

The Unsung U-boat Ace

The Memoirs of Victor Oehr

Edited by

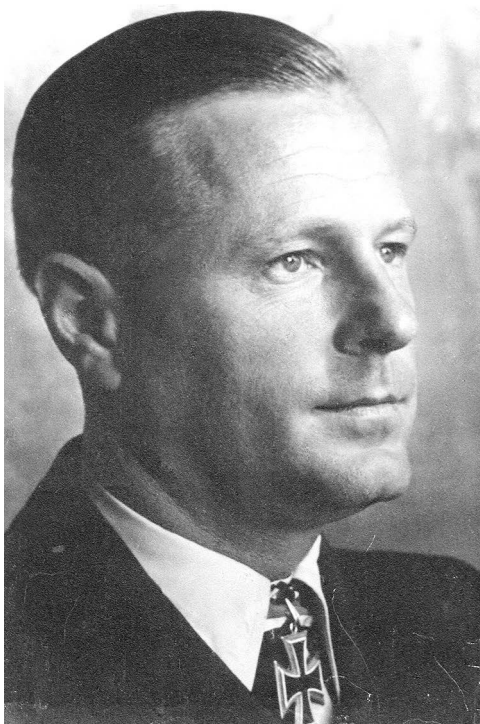
Hartmut Oehr and Lawrence Paterson

Unedited Excerpt



Savas Beatie
California





Victor Oehrman after his patrols, Lorient, 1941.

Author's Collection

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Photos have been placed throughout the text for the convenience of the reader.

FOREWORD

In Search of Victor Oehrn

Victor Oehrn is one of those who seemed destined to remain in the margins of U-boat history. For years, his name surfaced only in specialist works, and not in the books general readers normally encounter. Yet when you follow his career, you discover a story that runs straight through the heart of the German submarine war: from the bridge of an Atlantic boat in the early, heady days of success to the charts and conferences of the BdU staff, where Admiral Karl Dönitz and his officers tried to turn confusing patrol reports and radio messages into a coherent campaign at sea. *The Unsung U-boat Ace: The Memoirs of Victor Oehrn* is his life's story.

Born in 1907 in Kedabeg in the Caucasus, Oehrn joined the Reichsmarine in 1927 and began, like many of his contemporaries, on surface ships, including the light cruisers *Königsberg* and *Karlsruhe*. His move into the newly reconstituted U-boat arm in 1935 put him among its pioneers. Within a few years he was in command of U-14 in a patrol off Spain during its fratricidal Civil War. During this period, Oehrn was also temporarily assigned to train officer cadets and midshipmen from several entry classes (Crews), a particularly demanding responsibility that helped shape a cohesive corps of naval officers. He then served as a staff officer at BdU under Admiral Dönitz. There, at the center of the U-boat effort, Oehrn displayed his bold brilliance by using aerial photographs to find a way into the main British naval base at Scapa Flow. The daring submarine raid by Günther Prien's U-47 that followed sank the battleship HMS *Royal Oak* in October 1939. Germany had its first propaganda victory. After the Norway Campaign, Dönitz dispatched Oehrn into the Atlantic in command of the Type IX U-37. His four patrols (from May to October 1940) sank twenty-four ships and he earned the Knight's Cross as one of Germany's early aces. For most U-boat officers, this would have been the central story of a career; for Oehrn, it was only the opening act.

The escalating war pulled Oehrn off the bridge and back into the nerve center of the U-boat arm, as *Admiralstabsoffizier* (A1) on Dönitz's staff, where he helped plan and refine early wolfpack and convoy tactics. His dual experience of front-line commander and staff planner gives this memoir an unusual depth not found elsewhere. Oehrn writes as someone who knows what it means to stand watch on a cold bridge, worry about torpedo reliability and fuel, and then later experience those same realities turned into situation maps, tonnage tables, and operational orders.

Oehrn seamlessly invites readers into both worlds: the human reality of a boat on patrol and the abstracted version of that reality far from the front at headquarters.

One year later, in late 1941, Oehrn's path turned away from the well-worn narrative of the North Atlantic with an unwanted transfer into the Mediterranean to command U-boat operations from Italy. It was the hinge of his life story, for it was there, in Rome, that he encountered the love of his life, Renate (Ré) von Winterfeld, or, as Oehrn put it, "I met my fate." Duty sent him into North Africa and, perhaps, into a better position to control naval operations in support of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps. A mission near El Alamein in 1942 ended abruptly in a bloody ambush that should have killed him. Oehrn's deeply personal memoir takes the reader into the British hospital in the desert, where surgeons repeatedly attempt to repair the horrific damage to his shoulder and leg, and then into a prisoner-of-war camp near the Suez Canal, where he spends roughly sixteen months recovering and concealing from his captors his true identity as a senior U-boat officer.

He was exchanged and repatriated in 1943 to a very different Germany. Oehrn reported back to Dönitz and assumed the position of Operations (IA) within the Naval War Staff. The war at sea was grim, and the only bright spot for Oehrn was his marriage to Ré. In addition to explaining his duties, Oehrn uses this portion of his memoir to explore what it meant to help manage a campaign he knew was increasingly doomed, and to wrestle with questions of loyalty, duty, and doubt. His recollection carries through the collapse of the Third Reich, his brief postwar detention, and his eventual civilian work, including his years with Siemens. Taken together, these stages form a long, complex arc: cruiser officer, U-boat pioneer, Atlantic commander, staff officer under Dönitz, Mediterranean liaison officer, wounded prisoner, senior staff officer, and finally, civilian.

Threaded through much of this memoir is a quieter but essential element: his relationship with Renate von Winterfeld. Ré waited through sparse and often uncertain news, then married him when he returned to Germany, fully aware that his injuries and experiences had permanently altered his life. They remained together for the rest of their lives. Her presence gives the memoir an emotional center; the war is not only something that happens on charts and patrol logs, but also something that happens to particular people who have to build, rebuild, and sustain lives in its dark shadow.

My own connection to Victor Oehrn's story spans many years and several books. As a historian and a publisher who has always had a deep interest in the war at sea, I have long focused on U-boat commanders and the BdU inner circle. In 1996, I organized and edited *Silent Hunters: German U-boat Commanders of World War II* (1997), a collection of essays on remarkable men whose stories deserved to be told in greater depth to a larger audience. Jordan Vause's chapter,

“Victor Oehrn: The Ace with No Name,” was the first sustained effort in English to introduce Oehrn to a broader readership. That essay sketched the outline of his career and suggested there was much more to tell.

“Oehrn always displayed the virtues that marked the real German military—the organization behind the façade of National Socialism,” explained Vause, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, engineer, and writer. “He represents the lineage of the Prussian military system and the naval tradition that Kriegsmarine commander-in-chief Erich Raeder always wanted for Germany. He is a dignified man, self-effacing, loyal to his country and to his military superiors—but aware of their shortcomings. Oehrn makes no effort to defend the system he fought for; but he will defend Germany—a distinction that escapes many of his peers. He listens to criticism of his service without rancor and responds politely,” added Vause. “He is a gentleman and a professional. He is, perhaps, the ideal U-boat officer.”

Vause concluded by noting that within the U-boat community at large, Victor Oehrn was respected on all sides as a man of integrity and competence:

‘According to my opinion,’ wrote Jürgen Oesten, commander of three boats during the war, ‘[Oehrn] was decent, intelligent, quiet and matter-of-fact . . . equally qualified as a commander of submarines as for staff work.’ Otto Kretschmer, a man of very different views from Oesten, later described Oehrn as ‘not only the man with the highest IQ at BdU, but probably also the one officer who used it most effectively.’ In this observation Kretschmer presumably meant to include not only Karl Dönitz (whose IQ, as measured after the war, approached the genius level), but also several capable members of Dönitz’s staff, including Eberhard Godt, Günther Hessler, and Adalbert Schnee.

Oehrn was pleased with the essay. “The Ace with No Name—that is for all my comrades who served their country,” he remarked in 1997 during the final months of his life.¹

Silent Hunters was followed several years later by *Hunt and Kill: U-505 and the U-boat War in the Atlantic* (2004), and a reissue of Hans Goebeler’s edited memoir *Steel Boat, Iron Hearts: A U-boat Crewman’s Life Aboard U-505* (2008), both of which continued my exploration of the U-boat war through the stories of the men on both sides of one of the most recognized U-boats in history, now on display at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry.

1 Jordan Vause, “The Ace with No Name,” in Theodore P. Savas, ed., *Silent Hunters: German U-boat Commanders of World War II* (Campbell, CA, 1997), 109, 135. Jürgen Oesten was awarded the Knight’s Cross in 1941. Kretschmer was the most successful World War II submarine commander of any navy.

My relationship with Oehrn and his wife Ré was not limited to the printed page. I exchanged letters with both. Our correspondence was not extensive, but it was meaningful. Both took the time to answer questions and comment on their experiences, and each, under separate cover, sent me a signed photograph. Those photographs—formal, yet deeply personal—have been a constant reminder that the commander described in patrol summaries and staff lists was a real man with a family and a private life, carrying the weight of his wartime decisions for decades. That personal contact reinforced my conviction that his voice, preserved in full, would add something important to our understanding of the U-boat war. The connection with the Oehrn family continues today through my friendship with his son, Hartmut, forged during the editing and production of his father's memoir.

Victor Oehrn began writing what would eventually become *The Unsung U-boat Ace: The Memoirs of Victor Oehrn* in 1978 and completed the manuscript in 1983. His son later translated the original German text into English, seeking to preserve its conversational, first-person voice. In addition to assisting with the final editing, veteran U-boat historian Lawrence Paterson has contributed valuable annotations that help place Oehrn's recollections within the wider history of the German submarine war and explain references that may be unfamiliar to modern readers.

These memoirs are much more than an account of a U-boat commander's wartime service. Oehrn begins with his childhood and family background before recounting his naval training, operational service, staff appointments, his wounding and capture in North Africa, imprisonment, and eventual return home. Alongside this chronological narrative, he reflects on leadership, responsibility, duty, loyalty, and the difficult moral questions that continued to occupy him long after the war had ended. He writes about colleagues from the Kriegsmarine, Wehrmacht, and Luftwaffe, but repeatedly steps back from events to consider their wider significance—not only for Germany and the German Navy, but also for his own life. His career encompassed far more than operational U-boat service, giving him an unusually broad perspective on the wider context of the German naval war.

Victor Oehrn often told his son that he wrote these memoirs because he believed his experiences would be of lasting value to future naval historians. At the same time, he was careful to define their scope. As he wrote:

The purpose of this memoir is not to write a history of the U-boat warfare, which, for lack of my own records, I could only copy from other sources. Therefore, I have refrained from writing what can be read elsewhere. I have instead undertaken to give the framework of my personal experience within the greater events of this war.

This distinction is fundamental to understanding the pages that follow. Oehrn did not set out to write a political history of the Third Reich or a comprehensive

account of Nazi crimes. He deliberately confined himself to what he had personally experienced, leaving the broader historical interpretation to historians.

By the time he completed the manuscript in 1983, the essential facts about the crimes of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust had long been established. He was fully aware of those crimes and unequivocally rejected both them and the men who committed them. As his son recalls, “My father remained an independent thinker throughout his life. He was always prepared to consider new information and, where appropriate, to revise his views.” This reflected a lifelong habit of independent judgment. Throughout his naval career, loyalty never meant unquestioning obedience; he was prepared to disagree with his superiors whenever his conscience or professional judgment required it.

His perspective was also shaped by an unusual upbringing. Born to Baltic German parents, he spent his childhood in the Caucasus, then part of the Russian Empire. Growing up in a multilingual and multicultural environment gave him a breadth of outlook that remained with him throughout his life and distinguished him from many of his contemporaries.

Few U-boat veterans remain with us today, and no U-boat commander is still alive. Fewer still have left behind candid, book-length memoirs. Victor Oehrns’ account is exceptional not only because of the remarkable breadth of his naval career, but also because of the candor and thoughtfulness with which he examined his own experiences.

My hope is that you will find in these pages not only a compelling personal narrative, but also the reflections of an independent and conscientious man seeking to understand his own place within one of history’s most difficult periods. His voice offers a rare opportunity to see the U-boat war—and the wider context of the German naval war—through the eyes of someone who lived it, reflected upon it with intellectual honesty, and preserved his experiences for future generations.

Theodore P. Savas
July 2026

Author's Note

 I look back on a life rich in color, movement, and beauty, though it did not spare me many hard trials. My childhood offered surroundings and a time that inspired my imagination and gave me countless impulses. Even then I longed for a life not marked by calm routine, but by challenge and experience.

Such wishes, if strong enough, draw reality toward them—though reality often turns out quite differently than imagined or desired. We must confront it, and the way we succeed in doing so helps determine the path we take.

It is in my nature not to allow myself to be forced, even at the cost of paying a very high price. I look back on my life with gratitude for all that it has given me, and with humility before Creation, which time and again gave me the strength to endure.

Victor Oehr
Easter 1983

EXEGI MONUMENTUM
AERE PERENNIUS
REGALIQUE SITU
PYRAMIDUM ALTIUS

— Horace, Odes 3.30.1–2

An attempt, in humility, to emulate the spirit of the Ancients.
Epigraph selected by Renate (“Ré”) Oehr (née von Winterfeld)
to serve as the guiding motto for Victor’s memoirs.

Chapter One

Childhood in the South Caucasus

My birthplace was the South Caucasus, which at that time formed part of the Russian Tsarist Empire. I was born on October 21, 1907, in Kedabeg, a copper-mining town in the so-called Lesser Caucasus (Transcaucasia—now Azerbaijan), about 50 km south of the Kura River—itsself named after the Persian king Cyrus. To the north, some 50 km away in modern-day Armenia, lies Lake Sevan or Goktscha at an elevation of 1,920 m. Between it and Kedabeg (altitude 1,530 m) rises a high and rugged mountain range, crossed only by the Scheitan-Kala (“Devil’s Castle”) pass. As the crow flies, Kedabeg lies about 120 km from the Turkish and Persian borders, and 160 km from the biblical Mount Ararat.

Kedabeg was acquired in 1864 by Walter Siemens, then German Consul General in the Caucasus, on behalf of his brothers Werner and Carl. They had secured a concession from the Russian Caucasian Mining Office to build a copper smelter on adjacent crown land. The Siemens brothers first became acquainted with the Caucasus during the construction of the Indoline, the great telegraph line from London to Calcutta, a project entrusted to the firm Siemens & Halske. Like so many others who set foot there, they were deeply fascinated by the region.¹ All

1 The Caucasian War between Imperial Russia and the mountain peoples lasted from 1817 to 1864. Under Imam Shamil, Chechens and Dagestanis waged a holy war until his surrender in 1859. The chronicle of this struggle is presented in Lesley Blanch’s masterfully written book *The Sabres of Paradise* (London, 1960). During Victor’s childhood, the memory of this long conflict was still vivid among the local population and resurfaced in periods of unrest in 1905–06 and again in 1918–19.

At the end of 1865, Werner von Siemens undertook the first of three journeys to the Caucasus. He vividly described the fascination that this landscape and its peoples exerted on him and his brothers: “A legend even tells that the beautiful valley of the Shamkhor River, which belongs to the forest district of the mine, was once the site of the biblical Paradise;” Werner von Siemens, *Lebenserinnerungen* (Berlin, 1922), 148. A large portion of Werner’s and Carl’s private wealth (managed through the Siemens family estate administration) was invested in Kedabeg. In 1867, Carl moved with his wife and children to Tiflis (now Tbilisi) for a time to coordinate construction of the Indo-European telegraph line from London to Calcutta through southern Russia and Persia. To relieve his brother Walter, he also took responsibility for Kedabeg. For a while, with Walter, Carl, and Otto all living in Tiflis, three of the five Siemens brothers were there at the same time. The Indoline remained in operation



Late nineteenth-century Caucasus, showing Kedabeg and the route of the Indoline from the Black Sea via Tiflis, Eriwan, and Tabriz toward India. *Siemens Historical Institute, Berlin*

that was known of Kedabeg at the time was that copper ore had been mined there in the distant past.

The plant built by Siemens was owned by the Siemens family property administration, not by one of the large joint-stock companies of that name. Politically, the area was part of the Russian Empire; like the rest of the empire it was divided into governorates. In Tbilisi, the capital of Transcaucasia, however, a governor resided as the Tsar's deputy, usually a close member of the Tsar's family.

from 1870 until the advent of wireless telegraphy in 1931. Despite considerable initial difficulties, the Siemens brothers persevered, investing heavily to develop Kedabeg into one of the most modern metallurgical works of its era.

The Greater Caucasus forms a sharp dividing line between the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia. Climatically and scenically, the former still belongs to southern Russia, while the latter already opens into the subtropical landscapes of the Near East. As ancient historic transit regions, both are home to a colorful mixture of peoples of very different ethnic backgrounds and cultures.

My father, Adolf Oehr, born on April 13, 1860, in Wendau, Livonia, the son of a Baltic German pastor (a Lutheran clergyman of the Baltic German community), was a graduate mining engineer who specialized in mineralogy and geology. From 1906 he served as director of the copper mining and metallurgical plant at Kedabeg, where he had already worked as chief geologist. For a time he was in the service of the Russian Mining Administration in Tbilisi, from where he undertook numerous geological research expeditions, some of them in tents, throughout the South Caucasus. His predecessor at Kedabeg was named Kölle; one of Kölle's sons became a naval officer, and it was to his advice and influence that I owe my own decision to apply to the Navy.²

Shortly after my father assumed the post of director, while my mother and siblings were still living in Tbilisi, he was confronted with a great difficulty. Major upheavals swept through the Tsarist Empire, particularly its peripheral regions, at the turn of 1905–06. In the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, the South Caucasus was shaken by severe unrest among the mountain peoples against Russian state authority. Russia was temporarily weakened and battered, and at times its power scarcely extended into the mountainous regions. For my father, the most important task during this period was to guide the plant and its workforce safely

2 Since the time of Tsar Peter the Great, Russia had replaced Sweden as a major European power. At the end of the Northern Wars, with the Peace of Nystadt in 1721, Estonia and Livonia—whose territories roughly correspond to present-day southern Estonia and northern Latvia—became autonomous Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire; Courland was added in 1795. Under Russian rule, the German minority, many of whom had lived in the Baltic region for centuries, were able to retain the privileges once granted to them by the Swedish king: recognition of the Lutheran confession (as the Protestant regional church), German as the regional language, the continued validity of German law, and the German corporative order of self-government. Cf. Cord Aschenbrenner, *Das evangelische Pfarrhaus. 300 Jahre Glaube, Geist und Macht: Eine Familiengeschichte* [*The Protestant Parsonage. 300 Years of Faith, Spirit, and Power: A Family History*] (Munich, 2015).

In May 1893, Adolf Oehr took up his post in Kedabeg as head of mining and geological surveying, accompanied by his newlywed wife. Carl von Siemens had taken notice of the young Baltic German, a graduate of the Mining Institute in St. Petersburg, Russia's oldest technical university, who had already gained more than seven years of experience in ore deposits and smelting operations in the southern Urals. In recognition of his services, Adolf Oehr was granted the status of Honorary Citizen of the Russian Empire (почётный гражданин), a special legal status introduced by Tsar Nicholas I in 1832. The life of Carl von Siemens and his relationship—as well as that of his brothers—to the Caucasus is described in Martin Lutz, *Carl von Siemens 1829–1906* (Munich, 2013). Carl and his brothers Werner and Wilhelm, together with their partner Halske, transformed the Siemens company into a global corporation and a pioneer of globalization.



This wild yet beautiful beech-clad mountain landscape west of Kedabeg has changed little since the days of Werner von Siemens and remains much as Victor Oehr would have known it in his childhood. It conveys the natural setting in which he grew up. The memory of the local copper mining and smelting industry remains alive among the local population. *Author's Collection*

through the crisis. He succeeded, but not without facing dramatically worsening situations—including the deportation and slaughter of Armenian workers who had taken refuge in my parents' house in our large attic. They could not remain there indefinitely, as the situation had become increasingly dangerous for them and for everyone concerned.³

In the years that followed, a second copper mine was built under his direction by the Siemens family property administration. This was located at Kwarzchana, at the opposite end of the Caucasus in the extreme southwest corner, near the Turkish border and today part of Turkey.

In the spring of 1911 Wilhelm and Carl Friedrich von Siemens traveled to Kedabeg. Their purpose was to refine and advance Siemens's strategy in the Caucasus. At the time, Carl Friedrich—the son of Werner von Siemens from his second marriage—was thirty-nine years old, while Wilhelm—the son from Werner's first marriage—was fifty-six. Wilhelm was the senior director of the company and the founder of the Siemensstadt district in Berlin. Just over three years after this visit, the First World War broke out and changed everything.

3 The Russo-Japanese War was fought between the Japanese and Russian Empires in 1904–05 over competing ambitions in Manchuria and Korea. Russia ultimately suffered a humiliating defeat, signing the Treaty of Portsmouth on September 5, 1905, while being shaken by growing domestic unrest that culminated in the Revolution of 1905. The war marked the emergence of Japan as a major power in East Asia and exposed the weakening of Russia's position as one of the established great powers.

The years of the First World War, during which all contact with the factory owners was completely severed, brought my father fresh problems, especially after the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in October 1917. The mountain peoples of Transcaucasia took advantage of the revolution to rise up in an effort to free themselves from Russian domination. At times there was no local authority at all, and my father was entirely on his own.

Then, in 1919, when Soviet power reached Transcaucasia, we left Kedabeg and moved to Kvarzchana. When the Bolshevik revolutionary troops reached Batumi in 1921, this plant too was cut off from the outside world and had to be shut down. It was then that my father decided to seize the first opportunity to travel to Germany. He wished to report personally to the owners and to take me there for schooling and further education.

My father never returned to the Caucasus. He retired and remained in Berlin, where he lived in his own house at Haberlandstrasse 3 in Schöneberg, in the Bavarian Quarter. There he gently passed away on April 25, 1942, at the age of 82. Soon afterwards, the house was partially destroyed in air raids. We buried our father in the forest cemetery at Stahnsdorf.

My mother Olga, née von Minding (born August 26, 1874), came from Rasin estate in Livonia, about 40 km west of the southern shore of Lake Peipus. My great-grandfather, appointed from the Prussian Building Academy in Berlin as professor of mathematics at the University of Dorpat (now Tartu), had acquired the estate. She was the third of six siblings. In February 1893 she became engaged, and on April 28, 1893, at the age of 18, was married at Rasin estate. She then followed my father to Kedabeg. There she died of an internal haemorrhage on December 5, 1913 and was buried in Kedabeg.

At that time, I had been suffering for many months from an intestinal disorder, the treatment of which demanded all my mother's care and attention. Her death was surely due in large part to her refusal to part from me because of my illness, and her failure to pay attention to her own condition in time to seek treatment. My father unfortunately realised too late the seriousness of her illness, which she had managed to conceal from him. By the time he summoned specialists from Tbilisi, it was too late.

I believe that with the death of my mother, my father's personal life also came to an end. From then on, he lived only for his children and for his duties. Yet in his heart, the image and memory of my mother remained vivid and undiminished until his last day, as if she had never died. He had his favourite photograph of her enlarged to life size, and it always hung within view of his desk, even in Berlin.

I do not have many childhood memories of my siblings Paul, called Pauli (born May 11, 1894), and my sister Erika (born March 28, 1895). The difference



Carl Friedrich von Siemens and Wilhelm von Siemens in Kedabeg, welcomed by Adolf Oehr and his wife Olga, spring 1911. On the left, playing with the baby bear presented to him by Adolf Oehr, is Carl Friedrich von Siemens, with his wife Auguste seated in front of him. Seated in the center is Victor Oehr's mother Olga; standing behind her is Wilhelm von Siemens, then head of the company. Seated to her right is Ludwig von Winterfeld, then a doctoral candidate who later became a member of the Siemens Executive Board. Behind him stand the mining engineer Gustav Kölle, former works director, and his successor Adolf Oehr. On the far right is Adolph von Gernet, a Baltic German metallurgist who had previously headed Werner von Siemens's private laboratory in Berlin. The servant Stepan stands in the background.

Author's Collection

in our ages, and the fact that Pauli was educated at the Birkenruh boarding school near Mitau in Courland and Erika in Blankenburg in the Harz Mountains in Germany, meant that they were only occasional at our parents' home.⁴

Until I was 14, I was raised and educated in my parents' homes—until 1919 in Kedabeg, then in Kwarzchana. Most of the time I was home-schooled, with a teacher or tutor occasionally providing additional support. From the beginning I learned German and Russian simultaneously, and very soon French was added as well.

Mlle. Glaire, a young French-speaking Swiss woman, lived in our household for several years. Since I spent most of the day in her company, I eventually became almost more familiar with French than with German, which I spoke with my parents, siblings, and some of the factory children, and Russian, which I spoke

⁴ Until 1919, Mitau was the capital of Courland, which, in contrast to Hanseatic Riga, had a more aristocratic character. Since 1920, Mitau has been known as Jelgava, in the Republic of Latvia. During the fighting of 1944–45, the city was largely destroyed in the course of the Red Army's advance, losing much of its historic townscape and architectural character.

with my nanny Masha and most of the servants. I also began to think in all three languages. Mlle. Glaire left us when I was about ten years old.

My first teacher and tutor, and at the same time my mother's companion, was a Russian woman, Vera Vladimirovna Skwarzova, a lady from St. Petersburg who always appeared very well-groomed and elegant. Later I was taught by a Baltic German tutor, Mr. von Schmidt, who, to my great surprise, could not ride well—in the South Caucasus, everyone seemed to be born on horseback. He was succeeded during the World War by a student whose mother was German and father Armenian. He was supposed to prepare me for the German-Georgian high school in Tbilisi, the only school I could have attended to receive any formal education. So I also learned Georgian, of which I retain only a few words and letters to this day.

After this, a German officer stranded in the Caucasus during the retreat of the German troops—my later brother-in-law, Paul Maurach—arrived. My sister also taught me; she had returned from Germany shortly before the outbreak of the war and went on to study art history in St. Petersburg.

There was no fixed curriculum for me; everyone did their best. I learned to read and write in German, Russian, and French simultaneously. Later I added Latin and then English, along with history, Grimm's fairy tales, Greek mythology, geography, some botany and biology, and of course mathematics and algebra. In the three main languages I memorized many poems. My father always rewarded me when I recited poems and ballads without error—rewards graded according to the first, second, or later recitation. Among the longest were Schiller's "Die Glocke" and, in both German and Russian, Heinrich Heine's "Die zwei Grenadiere"; and the Russian epic "Borodino" by Mikhail Lermontov.

On the farm and in the stables I picked up Tatar, a Turkish dialect, and fragments of Armenian. In Tatar, at least, I progressed far enough to serve as interpreter for my father at the age of ten when petitioners came to our house. Altogether, eight languages reached my ears in those first years. I could think in three of them and express myself modestly in two others—Latin and, later, Georgian. Did it all become a confusion of tongues? Surprisingly, no. For me, each language was linked to a distinct world of people, unmistakably different from the others. What I lacked, however, was systematic grammar; my teachers did not have the background for this. To this day I still feel those gaps. I now believe that a solid grounding in grammar is indispensable for true mastery of a language.

The circle of children around me was very small. I was only allowed to play with the children of the few German officials. My closest companion was my "baptismal colleague," Helmut Bischoff, son of the metallurgical engineer. We had been baptized together by Head Pastor Wirén of the German colony Helenendorf,

and our mothers were friends. I lost sight of him during the Second World War, when he was interned in India.⁵

Towards the end of the First World War, no other children remained in the village with whom I could play. My father therefore took in a refugee child from Lithuania. His name was Misha, and he knew nothing of his parents. We grew up together like brothers, without distinction. Yet it soon became clear that our dispositions and interests diverged widely. The Baltic way of life in our household did not appeal to him and felt foreign to him. In the lessons we shared, he struggled to keep up, despite extra help. He was drawn instead to the servants and their way of life; that was the world where he felt at home. My father therefore decided to place him in an apprenticeship, where he learned the locksmith's trade at my father's expense in a nearby town. He always remained grateful, and we heard from him as long as the postal connections lasted. Looking back, I see this as a lesson: environment is not the sole factor in a person's development. Character, genetic disposition, talents, and interests ultimately shape an individual's path.

Although I saw my father often in my first 14 years, his work absorbed much of his time. He was constantly occupied with the management of the two mining and smelting sites, which lay far apart. For years he spent fourteen days at home, then fourteen days on the road. After the early death of my mother, he did everything possible to draw me close to him. My bed was in his bedroom; he also placed his desk there. Each evening he would sit and work by the light of a spirit lamp, for there was no electricity in Kedabeg. He often took me walking, on small trips, and on horseback rides. I was also allowed to visit him in his office. Twice a week we went to the cemetery, bringing flowers to my mother's grave and lingering there, where he would tell me about her. Once I asked why he had never remarried. Didn't many people do that? He replied that he did not wish to—and that perhaps I would understand that later.

He left me two letters: the first he wrote on the first anniversary of her death, in December 1914; the second on the 25th anniversary, in 1938. In these letters he sought to bring her image closer to me. For what does a small child know of what it means to lose his mother so early? I once said to my nanny Masha, when my mother's coffin was delivered: "*Masha, if you ever die, I will give you a golden coffin!*"

I clung to my father with all the love my heart could give. I was fond of many people around me, but I truly loved only him. When he had to leave on his

5 After a journey in search of traces of the past to Kedabeg (now called Gədəbəy) in 2009, Hartmut met two grandchildren of the former smelting works manager Otto Bischoff—Harald Bischoff from Munich (son of Helmut) and Wolfgang Müller from Heidelberg (his mother Hertha was also born in Kedabeg). They exchanged photographs and documents, which were eventually entrusted to the Siemens Historical Institute in Berlin.

frequent trips, I was close to tears; when he returned, I was overjoyed and never left his side. He would arrive from the railway station at Dalljar, 40 kilometers away, in a horse-drawn carriage called a phaeton, pulled by four horses harnessed side by side. From an intermediate station his arrival was announced by crank telephone. Then I would walk—later ride—to meet him. There was always something for me in his traveling cases.

The most decisive event of my early childhood was my mother's death. I had just turned six years old. I do not have many memories of her, but when I look back on my childhood as a whole, I see the break that her passing meant for me and for our home. She was the true center of our household: the many people who belonged to it, the constant stream of guests, the numerous servants, and the small farm with its flower and vegetable gardens, cows, pigs, chickens, geese, ducks, and dogs—all bore the imprint of her heart and nature. The reverence and respect she received from every side radiated back on all of us. She was the *Chanum*: the mistress.

My father told me she may have been especially attached to me because my birth had been so difficult for her. Yet with all the devoted care I owed to her, she gave me more than she could and should have, especially in the last year of her life, when I suffered from a protracted intestinal illness.

She never spoiled me. By today's standards she raised me strictly. I was no stranger to the strap and often had to stand in the corner. I remember this very clearly. From the earliest age she demanded above all that I should not be selfish or rude to those around me, and that I must always be truthful.

I still remember once, at about four years old, being severely punished because I gave my friend Helmut, whom I had invited, the smaller of two apples. Another time, I entered the room just as Mrs. Bischoff was taking leave of my mother. She shook my hand, and I—imitating a servant—said, "Good day! Adieu!" That earned me the corner. The saying "*He who lies once is not believed, even when he speaks the truth*" was impressed upon me from earliest childhood. I no longer remember what first occasion brought it about.

After my mother's death, my aunt Auguste Oehr, widow of my late uncle Axel, who had been a doctor, took over the household. With her came my two cousins Else and Ingeborg from Dorpat. Aunt Auguste ran the home with love and tireless care, overseeing my upbringing with kindness and indulgence; but she could never replace my mother. I was fond of her, but we never had a special bond.

So I grew up as a little boy surrounded mostly by adults, with few playmates and many servants, a small center in my little kingdom. The Tatars called me *Victor Aga*. I was not a couch-bound child; I was often in the garden, the yard, or in the forest, amidst wild nature. I became acquainted early with dogs, horses, and other domestic animals, and was good friends with them all. Above all, I loved *Boy*, a smooth-

haired fox terrier—my peer and my friend. He accompanied my mother and me everywhere and was the only dog allowed in the house with us. He was defined by raw courage, which shrank from nothing, and by his fierce dislike of cats. When he lost his life in a dog fight at the age of nine or ten, I was inconsolable for a long time.

I also had a silver-grey donkey, which could be saddled or harnessed to a small cart. His gait was steady, his trot short and jerky. True to the nature of a good donkey, he was stubborn and headstrong. We never became good friends, and I much preferred riding in our phaeton. Sitting beside our coachman Nikolai on the buckboard, with *Boy* next to me, who loved it as much as I did—sometimes even being allowed to hold the reins—was far more enjoyable.

I began riding at the age of eight and from then on rode frequently, almost every day. Accompanied by a groom, sometimes alone, sometimes with larger groups, we often set out for hours, visiting Tatar villages where we were frequently welcomed with lavish hospitality—until my father forbade me to continue, as such visits obliged him to return invitations, which were not always convenient for him.

Soon I felt so secure in the saddle that I was allowed to ride my father's horse, the Kabardinian *Dscheiran*, which in Tatar means “the Chamois.” He was a gelding from the renowned horse-breeding region of Kabarda in the mountainous Northwest Caucasus: deep black, spirited, and restless. Apart from my father, only our groom Sammät, a Tatar, was permitted to ride him. Yet under me he moved gently and calmly, aware he was carrying a child. One day, however, at the edge of a village, a shepherd dog attacked his hindquarters and he bolted with me; my companion managed to stop him only with great difficulty. I did not fall, but from then on I was not allowed to mount him again. Afterwards I rode a horse called *Tishin* and another named *Orloff*, both of which had once belonged to Cossack leaders who had guarded us years earlier.

I was also deeply interested in gardening. A small garden was set aside for me, which I was free to tend as I wished. I enjoyed tinkering and building, constructing for example a wire ropeway like those I had seen in the mines, or an irrigation system for the garden with sluices and channels. My father even set up a real carpenter's workshop for me, with a large workbench and many tools. He taught me himself, as he had once learned the craft; in those days it was part of a general education to practice a trade. I built a Tatar-style earthen hut with an open fireplace in the garden and spent many hours with my fret saw. This was my world, and my days were always full. I approached each task with perseverance, but also with impatience. I would not rest until the work was done; yet in hurrying, I often slowed myself down.

The multitude of peoples, races, creeds, and cultures that coexisted in the South Caucasus—all living their own lives, yet constantly interacting—opened

my eyes from childhood to the diversity of human worlds and left strong impressions upon me.

The Tatars formed the bulk of the population in the Southeast Caucasus: a fusion of Mongol and Turkic peoples of the *Golden Horde* with ancient ethnic groups of eastern Transcaucasia. Half-sedentary, half-nomadic; proud, armed, and predatory; fanatical in their faith in Allah and his Prophet. They venerated Ali, the cousin and earliest follower of Muhammad, who was married to his daughter Fatima, as the only legitimate successor and caliph. His sons, Hassan and Husain, were revered as rightful successors as well. To commemorate their martyrdom, they held the annual *Shahse-Wahse* festival at the end of Ramadan. In great processions, young men of certain age groups, chanting rhythmically, would work themselves into a state of religious ecstasy. Wearing long white cloaks, they struck their smoothly shaved skulls with the flat blades of their double-edged daggers, the *kinjal*. My father, as guest of honour, often brought me along to these ceremonies. At the conclusion, all would gather in the mosque, kneel with shoes removed, and be served thin tea with sugar.⁶

The Caucasian peoples differed markedly in race, culture, and custom, and each had to be approached in its own way. From childhood I absorbed this more intuitively than intellectually, and the small world in which I lived gave me an early picture of how varied the greater world would be. I learned that not all people are the same: each wishes to be treated according to his own nature, and each must be given a fitting place if he is to thrive.

On the northern slopes of the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus, in the area of the Kura Plain, lived German winegrowers—descendants mainly of Swabians (*Donauschwabern*) who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had set out via the Balkans and Ukraine to emigrate to the Holy Land for religious reasons. They wished to be present in Jerusalem for the return of Christ. When they were only a few hundred kilometers from their destination, the Tsar's governor urged them to stop. Ahead lay harsh and impassable mountains; many would perish, and those who survived would be cut down by the Tatars and Kurds, carried off, or forced to herd their cattle.

6 The term "Tatars" was widely used in the Russian Empire as a general designation for Muslim populations speaking Turkic languages, particularly those now known as Azerbaijanis in the South Caucasus. *Shahse-Wahse* is a regional expression derived from the devotional lament "Shah Husain, Wah Husain" ("Lord Husain! Alas for Husain!"), associated with *tatbir*, a Shiite mourning and penitential ritual observed on the day of Ashura. The rite commemorates the Battle of Karbala on October 10, 680, in which the Prophet's grandson Husain ibn 'Ali, together with his companions and close relatives, was martyred while fighting against the forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I. The Battle of Karbala is widely regarded as the defining event that led to the enduring division between Sunni and Shiite Islam.

So these people, whose trust in God seemed limitless, remained where they were. They were given land, worked hard, founded villages, and built thriving settlements which I often visited—flourishing German colonies, still thoroughly Swabian in language and customs, reminders of the emigrant days. The Tsar granted them many privileges; they were exempted from military service, for example. They were respected everywhere, lived at peace with their neighbours, and were devoted mainly to viticulture. The wine on our table, mostly red but also white, came from them. It was delivered in barrels, bottled by us, and served in tall decanters. On special occasions we opened finer Georgian wines from Kakheti, northeast of Tbilisi, a region famous for its vineyards, said to rival the best European vintages.⁷

During the First World War, as anti-German sentiment grew, many Germans—including factory employees—were deported to Siberia, and we often feared for my father.⁸ But his high standing, his connections, and the respect he commanded everywhere spared him this fate. Even so, we had to be cautious: we were no longer allowed to speak German in public, nor even at the table when guests were present.⁹

7 The families Hummel and Vohrer from Helenendorf made German wine-growing renowned throughout the Tsarist Empire. Victor occasionally visited the Vohrer family. The Swabian families remained there until their deportation to Kazakhstan. In 1941, around 50,000 German settlers from the South Caucasus—Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan—were deported to Central Asia by Stalin, while from the North Caucasus the number exceeded 140,000 persons. Recognition of the historical role of German settlers in Azerbaijan, as well as reflections on their later deportation, can be found in Nazim Allahverdi oglu Ibragimov, *Heimat in der Fremde. Der deutsche Einfluss auf die Entwicklung Aserbaidshans* [*Homeland in a Foreign Land: The German Influence on the Development of Azerbaijan*] (Baku, 1997). See also the scholarly work of Eva-Maria Auch, who held the endowed chair in the “History of Azerbaijan” at Humboldt University of Berlin.

8 See Traugott von Stackelberg (1891–1970), *Geliebtes Sibirien* [*Beloved Siberia*] (Stuttgart: Günther Neske Verlag, 1951), the memoir of a young Baltic German physician from Reval (present-day Tallinn), deported to northeastern Siberia from 1915 to 1918, who later described how he came to love the land and its people despite the hardships of exile. Such deportations reflected the growing anti-German sentiment in the Russian Empire since the reign of Tsar Alexander III, when the influence of Baltic and Russian Germans increasingly came under suspicion. Individuals regarded as politically unreliable could be subjected to internal exile or forced labour (*katorga*), systems later expanded by Stalin into the vast Gulag network described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Victor Oehr’s own family was affected: his cousin Gustav Oehr, a young pastor on the island of Ösel (Saaremaa), was arrested in 1915 on suspicion of collaboration with Germany, imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, and exiled with his family to a suburb of Moscow before escaping to Germany via Finland in 1919. Another cousin, Alexander Oehr, a medical officer in the Russian Baltic Fleet, was likewise imprisoned and later exiled to Kokand in Russian Turkestan, where his trail was lost. For a deeply personal evocation of the disappearing world of the Baltic Germans before the resettlements of 1939–40, see also Camilla von Stackelberg, *Verwehte Blätter. Erinnerungen aus dem alten Baltikum* [*Blown-Away Leaves: Memories of the Old Baltic World*] (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1992).

9 At the outbreak of war in August 1914, the Georgian governor in the governorate capital of Elisabethpol—today Ganja—in Russian Transcaucasia, a friend of Adolf Oehr, advised Paul to forestall conscription by volunteering. At the end of October he entered the War Cavalry School in Elisavetgrad (today Kropyvnytskyi, Ukraine), founded by Tsar Alexander II, as a Junker (cavalry

It was my sister above all who took it upon herself to prevent me from forgetting my mother tongue. She read me ballads, had me memorize poems, and told me about the Baltic States and Germany. My father, meanwhile, had little time to spare; he spent nearly half his days traveling between Kedabeg and Kvarzhana, which was under construction. With all ties to the owners and the parent company severed, the entire burden of responsibility for the plants and their workforces rested on his shoulders alone.

Yet whenever possible, he still made time for me. Our special hour was usually in the evening, when he read aloud from books we chose together, many from the collections of my older siblings: the travelogues of Sven Hedin and Fridtjof Nansen, Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales", Max Eyth's "Behind the Plow and the Vice", which I loved especially, Felix Dahn's "Battle for Rome", and many others. At that time I also read a great deal on my own, including "The Count of Monte Cristo" by Alexandre Dumas—in French. Its excitement encouraged me greatly. That evening hour, belonging to us alone, was very dear to us both.

My Aunt Auguste, for all her kindness and indulgence in overseeing my upbringing, was easy compared with my sister. With her, nothing came easily. I was not allowed to join her at the table until I was about seven, and even then my manners were a constant cause of reproach: posture, elbows, distance from the table, use of the napkin, bite size, and everything else. It was dreadful! I was always relieved when my father was present, for then the rebukes were fewer.

When the Russian Revolution broke out in the spring of 1917 and Russian troops streamed back from the Turkish front, we entered a troubled, "emperorless" time. Although there were no violent disturbances at the plant, only a few demonstrations and marches by Russians and Armenians, we were cut off from all connection with the outside world. The sale of copper, the food supply, and the raising of money at times ceased altogether or became increasingly difficult. Meanwhile, the mountain peoples once more breathed the air of freedom from Russian rule. The Tatars, kept under strict discipline by the Cossacks and armed only with obsolete weapons, began to acquire modern arms for themselves by derailing Russian military trains—which, for safety, already traveled in convoys—and then attacking and robbing them. Soon the entire country was in turmoil, as theft and looting became the order of the day. The hereditary enmity between

cadet). He subsequently served in the 3rd Cavalry Division of the traditional Novorossiysk Dragoon Regiment, a unit with battle honors dating back to 1812 and the Paris campaign of 1815, eventually rising to staff cavalry captain (*Stabsrittmeister*). By the end of the war, his unit belonged to the cavalry corps commanded by Lieutenant General Mannerheim, later Marshal of Finland and President of the Republic of Finland.

Armenians and Tatars, long suppressed by Russian rule, flared up once more, and outside the larger cities there was no authority at all.¹⁰

When the unrest reached us, my father was forced to raise and pay for his own mercenary force (*Okhrana*) of 106 men, mostly mounted. The leaders were local minor nobles, the so-called Beks. My brother, recently returned from the front, was placed in command, with Said Abasar as his chief. If his title of *Said* was rightly borne, he traced his lineage back to the Prophet himself.

The Tatars were quick to fire their weapons, with or without cause. At night, when bullets began to whistle around our house, all the windows were barricaded with heavy wooden boards. During this time, I was allowed to go riding or walking only under escort—a small armed guard of five to seven men—to protect me from the risk of being taken hostage.

While my aunt lived in constant fear, my father remained unshakably calm. Everyone carried weapons except him; his safety rested not on arms but on his authority. When the plant ran out of money, he issued promissory notes backed by the copper on hand and produced at the works. Bearing only his signature, they were accepted everywhere. Later he made sure that all of them were redeemed, and no one's trust in him was ever disappointed. I still recall many details of that turbulent time. For me, it was more interesting than frightening—after all, I knew no other world. Today it seems like an adventure novel, and yet it was once my reality.

Normal conditions did not return until Turkish troops occupied the eastern Caucasus as far as Baku, while German troops, at the urgent request of the Georgians, took over the western part with Tbilisi. This was around spring or summer 1918. Before long, however, they had to give way to the British, who were pushing toward the oil fields of Baku. My brother left with the German troops, having volunteered to serve under General Krefß von Kressenstein in Tbilisi. His enlistment required approval by Emperor Wilhelm II—which was granted. But in the meantime, revolution had broken out in Germany.¹¹

Autonomous governments now emerged in Transcaucasia, which, after some back and forth, coalesced into the Republic of Azerbaijan in the east, Georgia in the west, and Armenia in the south and southwest. Their existence was short-lived:

10 Among the ethnically diverse peoples of Kedabeg, Adolf Oehrn was remembered as a “white raven”—someone regarded as exceptionally rare. At a time when almost everyone carried weapons, he relied solely on the authority of his office and the respect he commanded. Though capable of firmness, he was widely admired for his fairness, integrity, and humanity.

11 General Friedrich Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein assisted in directing the Ottoman Army during the First World War and, in mid-1918, as the Ottoman-German alliance collapsed, was dispatched with a small German force to Georgia, whose independence Germany supported. There he helped secure the country against Bolshevik incursions, including fighting in the region of Abkhazia.



Mounted works guard (*Okhrana*) at Kedabeg during the local unrest, 1917–1918. On the left is Pauli Oehr, leaning on his carbine; beside him stands his co-commander, Said Abasar, holding a kinjal.

Author's Collection

in 1920 and 1921 Soviet Russia moved in from the east, conquered them, and turned them into Soviet republics.

Just before Soviet troops occupied the region, we left Kedabeg and moved to Kvarzhana, in the southwestern corner of the Caucasus. It lay about 300 meters above sea level, in the Pontic Mountains, which rise to 2,500 meters and fall steeply into the Black Sea. The climate was subtropical and rainy, the vegetation lush, the slopes steep, the riverbeds deeply cut, and the soil rich and loamy. At the lower elevations grew figs, olives, oranges, tangerines, mulberries—even bananas; higher up, cherries ripened. There was corn and tobacco cultivation, and near Batum a great deal of tea, though hardly any cereals. The population was Adjarian, a people related to the Georgians, who had been forcibly converted to Islam by the Turks in the early 18th century. Sedentary, peaceful, and somewhat colorless, they wore flat turbans and wide woolen trousers in Turkish style. There were almost no horses, only mules, a few sheep and cattle—nothing of the colorful Eastern world shaped by great cultures.

Our wartime-built house was modest compared to Kedabeg, though the landscape was far more beautiful. I spent nearly two years there, though I can



Victor in Caucasian cherkesska with kinjal, Dorpat, 1912. *Author's Collection*

describe them only briefly: no riding, few visitors, no friends. I was preparing for high school in Tbilisi, but that plan was soon abandoned, as the Russians occupied the city. Day followed day in sameness; in the evenings, just after dark, the jackals would circle our house and howl their short evening song. They were shy, and one seldom saw them.

In the winter of 1920/21, the Russians reached Batum, the Black Sea port that was also the terminus of

the Baku oil pipeline—40 kilometers away and our only link to the main roads. The plant was thus effectively isolated. My father's deputy, Sawadski, who had dared to go to Batum, was shot there. My father likely faced the same danger as a *Burschui* (bourgeois), a member of the so-called exploiting class. Our situation was worrying: would the Russians reach us too? Then, almost miraculously, Turkish troops under Kemal Pasha came over the snowy passes from northeastern Asia Minor. Apart from their weapons they had nothing but rags, the men hard and frugal to the point of utter need. Their officers were different: when I accompanied my father to meet the military commander, he appeared dignified, carpets laid out for him, majestic in bearing, looking every bit the hardened warrior. The Turks advanced to within 20 kilometers of Batum—and they are still there today.

We were saved for the time being, but there was no livelihood: the mine and factory lay idle. Without the port of Batum and any connection to the outside world, operations were doomed to stagnation. With no change in sight, my father—who until then had managed to steer the plant through all the turmoil of the war and keep it in the hands of its owners—decided to travel to Germany to report in person. At the same time, he resolved to take me along, to give me the chance of an education. The factory workers could only be spared destitution if help came from Germany via Turkey, and after 29 years of service with Siemens, my father now saw this step as his final duty.

One morning in May 1921, he called me in and told me to be ready to leave with him that afternoon, across the passes of the Pontic Mountains to a port on

the Black Sea, from where we would see how best to reach Germany. I was allowed two medium-sized suitcases, packed so they could be strapped onto the back of a mule. No one was to know of our departure, he said, for fear we might be stopped. But he also had to go now, for the sake of all the plant's employees. With two companions and two mules for the luggage, we set out for the border town of Borchka, where we spent the night. The next day we crossed the river *Choruk-Su* ("wild" or "dirty water") and climbed the pass at Mount Trial in the Pontic Mountains. By afternoon, in brilliant sunshine, we reached the summit, where a magnificent view opened before us—the last image I carried away from the Caucasus: below the long, sloping ridges and steep cliffs lay the Black Sea, framed by vast stretches of rhododendrons and azaleas in full bloom. By evening we reached the coastal town of Chopra, Turkey's easternmost port. The only inn in town, built of wood and indescribably infested with bugs crawling in rows out of the wallboards, took us in. We stayed there several days until we managed to charter a motorboat to Trapezunt, an ancient Greek town, where we found a comfortable hotel—and, in its bathhouse, washed off the last of our unwelcome companions. After about eight days we boarded the first steamer to leave Batum for Constantinople since the war. My father must have known of its sailing. The ship, once Austrian, now belonged to Lloyd Triestino and was named *Franz Joseph Király*. We shared a two-berth cabin.

On the second night, sudden commotion in the corridors woke us. The ship began to heel so sharply that we had to brace ourselves against the bulkheads as we hurried, half-dressed, onto the deck. Panic reigned. Life jackets were being put on, lifeboats jammed in their davits. What had happened? We had strayed too close to shore and struck a rock north of Cape Sinope. Standing on the slanting deck at the rail, I looked down into the black water and up at the hills of the coast outlined against the night sky. I could not yet swim, but something told me: this is not my last hour.

When my father went back into the cabin to retrieve our papers, money, and necessities, I suddenly felt a sharp pang of abandonment and fear. But all turned out well. The ship steadied somewhat and grounded on a rock. At dawn, U.S. destroyers from Constantinople appeared, took us aboard at full speed—even with our luggage—and carried us on to the city. As I climbed the sea ladder, a sailor stretched out his hand to me: "Come on, boy!" That was my first taste of seafaring.

We stayed at the Khedivial Palace Hotel in the Pera district of Constantinople. It took several weeks to secure our papers and visas for the onward journey, and in the meantime we had the opportunity to discover the city—the first great city of my life—with its many sights and its immediate surroundings. For me, these impressions were overwhelming. Still filled with the experiences of the past

weeks—the sudden and almost flight-like departure from the Caucasus, and the dramatic events of the journey that followed—I was inwardly overcome by all that this city, poised on the border between Europe and Asia, had to offer. It was all so foreign, so new, so utterly different from anything I had ever known. A feeling of abandonment welled up inside me. Nobody knew us; not even my father, who in our previous world had been known and respected everywhere. And I—who until then had always been the center of attention? But a child adapts quickly and lives more in the moment than in memories of the past.¹²

Amidst this sense of isolation, it was comforting again and again to meet people who, simply because we were *Aleman*, approached us with warmth and respect: *Aleman-Kardash*—brother, companion. This Germany of which they spoke with kindness was the land we were soon to reach. As a small aside, I was especially struck by the fact that here no one carried weapons—something entirely unfamiliar to me.

Once all our papers were in order, we traveled on the Orient Express to Belgrade, and from there by Danube steamer in a fine deck cabin to Bratislava. From there we continued by train via Dresden to Berlin. We had reached our destination!

End of Unedited Excerpt

12 At that time, the former Byzantine metropolis still bore its historic name Constantinople, whose international usage remained unchanged despite its conquest in 1453 by Sultan Mehmed II. Under Ottoman rule the city increasingly became known as Istanbul, derived from the Greek phrase εἰς τὴν πόλιν (*eis tēn polin*, “to the city”), a name officially adopted in 1930 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.