean giving up the fortifications along the mountainous frontiers and would leave the republic exposed and helpless before the German onslaught. At the end of September we still hoped against hope that Britain and France would refuse to accept German demands. In a letter of the 21st, a week before the Munich conference, we wrote: "What we had feared has come true. France and Britain have betrayed Czechoslovakia, leaving her isolated and alone in the face of an assault by Germany." It was not known

whether the Soviet Union, which was bound to help Czechoslovakia only if France did so, would support the Czechs and Slovaks if they were abandoned by the West.

In Prague the workers in all factories and stores went on strike and, in huge, orderly columns, converged on the square in front of the university and the Parliament. There they listened to political and military leaders who called on the new government to reject the pressure from abroad. It was inspiring to watch this massive demonstration of the will to resist. Britain was never so hated and despised, we wrote, but many were still hoping that the British people would repudiate the sell-out and force Chamberlain to resign. Some Czechs, including my boss at Radiožurnál, manifested their disgust with France by throwing their French medals into the Vltava.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF MUNICH

The Munich settlement did not come as a surprise, and it had the expected disastrous consequences. I wrote in a letter of 23 October to friends in England that Czechoslovakia, now completely isolated diplomatically, was subject to the full force of pressure from Berlin and had to give in to all demands. President Beneš was forced to resign but managed to get out of the country before a trial was staged. Newspapers and journals were severely censored, and a purge of the civil service began. The slogan of the day was "National Unity," and anyone who attacked the government was regarded as a traitor. The Communist party was dissolved, and its publications were banned. The Social Democrats left the Second International and united with the Czech National Socialist party in a left-wing bloc. The main parties of the right and centre, including the Agrarians, formed an all-national bloc.

The cession of territory to Germany and the granting of autonomy to Slovakia changed the balance of power in the state in favour of Slovakia, and the new central government in Prague was made up almost exclusively of Czech Agrarians and Slovak Clericals. The right-wing parties seized the opportunity to denigrate everyone and everything connected with the Masaryk-Beneš tradition — one year after everyone, over the bier of Masaryk, had pledged that "we shall remain faithful." Their newspapers sought to discredit the foreign policy of Edvard Beneš and to justify yielding to Germany's every demand; they also launched a wave of chauvinist propaganda directed against Jews and democratic Germans. Some of the progressive elements sold out

and advocated "selfish nationalism" and "loyalty to Berlin." Other progressives still defended internationalism and democracy. The autonomy granted to Slovakia gave complete control of that province to the Clerical Hlinka party. The Slovak prime minister, Dr Tiso, opened cabinet meetings with prayers to God and publicly stated that the main enemy was Jewish Bolshevism. The first act of the government was to dissolve the Communist party.

After Munich our broadcasts became more and more distorted by self-censorship and official restrictions, so that the work lost all purpose. I resigned at the end of October and worked henceforth only once a week to relieve my English colleague. This left me free to resume full-time research on my thesis, although it was not easy given the atmosphere of impending war. The Parliamentary Library was shut down for lack of heating fuel, and I had to study in the Klementinum and at home. I worked very hard, and Sally had to persuade me to take short breaks once in a while. I began writing the first chapter in early January 1939 and finished it, over 100 pages long, by the end of February.

By this time Sally and I had moved to the plebeian district of Žižkov. We lived in a room with two large beds and their bulky bolsters, which left hardly any free space. Sally had the use of the kitchen where our landlady, Mrs Kadrnožková, who was a widow, ran a corset-making establishment. Sally took up her study of German with a friend, Heinz Frank, a German-speaking communist from the Sudeten region. I turned to studying the Czech language, taking regular conversation with Gustav Bareš (formerly Breitenfeld), a Czech communist journalist who had lost his job (later, under Communist rule, he became a top party leader). Once more Sally and I began to live a more normal life, going to concerts and seeing our friends. One evening we went the rounds of Prague taverns with Heinz Frank. We made frequent excursions into the countryside, including a visit to the villa where Mozart had lived during his stays in Prague.

Another day we went out to Brandýs nad Labem and talked with my friend Zdeněk Prokop about his military service on the frontier. He told us of one group of soldiers who refused to withdraw when the land was being occupied by German troops. They shut themselves up in a fortress and blew it up when they ran out of food. At an evening with our good friends the Rudingers, Zdeněk, also back from military service, told us of the terrible shock of the surrender on the minds of soldiers who were ready to fight. The Rudingers told us of their fears for

the future. Zdeněk, general manager of a glass cartel, was Jewish and spoke perfect Czech and German; Lisa was the daughter of a Hungarian aristocrat. They spoke German at home with their two children. They were both ardent Communists and faced the prospect of exile. Under the new regime, life for democratically minded and Communist Germans — and for Jews — would be grim.

On 15 October I wrote to my thesis supervisor in London, Professor R.W. Seton-Watson: "I can guess your feelings. To one so intimately connected with the fortunes of Czechoslovakia from the beginning, the trend of events must have been, to put it mildly, profoundly discouraging. I, too, have come to admire this state, not only for what it had accomplished within its borders, but also for what it could have been expected to do in the maintenance of European peace. The useless sacrifice of one of the most loyal European states and the last democracy of Central Europe is in my mind a political crime, and not the first or the last of its kind." I was later glad to hear that Seton-Watson had formed a committee in Britain to assist the refugees.

In a letter home on 26 October, Sally wrote of the follies of this so-called peace and placed the blame squarely on Chamberlain and his clique. Ever since 1931 Britain had consistently given way to the aggressors — in Manchuria, Ethiopia, Spain, Austria, and now Czechoslovakia. In doing so, they had two aims, she thought: first, to undermine the democratic France of the Popular Front and to force on it a government pliable to Britain's wishes; and second, to isolate the Soviet Union, which for years had striven for peace and aided democracy all over the world. In a letter to an English friend on 29 October I referred to those who had been laughed at when they described Czechoslovakia as a possible second Spain but who were now shown to have been foresighted. There was no reason to expect any more resistance to German expansion in central Europe than to Japan in China or to German and Italian intervention in Spain. Only the extreme left in Britain sensed the wind's true direction and warned of the danger. If Prague, with Soviet support, had resisted Germany, the opposition forces in the West might have been successful in their efforts to press the British and French governments into helping Czechoslovakia. Yet if Czechoslovakia had resisted, with Soviet help, Britain and France would probably have joined Germany in a war against the "Bolshevist front."

One month later, on 19 November, I wrote that the situation in Czechoslovakia was almost unrecognizable compared to the days before

September. Then, Czechoslovakia was in the forefront of the peace movement and the League of Nations, and stood in the way of German advance into the whole of Central Europe. Now, powerless, she was dominated by Germany and forced to give way to every demand by Hitler. Then Czechoslovakia was, in many ways, a model democracy politically, with a high degree of national tolerance. Now it was a land where the undemocratic and chauvinist elements had seized the upper hand; people were turning against everything foreign and toward things "national" and Czech, even to anti-semitism. In early December a relatively unknown judge, Emil Hácha, had become president, and a new conservative government was formed. In Slovakia there was a completely fascist regime, which was a willing instrument for Hitler.

The outlook was by now gloomy indeed. Munich had simply postponed war for the time being but also made it more likely, perhaps even inevitable. "With nothing standing in his way, Hitler will plan his next aggression, either in the East, or in the West against France or Britain. Hitler will always have new demands, and finally resistance will have to be made to his desires for world expansion," I wrote on 2 November. If there had been resistance a year earlier, or even in September, war might have been avoided. After Munich a firm hand would still be necessary, finally, but Hitler was now so strong that he would willingly risk war. We should see within the year, I wrote home, whether my father's confidence that Munich brought permanent peace was justified.

The main question confronting our Czech friends was the plight of the refugees, not only those from the German Reich and from Austria, who had been given refuge in Czechoslovakia, but the even larger number — some 40,000 — from the Sudeten German areas ceded to Germany. An asylum had to be found abroad for the half-million Czech and German Jews involved as well as thousands of German and Austrian political refugees who faced great danger if they remained in the Protectorate and certain death if they returned home. Four months of almost fruitless efforts abroad on their behalf had created a feeling of hopelessness concerning their future. The refugees were living in camps scattered through the country — about 60 in all, housing some 140,000 persons. These camps were supported by the Czech National Fund, the Lord Mayor of London's Fund, and Czech local municipalities.

On Christmas Day 1938 we visited one of the camps in a Workers Club House in Beroun, a large town near Prague. There lived 180 people; 60 Czechs and 120 Germans. All had been active in the struggle

against the Henlein movement in the Sudeten region and feared that, on Hitler's demand, they would be sent back to face their fate. They had built up a remarkable camp life, with an elected leadership, a regular general meeting, a so-called Wall Newspaper, a kitchen, a dining-room, a tailor, and shoe-repair shops. We attended a gala concert in the evening, which included a play that dramatized the plight of the refugees and demonstrated their unshakable belief that the fall of Hitler would mean a quick return home.

We were greatly concerned with the future of these victims of the Munich settlement. I had written on 26 October to the Canadian High Commissioner in London, Lester Pearson, urging that Canada provide a home for these victims of political and racial persecution and consider admitting some of them to form a self-supporting communal colony somewhere in the Canadian countryside. Many were political leaders, tried and tested in their devotion to democracy, others were skilled workers. "It was a unique opportunity for Canada to demonstrate her humanism and at the same time to gain new citizens of inestimable worth." This letter may have contributed to the eventual decision by the Canadian government to admit some 50,000 refugees and settle them on land in northern Alberta. Sally took on some very practical work in an office run by the Friends Service Committee, which conducted a program of relief for the refugees.

Meanwhile winter came, bringing heavy snow at the end of the year and skaters to the frozen Vltava. Large Christmas trees all over town served as centres for the collection of food and clothing for poor children. We celebrated Christmas eve with a friend, Leopold Grünwald, former editor of *Rote Fahne*, the Communist German-language newspaper, for whom Sally had been translating news bulletins into English. Still quite young, he had been among the founding members of both the Austrian and the Czechoslovak Communist parties in the 1920s. Both he and his wife faced an uncertain future and probable exile. Although both were Jewish, they served us the traditional Catholic Christmas supper of carp, potato salad, and fruit compote.

On New Year's Day we visited several small churches, all filled with worshippers, with the usual beggars at the doors. In one church there was a great cross, "the Cross of the Republic," with two round shields. Both showed maps of the republic: one, in black, had a crown of thorns superimposed; the other, in white, a laurel wreath and a red cross. Above the cross was the inscription, "Protect the Republic."

WITNESSES OF DISASTER

On 25 February 1939 we honoured St Matthew's Day — traditionally regarded in Czechoslovakia as the end of winter and a harbinger of spring. We joined the pilgrimage, an annual event since 1598, to the tiny church of St Matthew, which overlooked the Šárka valley and was packed with worshippers. We sent home a postcard showing the church and bearing the inscription: "At St Matthews, when the sun smiles on the pilgrimage, there are as many pretty maidens as when poppy seeds are sown." Nearby was a fair, with sideshows for shooting or gymnastics, and stands selling hotdogs (horké párky), which hung in great festoons, and honeyed marzipan biscuits, often in the shape of hearts. In this gay atmosphere it was hard to recall the fate that had befallen the country.

Britain was showing a complete lack of interest in the fate of what remained of the republic and had reneged on its promise of economic assistance. Germany was stepping up pressure on Czechoslovakia, which could no longer be considered an independent country. The threat of Slovak separation was so serious that Prague cracked down on the separatist movement and appointed a new government in Slovakia. In several articles for the *Canadian Forum*, dated July 1938 and March and April 1939, I concluded that a German occupation was one of several likely possibilities.

The crisis began one Tuesday evening, 14 March, when Slovakia declared itself independent. Loudspeakers throughout the town called at intervals for order and discipline. Great numbers of policemen lined the main streets. A troop of fifty mounted police rode up and down Na příkopě where the Deutsches Haus and German student quarters were located. Nazi students paraded through the main streets in uniform, chanting "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer." In the face of similar provocative actions throughout Bohemia and Moravia, the Czechs preserved admirable discipline and only minor disorders occurred. As we prepared for bed that night the wireless announced that President Hácha was on his way to Berlin and German troops had occupied some border towns. At seven-thirty in the morning, on 15 March, we were awakened by our landlady, who told us tearfully that German troops had been marching from the border since six o'clock and people were out buying up goods. By ten we were on Wenceslas Square, where we saw the first advance German motorcyclist arrive, in a severe March snowstorm. A few Germans ran up to shake his hand, but thousands of

Czechs looked on grimly and refused to give him directions. Soon the motorized divisions, including tanks with machine-guns at the ready, poured into the city centre. They were driving on the right side of the road (in a city with left-hand traffic) and were sometimes blocked by trucks and taxis moving in the opposite direction. At certain points the crowds formed a solid human barrier, booing, hissing, and shaking their fists into the very muzzles of the machine-guns. The police had to clear a way for the invaders. At other points the people were silent and gazed with hatred or contempt at the passing vehicles. Others continued on their way to work or business. In the very heart of the city, at the foot of Wenceslas Square, we were part of a crowd that began to sing the national anthem, heads bared in the driving snow — a stirring moment.

Throughout the day the German troops poured in, occupying barracks vacated by the Czechoslovak soldiers. The Chief of the German General Staff set up its headquarters at the Hotel Alcron. The airport, radio studios, police stations, and postal and telegraph offices were all placed under police control. And then came the culminating indignity, which sent a cold shudder down the spine of every Czech — the entry of Hitler, together with the German foreign minister, Von Ribbentrop, General Keitel, and Himmler, the head of the SS, into the Prague Castle, where the swastika was raised for all to see. In the morning we climbed up to the Castle heights and witnessed a crowd of five thousand Germans, chanting over and over: "Lieber Führer, sei so net, zeig dein Gesicht am Fenster brett" (Dear Führer, be so kind; show your face at the windowsill). He did at last appear and could be seen behind a curtain. We were sickened by the irony and the falsity of this Nazi demonstration, high above a city with a population of almost eight hundred thousand Czechs and fewer than 50,000 Germans.

The work of "totalitarianizing" a democratic country began at once. With Himmler came hundreds of his secret police, who began arresting former high officials and hunting down the "politicals," not only those who had fled from Germany after 1933, or from Austria in March 1938, or the Sudeten districts in September 1938, but also now their Czech comrades. Days and nights of psychological terror began for the politically endangered, who slept in friends' homes and wandered the streets in the daytime. House searches began, at first by lenient Czech policemen, who warned suspects to burn everything incriminating. Meetings of all kinds were forbidden — the press was incorporated into the Nazi press service — and there was a curfew at eight o'clock every night. The civil administrator of Bohemia was

Konrad Henlein, the Sudeten German leader. The Czech General, Gajda, who had been dismissed from the General Staff in the 1920s for betraying military secrets, and led an abortive fascist putsch in the 1930s, was made the leader of the Czech National Committee, an instrument of German rule.

At his midnight meeting in Berlin President Hácha capitulated when Hitler threatened him with the destruction of Prague by bombing, because he knew there was no help forthcoming from the British or French governments. To interpret Hácha's act of delivering the Czech nation into the hands of the German chancellor as a voluntary expression of a desire to live under the rule of Hitler is to insult a brave and steadfast people, whose hearts were boiling under their calm exteriors. At the statue of St Wenceslas, the patron saint and king of Bohemia, and at the resting place of the Czech Unknown Soldier, crowds of people, bare headed and weeping, gathered and left thousands of little bouquets. Flowers were also placed at the Jan Hus monument and the statue of Woodrow Wilson. The old Czechoslovak flag was raised throughout the city, and the swastika was seldom seen. Such was the enthusiasm of Prague for their liberation by the Führer!

The newspapers at home in Canada carried headlines about a "Toronto boy" who had disappeared after the German invasion. A few days after the event I received a call from the British embassy asking if I was safe; my brother Andy had asked the government in Ottawa to inquire after us. Friends urged us to leave as soon as possible, but with our British and American passports we felt relatively safe. We hated the prospect of staying on but were reluctant to give up when my studies were so close to completion. During the days of crisis I had stopped work on my thesis, and I now found it hard to get back to it. But there seemed no alternative to pushing on as fast as possible. Using a new typewriter, with Czech diacritics, we buckled down to the task of typing several more chapters.

Sally redoubled her work at the Friends Committee. When a big transport of women and children received permission to pass through Germany, Tessa Rowntree, the head of the office, accompanied them and left Sally in charge of the office. Sally dispensed money to the refugees to keep them alive while they waited for arrangements to cross the narrow frontier into Poland. This they did by paying high fees to often-unreliable smugglers who were to guide them through the mountains to the border. The "politicals" were hidden by railway workers in the coal carriages of trains or led by miners through disused mine shafts under the frontier.

My friend Grünwald was living in hiding and had lost contact with the Soviet embassy, which had promised him a visa. I kept in touch with him through a prearranged contact with a shoemaker. On one occasion I made a nighttime visit, on his behalf, to the Soviet consulate general. It was terrifying, standing outside the high wall in full view of a police guard, to ring the bell at a spotlit gate. Later I had a conspiratorial meeting with a Soviet representative in Rieger Park, by the statue of the Czech political leader F.L. Rieger, where he identified himself by a prearranged signal, whistling to his dog. Grünwald in the end escaped across the border into Poland, picked up his visa in Warsaw, and spent the war years in the USSR.

In April 1939 when spring came, Prague began to look beautiful again. We got out for some good walks, once in the steep and rocky valley of Šárka, another time on the slopes of Petřín Hill, where one could see the blossoms in the huge monastery gardens. We also joined the tens of thousands of Praguers who made excursions on Sundays by train or by bus to the woods on the Labe river or to the Sázava river. Once we went with Professor Otakar Odložilík, who told us of his plans to go to the United States for the summer. When he found a Canadian penny he was delighted with this good omen! The rivers were filled with bathers and canoeists, and the steamers took excursionists up the river. We made an overnight trip to the industrial city of "red" Kladno, a bastion of communist strength, and stayed with a family of workers. In the morning the children rushed in expecting to see "Red Indians" from Canada!

By the time of our departure from Prague in the early summer of 1939 I had completed five chapters of my thesis in final draft and sent them back to England. We began putting our passports in order, getting the necessary documents from the police and the Nazi occupation authorities, and packing our suitcases. Since we were "more or less in rags" by this time, we took the opportunity of getting some clothes made cheaply — in my case, by a little tailor across the street, and in Sally's, by one of the girls who worked in our landlady's corset establishment. Finally, all was in order, and we bade a sad farewell to the city that we had come to love and to Czech friends who had to remain in occupied Prague. We spent our final evening with the Rudingers, whose son and daughter were already in England and who expected themselves to reach that refuge before we did. We left on July 8, stopping for a final visit at the historic city of Tábor, centre of the Hussite movement in the fifteenth century.

NOTE

1. I base parts of this chapter on my letters to family and friends during this period. University of Toronto Archives (UTA): Gordon Skilling Papers, boxes 8 and 9.

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I

GETTING MY BEARINGS

2

GROWING UP ON COLLEGE STREET

MY MOTHER, ALICE STEVENSON, was born in the village of Stanwell Moor, near Staines, Middlesex. The daughter of a gardener on a large estate near the village, she lived with her parents in Park Lodge, the coach-house at the manor, and served as a children's helper and as maid or cook. She was 19 years old in 1893, when she married my father, William, who was 21. A shoemaker, he peddled around Stanwell and other villages on a bicycle, picking up shoes to be repaired. His father, a Scot from Leith, was also a cobbler, as were his four brothers and two of his brothers-in-law. Like her husband, Alice was almost entirely without education, having left school at age 12. Moving first to Ashford and then to Brighton, they had four children: my three brothers, William John (born 1894), Edward Donald (1898), and Andrew Douglas (1903), and one daughter, Alice Evelyn, who died shortly after her birth in 1901. I entered the world in 1912, their only child to be born in Canada, and was given names as Scottish as those of my brothers.

I do not know the reasons for my parents' emigration to Canada in 1907 — perhaps worsening economic conditions or simply my father's search for adventure and a new life. Certainly the decision to migrate to a new country at the age of 35 with his wife and three sons (then 10, 13 and 15 years old), was a bold one, an act which entailed uprooting their lives from traditions, friends, and family to embark on a risky and challenging new course. One can only imagine the "joys" of the voyage to Canada in the steerage of a small steamship. My mother remembered it as a nightmare of constant seasickness, and the huge rats which scuttled around the cabin — the "pussy cats," as my brother Andy called them — terrified her. They spent two or three years adapting to the new and strange life in Montreal. Once or twice in the summer Dad went "harvesting" in the West, but he was not attracted to the hard life of a farmer. For reasons unknown, he and his family pushed

The shoe-repair shop on College Street: Andy, Mother, Don, and Father, in 1912

Our family, July 1917: me at centre, Bill and Andy in back, Mother and Father with Bill's daughter Margaret

on to Toronto, living for a brief period on Ontario Street, in the heart of the city, among other newly arrived immigrants. They then moved west to the major thoroughfare of College Street, where they lived at number 633, near Grace Street, in a flat above my Dad's shoe store. I was born there on February 28, 1912.

Dad always seemed chained to his shop, which was open daily from eight o'clock in the morning until eight at night, and on Saturday until almost midnight. Hour by hour, in the flat above the store,we could hear the pounding of the hammer and the whirring of the machines. It was a good business, and my father was not hard-up. He was able to purchase his store and later bought, rented and sold half a dozen houses and stores, then built a large store on the Danforth. In early 1926, during the real estate boom, he went down to Florida alone and bought a lot in Coral Gables. In my eyes he seemed to be a slave to work and money-making, but he was an industrious and ambitious man who achieved much from humble beginnings.

My father had no hobbies and took no interest in sports. He enjoyed reading biography, and sometimes went to downtown theatres on passes given in return for his placing a poster in his shop window. He did not drink (except some port wine on special occasions) but was a constant smoker of foul-smelling cigars. We had family parties at home or on weekend outings to the suburb of Long Branch, where Dad built a little cottage. He loved to travel, and in 1924 purchased a used Ford Sedan for $427, making possible car trips to Muskoka and Niagara Falls, into the States and to Quebec. After the armistice in 1918, *wanderlust* led my father further afield, first to Ottawa in 1919, where he was an "instructor in rehabilitation," teaching the art of shoe-repair to returning veterans. Soon afterward he spent a year or so in Brooklyn where he worked in a shoe-repair shop in Flatbush. From there my parents made their first trip home to England. Dad continued in business until the mid-1930s, then retired to a small cottage in the suburb of West Hill. They later moved back into the city, resettling in the east end. In 1953 they celebrated the 60th anniversary of their marriage.

My mother was a devoted wife and parent, bearing sole responsibility for bringing up the children and looking after our home. Her life was one of hard and unremitting work on frugal means, and she was expected to follow my father's will in all matters. She was a woman of sensitivity and intelligence, affectionate to her family and generous and kind to all. Although she had only elementary schooling, she

appreciated the value of education and was a constant support to me in my studies from childhood on. She and my father were regular church-goers; we walked every week in our Sunday best to a neighbouring Presbyterian church, later belonging to the United Church of Canada. In the east end, when life was a little easier at home, she was active in churchwomen's groups. The loss of my brother Don, in the war, was a source of lasting grief to her. Each year, on Armistice Day, I went with her to the ceremony of remembrance at City Hall, where she placed a wreath on the cenotaph in his memory. In the mid-1930s, after visiting me in Europe, she gave frequent talks on her impressions of the battlefields of France and of the meetings of the League of Nations

My brother Don, before leaving for the war, 1917

Assembly that we attended in Geneva. She became active in peace work in the League of Nations Society and revealed latent talents that were never fully developed due to lack of education and opportunity.

In 1916 two of my brothers enlisted for war service. The older, Bill, was seriously wounded but survived. Don died of wounds on his first day in action at the front. My brother, Andy, was closest to me since he lived at home while I was a lad. He became a successful photographer and was active in the Kiwanis Club. I was greatly saddened by his early death in 1958, after several heart attacks, at 55 years of age, only one year before my permanent return to Toronto.

Two of my earliest memories related to the two great tragedies, World War I and the world Depression, that symbolized the times in which I grew up. I vividly recall the day, in May 1917, when my father came up the staircase from the store below, bearing the telegram with the news that my brother, "Pte. Edward Donald Skilling," had "died of wounds — gunshot wound in left thigh." As my mother wept at the head of the stairs, I crept into the kitchen to cry against the wall. Some 12 years later I remember just as acutely the day my brother Bill, in the same hallway, jokingly announced to my mother that he had joined General Cox's army, that is, the army of unemployed, having lost his job as carpenter.

My own "war effort," at age five or six, was to wear a little military uniform, replete with Scottish tam, and to return the salute of a friendly officer who regularly led his company down College Street beneath our front room window. Finally, on Armistice Day, I remember the singing and cheering, the bonfires on College Street, and after the war the snapshots taken by my parents during their trip to Europe in 1919, of ruined Ypres and Vimy Ridge, and of Don's grave in Aubigny, France.

During my year or two at Grace Street Public School, just around the corner from my father's store, I remember being intensely shy and hiding behind my mother when I was introduced to someone. There were about four hundred boys and girls of Jewish or Italian origin at my school. Most of them left school at age 14, for lack of the means to continue. The teachers were almost all women, and the few men were away on war service. When we moved to Ottawa in 1919, I received farewell letters, written on a Jewish holiday, from my teacher, Alice Brabazon, and those few classmates who were present that day.

I can fill in bits of our time in Ottawa and Brooklyn, and later in Montreal, from a skimpy diary. From Ottawa I have a recollection, no

doubt preserved by my mother's frequent recounting, of a librarian's joking comment that I had read all the books in the local public library. I often read to my mother at home. For Brooklyn, my diary records frequent movies, occasional churchgoing, and sightseeing with Andy in New York City and even further afield. I remember nothing of my life in Brooklyn except the anxieties connected with frequent bed-wetting. In Montreal I stayed with my Aunt Lill, my mother's sister, during my parents' trip to England and France, and the summer months were passed in games and reading, outings with my grown-up cousins, Ted, Flo, and Grace, and with Ted's man friend.

Back in Toronto again, we lived in the east end in a small house on Monarch Park Avenue, then above the store that Dad had built at 2217 Danforth Avenue. I attended Wilkinson Public School, more modern than Grace Street; it served a largely middle-class and fairly well-to-do population, mainly British in origin. The teachers were again almost all women, including Mildred Sloan, with whom I was apparently a great favorite. In walking to and from school I passed through the playground, and I remember an encounter with a bully from whose attack I was rescued by a fellow student. About this time I tried my hand at writing a short story entitled "Adventures in the Rockies," a romantic tale of trappers who struck it rich by finding gold. A letter of rejection from an editor of the *Boys Tely*, a section of Toronto's *Evening Telegram*, described the story as "wonderful for a boy of your age" (I was then 11). Someday, he thought, I might be writing stories for the press. "Do not be discouraged by a few failures at the start."

Our move back to College Street in 1924 was a return to the scenes of my early childhood and to the district which would be "home" for me during my public and high school days and through my first year in university. Clinton Street Public School had a high proportion of foreign born students. Boys and girls were segregated into separate classes. I was in room 10, for the best students, and had one of the few male teachers, Andrew Wilkie, who was a pianist and formed an orchestra and choir. I played for the school baseball team, took part in a play, and was a member of the cadet corps. Later, in 1928, when a Clinton Old Boys' Reunion was organized during a trip by steamboat to Port Dalhousie, I was elected president.

As a boy aged 12 to 16 I was generally good at school, though there were occasions when I got my hands strapped. Much of my time was spent doing homework and reading, and visiting the library. I kept long lists of words and their meanings, as well as brief reviews of books I had

read. Homework essays dealt with such exotic subjects as the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution. I was obsessed with crossword puzzles and even tried to construct some for the *Evening Telegram*, but they were not accepted. Having begun piano lessons on "the Danforth," I went on to study with Fair Cockburn at the Toronto Conservatory of Music. I took the examinations year by year, always with honours or first class honours, and eventually obtained the degree of ATCM (Associate of the Toronto Conservatory of Music). I also gave piano lessons, teaching four students every Saturday morning and earning 75 cents an hour.

I was closely associated with the church, first at Clinton Street Methodist, then at West Presbyterian on College Street, and first took communion in October 1925. I attended Sunday School regularly, later teaching a class for several years. Our teacher, John Burgar, a businessman, spent little time on the Bible and read to us instead from *Les Misérables.* He openly discussed the sexual problems of growing boys. He also ran the West Church Club, of which I was secretary. We met weekly for games in the gym, devotional services, talks, book reports, and debates; in one I remember opposing the abolition of cadet-training in schools. The club followed the program of the Tuxis Trail Rangers, and I zealously sought to win badges for specific achievements. The club sponsored occasional picnics, paper chases or banquets, including one for fathers and sons, and (more unusually), one for mothers and sons. For these gatherings I often attempted humorous speeches on subjects such as "If I were my father's father" and "Raising a large family." In 1928 and 1929 I myself ran a junior boys' club at the church.

"Minding the store" in the evenings was one of my responsibilities, especially when both my parents were out. Between customers, I read and did homework amid the smell of leather, ink and polish. Most bothersome was the need to rush downstairs during mealtimes, whenever the bell rang, to serve customers. I learned to do some of the minor work: sanding, inking and polishing, sharpening skates and even heeling shoes. There were also numerous odd jobs such as cleaning the store windows, shovelling snow, sometimes helping to scrape and paper or paint the walls, not only at number 633, but at other of my Dad's properties. I often did errands on my bike, collecting the rents from Dad's tenants. I received a small allowance and had a bank account of my own, which reached the grand sum of $40 by the end of 1924. I even made a loan of $20 to my father when he acquired his first car and did not have enough in the bank to cover it — a debt he soon repaid.

I have vague memories of playing with toy soldiers in the postage stamp-size garden behind the store, and of swimming at Sunnyside; of football and baseball games in the summers, and in winter, playing hockey, skating to music, and sleighing in the ravines. I was an ardent fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs although I rarely went to games at the Lakeshore stadium. I played the hand-wound "Victrola" and listened, often in vain, to a crystal set radio. In the evenings there were sometimes card games at home, as well as cribbage and crokonole. We made frequent visits to the local movie-house, at first to see silent thrillers, which were accompanied by a pianist, and later the "talkies." The great stars of the day were Charlie Chaplin, Rudolf Valentino, Harold Lloyd, and Douglas Fairbanks. A special treat was to attend a play at a downtown theatre with one of my parents. We had frequent social gatherings of friends and relatives. The big occasions were Christmas and New Year's, with these parties lasting past three a.m. After a huge dinner, we played parlour games and cards, and sang at the piano, with me at the keyboard and my cousin, Ern, playing his trumpet.

I was growing up in the thoroughly urban environment of a rapidly developing city whose population reached over a half million in the 1920s. Toronto retained a predominantly British character well into the 1930s, but its ethnic profile was actually changing rapidly as a result of immigration. Our own district became more and more cosmopolitan as European immigrants, including many Jews, moved in. Almost all our neighbours and fellow shopkeepers were Jewish. I do not remember any anti-semitism on the part of my father, but I deplored his habit of referring to Italians or Ukrainians as "foreigners," even though they might have been born in Canada. I was horrified by the taunt, "Ye killee Christ," chanted by some of the neighbourhood children, as they held up three fingers at the bearded "rag and bones" man in his horse-drawn cart. My diary recorded some mildly negative comments on the overwhelmingly Jewish composition of my classes, both at Clinton and Harbord, I had many Jewish friends and classmates, and I used to go to Holy Blossom Synagogue occasionally to hear the eloquent sermons of Rabbi Eisendrath.

In 1925 we drove to Washington DC, New York, and Montreal in our Model-T Ford, covering about 2500 miles, never at more than 25 miles per hour, over rough and dusty roads, with frequent stops for repairs and many detours. Another trip in 1926 took us to Detroit and Chicago, where my brother Andy was working. In Detroit we visited the enormous Ford assembly-line factory and I took my first flight by

airplane at the Dearborn Airport. In Chicago the bloody slaughter of sheep and steers at the Swift Packing Company sickened us.

In the summer of 1926 I first experienced the beauty of the lake country to the north of the city. We spent a wonderful week at the cottage of our friends and neighbours the Martins (Mr. Martin ran a grocery store near us), swimming, canoeing, berrying, fishing, chopping wood, and playing golf in an open field. The following summer I spent two weeks across Lake Muskoka at Pine Crest, a boys' camp run by the YMCA. I lived in a tent with other boys and eagerly imbibed Indian lore around the campfire in the evenings. There I learned to swim and canoe properly. In the summer of 1928 I had quite a different experience as a counsellor at the Bolton Summer Camp, not far from Orangeville, which was run by the Neighbourhood Workers Association. There I had my first contact with underprivileged children from the city's poorest districts.

In 1930 I took an unforgettable canoe trip in the wilds of Lake Temagami with Mr Burgar, my Sunday school teacher. He was an experienced outdoorsman, and introduced me to life in the wilderness: the joys of setting up camp, cooking over a campfire, sleeping in a tent or in the open air, and the arduous hours of paddling, sometimes bucking high winds and waves in difficult lake crossings, and portaging our canoe and supplies for several hundred yards. In our ten days we met only one other canoe and felt like early explorers or *coureurs de bois.*

In September 1926 I got my first job, as an office boy at the *Star Weekly,* but it only lasted one week. There I delivered messages and performed menial tasks like clearing the wastebaskets, but I got to hobnob with the "famous," such as writer Gregory Clark (a Harbord graduate). In the summer of 1927 I had several jobs, first at the Nu Tec Sign Co. on Queen Street, where I did my first piecework. In one week I earned over $20, and was glad to give $5 to my mother. Later I worked briefly in the ladies' hat department of Simpson's department store.

In 1929 I got a summer job as a bellboy at the Royal Muskoka, a luxury hotel on Lake Rosseau, where for eight weeks I combined business with pleasure. Carrying baggage and catering to the needs and whims of the well-to-do, I earned a total of $250, which I used to cover the expenses of my final year at high school. The staff, many of them students like me, shared some of the privileges of paying guests; in our off-duty hours we could swim, canoe, golf, and dance in the ballroom. We lived, however, in bug-infested wooden tenements. My glimpse into the life of the leisure class at the Royal Muskoka offered a sharp

contrast to my memories of the poverty of the kids at Bolton Camp. The following year, just before entering college, I was again employed at the Royal, but because of the Depression, my job lasted only two weeks. I spent most of the summer at home on the Danforth, walking down to Lake Ontario to swim and sunbathe, and hitch-hiked with my brother Andy to Montreal and Ottawa.

These were my years of growing up. I began to be interested in girls and sex, at least in my thoughts. I had my first crush in the summer of 1925, on Violet Dodds. After a Sunday school picnic at Queenston we enjoyed the ferry trip home together on the open deck. In the summer of 1927 I fell for Lorraine Sanderson, formerly of Clinton, who served with me on the executive of the Old Boys' Reunion. That autumn I acquired my first suit of clothes with "longers" (long pants) and my first man's hat — a fawn fedora. I began to go steady in the later years of high school with Harriet Mills, the daughter of a high school classics teacher (whose approval I won by my good work in Latin and Greek). Harriet and I went to school dances together and sometime went into nearby High Park for a little necking and kissing.

On 2 September 1925, I registered at Harbord Collegiate Institute, just south of Bloor Street West, near Bathurst. By this time well over half, perhaps even 90 percent, of my fellow-students were Jewish. "The Old School," to which I wrote a dedication in the *Harbord Review* in my final year, was "an ancient red-brick place" with "a massive incongruous tower" and strange "Oriental turrets," and with "time-worn classrooms, ill-lit corridors ... and a bare old-fashioned Assembly Hall." This "dark, poorly ventilated building," was replaced by a more modern building the year after my departure. Old Harbord had a good library and a gymnasium, but no cafeteria or swimming pool. Whatever its physical defect I wrote, it still "stood loftily in our hearts."

The school was headed by Lt.-Col. E.W. Hagarty, a veteran of the Great War whose own son was killed in 1916. He had been a teacher of Latin and Greek since Harbord opened in 1892, and principal for more than 20 years. He was very patriotic and a strong advocate of military training in schools. Widely considered to be a "martinet" in disciplinary and academic matters, he tended to run the school like an army, but he also possessed a profound dedication to scholarship. He ran a staff of excellent teachers, for whom I had great respect at the time and fond memories years later. Year after year the scholarly record of the school remained outstanding and its students garnered many scholarships. It had many distinguished graduates over the years and Harbordites developed an extraordinary loyalty to the old school.

I ranked high in academic work and was usually first in my class. However, I was somewhat bored by the slowness of classroom work and it was not unusual for me to be sent out to the hallway for whispering or passing notes. Homework took up an average of one to two hours daily, and as much as five in my final year. Practising the piano took another hour or two each day. I was busy with extracurricular activities, eventually becoming president of the Lit (Literary Society), associate editor of the *Harbord Review*, and battalion commander of the cadet corps. I played defense on the junior basketball team; Harbord won the city high school championship in 1928-29. This qualified me for the coveted badges, Harbord H and V. The undoubted climax of my teen years was graduating with12 firsts in 12 subjects, with an average of 89 percent. This brought university scholarships in general proficiency, Greek, and Latin, and a gold medal in mathematics. I was also lucky enough to win a special Gundy-Doran scholarship in Canadian history, valued at $1,200. These awards secured financial support for my studies and meant that I could pay my mother for room and board.

When I re-read my school essays and other writings now, they seem empty of original ideas and and full of clichés and prejudices. I exalted "great men," such as Nelson and Lincoln, celebrated patriotism, both British and Canadian, and had effusive praise for Loyalists, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the monarchy, and Canada as a nation. In an essay for the Simpson's Essay Contest, I waxed eloquent on the romance and achievement of that company: I won sixth prize ($10). I was equally romantic in an essay submitted to a contest of the Canadian Progress Club (1927); here I wrote enthusiastically of Canada's progress during 60 years of confederation and the country's "glorious future." I believed, naively, that "the two races," English and French, would always work harmoniously together, united by the ties of common interest and allegiance to the empire. In an oratorical contest on the subject, "Canada Among the Nations," I spoke of Canada as a country on its way to equality status within the empire and "an enormous future." I said Canada should take a stand for world peace and international good will; its relationship with the United States offered testimony that "all disputes between nations can be settled by reason, not force." I won a gold medal for this effusion. My Gundy-Doran essay on the settlement of Ontario before confederation was a more solid piece, based on research and reading some 70 sources. I ended by expressing pride in the heritage of our ancestors, both the United Empire Loyalists and the later immigrants from Europe, who

together "ushered the new-born Ontario into the world, not with bloodshed and plunder, but with the ring of the woodsman's axe as he felled the trees to build his forest home."

My school essays make almost no mention of the glaring social problems of the time and the two great tragedies of my boyhood and youth — the Great War and the Depression — appear to have had a negligible impact on my thinking. I seemed to have little or no social conscience, and took no interest in politics, national or provincial, or in international affairs. I uttered platitudes on the undefended Canadian-American border but did not so much as mention the League of Nations. Yet my seeming disinterest in events abroad and unawareness of the mounting international crisis in Europe and Asia, and the growing threats of Fascism and Communism, may have been typical of my age and class. I expressed no sympathy for the new currents of organized labour and socialism in Europe, and served blithely as an officer in the cadet corps. Appearing in uniform at the Armistice Day ceremony at the war memorial, which commemorated the 75 Harbordites killed in World War I, seemed a proud honour.

One school essay, entitled "Poverty: Its Causes and Its Remedies," and written after the stock market crash of October 1929, was an exception to my general lack of concern with society and its problems. Still, it barely differed from my other efforts in its smug and self-satisfied conclusions. The causes of poverty were carelessness in handling money, the pursuit of pleasure, the worship of our neighbours, and the desire to emulate them. "To rise out of poverty" was by no means easy, I conceded. Success required "patience, industry, perseverance and courage." Another essay on "success" effusively praised Henry Ford, who "disposed of his millions in charitable ways," and "was able to create a low cost of living, a comfortable home-life, and good wages for his employees." In my valedictory address, given in the fall of 1930 after my graduation, there was not a single reference to the Depression and the tragedy of unemployment or to the gathering clouds of war. I spoke in clichés of the virtues of the "successful man," and quoted Bruce Barton: "He had an aim. He studied. He worked."

Perhaps it is too much to expect that a youth of 17 or 18 would have begun to sense the ills of the society in which he was growing up and to seek solutions to some of its problems. My own life had been a serene one, largely without personal tragedy apart from the death of one brother and the imprisonment of another for harassment of his children. There were no serious conflicts within my family (at least

none that I was aware of), nor did I experience difficulties in growing to maturity. I was successful academically and socially, and was well enough endowed financially to pursue the studies I loved. I could therefore proceed to university with my optimistic assumptions of a good life ahead completely intact. In an essay written during my first term at college I actually agreed with William Osler, who, in a speech at Yale University, declared that students should "stop worrying about the future and the past," the "unborn tomorrows" and the "dead yesterdays," and concentrate on "the year's tasks." Our university years, I wrote, would be "the period in which we established the mental, social and moral basis for a straight, unfaltering journey through life."

It only took a year or two of higher education to challenge these illusions and to bring me into touch with the realities of the contemporary world. Many, many years later, speaking at the Harbord reunion dinner in 1985, I observed that our studies at Harbord did not prepare us for the unexpected and unpredictable life ahead: the effects of the Depression, the Second World War, the Holocaust, nuclear weapons, or the Cold War. Harbord was but a beginning in the lifelong process of education, but it had been "a good place to start, a place of good teachers, high standards, rich opportunities in music, literature and sports, a place of good friendship and happy associations, of racial harmony."

3

BECOMING A SOCIALIST: TORONTO

IT WAS A FOREGONE CONCLUSION that I would study at the University of Toronto since I had won scholarships for that institution and I could live at home and avoid the expense of residence. My choice of non-denominational and cosmopolitan University College, instead of Victoria College, which was affiliated with the United Church, was probably influenced by my declining religious faith and my upbringing in the most ethnically mixed part of Toronto. My selection of political science and economics was more surprising, because my scholarships had been for the most part in classics; perhaps a factor was my meeting Irene Biss, a charming young lecturer in economics, at the registration desk.

The University of Toronto, under its scholarly president Sir Robert Falconer, was pre-eminent among Canadian institutions of higher learning. University College (UC) had great strength in the traditional courses of classics, modern languages, and philosophy and was headed by the urbane and liberal-minded principal Malcolm Wallace. The department of political economy had established a high standard of scholarship and bore a decidedly British stamp, which was only gradually modified by the Canadian influence of Harold Innis and other, younger professors. Its classical "political economy" approach was being newly counterbalanced by modern socialist and Canadian tendencies of thought.

Work in the honours course, political science and economics, was rigorous and demanding; it involved compulsory lecture courses, sometimes in large classes and, less often, small tutorial groups. Most important was the writing of essays, a constant exercise that counted for nothing in one's ultimate standing but disciplined one to devote enormous time and effort to a given topic. The curriculum was highly structured with only limited freedom to choose among subjects, and the whole course demanded a high degree of specialization, mainly in

economics. The thrust of the program was British and Canadian although it tended to be more European in its historical and theoretical aspects. There was not a single course on Canadian government. There was a benign neglect of foreign countries such as Soviet Russia, China, African states or even the United States.

I was lucky to study under a galaxy of stimulating scholars. The more senior academics included Vincent Bladen, a fervent believer in Adam Smith, who touched on Marx only at the end of his course; Harold Innis, dean of Canadian economic historians, whose lectures (quite dull and uninspiring) were based on his massive pioneering studies of Canadian staple production; and Alex Brady, a specialist on the governments of the dominions, who lectured on political thought from Plato to the present. Among more recently appointed lecturers were Wynne Plumptre, who was fresh from studying at the feet of John Maynard Keynes at Cambridge (he was an ardent advocate of a central bank for Canada); Joe Parkinson, a specialist in international trade and finance; and Harry Cassidy, an expert in social problems and social insurance. Many of these newer recruits were moderate socialists and participated in the founding of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). More radical was Lorne T. Morgan, an economic historian whose eloquent and witty lectures on European economic development (including Russia and the Soviet Union) attracted several hundred students. A lecturer from Holland, the eccentric Otto Berlenbach van der Sprenkel, gave me my first insights into Marxism through his interpretation of political theory. I studied British and colonial and some modern Canadian and American history under leading scholars such as George Brown and George Glazebrook. Outside the classroom I was influenced by the radical historian, Frank Underhill, a leading figure in the CCF.

I devoted much of my time to study, and especially to the essays. Well trained in the art of writing exams in high school, I was able to achieve first class standing in all years and, in all but the final year, stood first in my class. I also won the Southam and Mackenzie scholarships in political science. At the same time I was very active in campus politics, including the University College Literary and Athletic Society (the Lit, as we called it). In my senior year I conducted a hard-fought campaign for the presidency, using posters and leaflets, and won by a vote of 314 to 158 over my conservative opponent, Dick Bell, with whom I often locked horns in debate. Our honorary president was the extraordinarily young-looking and witty Wynne Plumptre. On

February 22, 1934, when the Lit celebrated its 80th anniversary with a great banquet in the Hart House dining hall, the university's chancellor, Sir William Mulock, proposed a toast to the Lit. In my reply I paid tribute to it as a central current in the stream of college days that constituted our initiation into real life. At other commemorative occasions in the great hall, such as the retirement of Sir Robert Falconer or Dean De Lury, I had to preside or speak. The first meeting of the Lit under my presidency passed a motion eliminating all bribery (peanuts, cigarettes, and blotters), as well as campaign advertising in future elections. The Lit also adopted, after a competition, a new college cheer or "yell," which gave prominence to UC as "the home of knowledge," citing its motto "*Parum claris, lucem dare* [To give light where it is needed]." As president of the Lit I became a member, and later an elected vice-president, of the Students' Administrative Council (SAC) and represented it at the annual meeting of the National Federation of Canadian University Students (NFCUS). The Lit found many lighter outlets in such galas as the Arts Ball and the UC Follies, and the highly polemical and often witty debates in its Parliamentary Club. As "governor general" in the autumn of 1933 and again in January 1934, I read, on behalf of the government, a markedly socialistic Throne Speech declaring support for the League of Nations. On other worthy occasions I condemned the English accent, the restoration of knighthoods in Canada, and even Santa Claus — as an exemplar of crass commercialism.

My life at the University of Toronto was one of perpetual motion. Living at home, I had to walk daily to the campus, trudging along College Street during my first year, and later taking the streetcar from our home on the Danforth. I spent many hours attending lectures in the then rather dilapidated but pleasant halls and classrooms of UC, and in the junior common room, where the Lit had its meetings. I was proud to see my name inscribed in gold on the wall with other members of the Lit executives, dating back to 1852. There was so much to do in the splendid neo-gothic Hart House, where annually elected student committees planned and organized activities involving art, athletics, music, and debating. I was elected to the debates committee and was thus able to take lunch or dinner at the high table. There I enjoyed a personal association with the warden, J.B. Bickersteth, an Englishman who was a graduate of Oxford and a war veteran. A confirmed bachelor, Bicky resided in the House and seemed to embody its spirit of collegiality and all-roundedness. I was also a news editor, and later associate editor, of the *Varsity*.

Our evenings were sometimes spent in informal discussion circles which gathered, by invitation, at Wynne Plumptre's house in Rosedale. The Historical Club met at the homes of other professors or Toronto business magnates such as Sir Joseph Flavelle and J.S. McLean. Somewhat contradictory to my emerging socialist beliefs was my pledge to a fraternity (Psi Upsilon) — costly and elitist as these clubs were — and I played an active part in its affairs. I found time to play basketball and swim in the Hart House pool. In the early university years I regularly trekked down to the Conservatory of Music for music lessons and the occasional recital. During this hectic life I found welcome relaxation with my girlfriend, Eileen Woodhouse, a quiet, attractive young woman from Niagara Falls. She was not active in student affairs and had little interest in politics, but we enjoyed many happy hours together, going to the college balls and to dances at her sorority or my fraternity.

My other close friends included Sydney Hermant, son of the owner of a large optical firm. On the first day of registration he clipped my freshman tie at the entrance to University College and enlisted me in debating activities. Sydney liked to bring together Jews and gentiles at parties at his father's big home on Heath Street. After graduation he married Madge Shaw and took over his father's firm. He remained passionately devoted to the university and dedicated spare time for the rest of his life to work on its governing bodies. Another good friend was Marvin Gelber, also Jewish and the son of a businessman. A serious, scholarly person, he was strongly anti-Nazi and once tried to get me to boycott a concert by Walter Gieseking. He remained a bachelor all his life, succeeded to his father's business, and became a patron of the arts, an MP, and an active participant in international affairs, including serving as a delegate to the United Nations. Other friends were Arnold Smith, active in debating and the Lit, a fellow socialist, who in later life became a diplomat and secretary general of the Commonwealth, and George Ignatieff, the scion of a distinguished Russian family, who also rose high in the diplomatic service. I made other friends through debating and student politics: Dick Bell, who became a lawyer and a leading Conservative; and Sam Hughes, later a justice of the Ontario Supreme Court. I also relished my friendship with Saul Rae, song and dance star in the UC Follies, a socialist who later became a prominent diplomat, and Max Patrick, a witty debater, who later taught school in England and in Canada.

The campus was seething with politics, as was reported in the student newspaper, the *Varsity*; there were active Conservative and