CHAPTER TWO

Austrian Beginnings

1900-1917

1

Strickland didn't like to talk about his childhood. He provided me with the facts, whenever I requested them, but seldom entered into the spirit of his early life as he did his years in Munich. He considered his childhood the least important part of his life, I think; in any case, the part of his life that gave him the least difficulty. Or, as he put it at one of our sessions: "Yes, important . . . we should always remember Goethe's remark—'Let no one think he can overcome the first impressions of his childhood.' But still, we shall need all our resources for the middle years!" He viewed his post-war years in Canada similarly, refusing to discuss them. "You will find all you need to know about my Canadian life in my published books," he closed off the discussion succinctly.

I didn't think I could force my questions upon him about this early, innocent part of his past, and, besides, I wanted to let him determine the important events of his life, to place the emphases where he himself wanted to place them in his own assessment of that life. I didn't wish to risk breaking the chain of recollections that linked him to Munich and the German Reichskanzler—those not so innocent years that were to form the centre of my study. One evening, however, he let down his guard and allowed me an extended glimpse into his childhood—his orphanage years in the South Tyrol, the part of Austria ceded to Italy after Austria's defeat in the Great War.

We had been discussing nature—alpine nature in particular—and its effects on the German soul. Mahler and Freud, he pointed out, had summered in the lake district west of Vienna, composing their best work in that bucolic region. And Nietzsche had loved the Engadin valley in the Swiss Alps, whose temperate climate, the philosopher had claimed, was the most conducive in Europe for creative work. He had completed a brief

lecture on *spiritus loci* when suddenly he brought the subject around to himself—describing how the alpine landscape had shaped his own thinking in his youth and continued to do so throughout his mature years.

"... I now summer in the Oberengadin—as you know—and have done for the past twenty years. The same rustic little village Nietzsche chose, known as Sils Maria—at the opposite end of the valley from fancy St. Moritz. The Engadin sits 1500 metres above sea level—amid a shield of Alps that rises another 1500 metres above the valley floor—and is protected from the climatic extremes of Europe and the Mediterranean both. Nietzsche was right, by the way, the Engadin's equanimous barometric pressure sharpens the senses, keeps one's thinking vital. Nietzsche discovered the 'principle of eternal return' while strolling along the shores of the glacial lake at Sils . . ."

Then, openly and unselfconsciously, Strickland began to regale me with stories of his childhood among the mountains of the South Tyrol, a hundred kilometres east of the Engadin. I knew nothing about his past at the time and listened avidly as he brought these memories alive for me.

Born in Vienna on January 1, 1900—"on the stroke of the twentieth century," as he liked to remind me—he spent his first three years in the Habsburg city. His parents had been wealthy and prominent citizens of the empire, his grandfather a companion and fencing partner of Archduke Karl Ludwig, Emperor Franz Joseph's brother. The father, who had himself inherited great wealth, owned an art gallery on fashionable Josefsplatz, "where he displayed the work of some major nineteenth-century painters . . . and was an early promoter of Manet and Cézanne." His mother was an accomplished poet and active member of the Goethe Society. She also had inherited a large fortune, before marrying Herr Doktor Kunstkenner Streichland. But Stefan, the only child born to the couple, hadn't known his parents in any real sense as both had died when he was an infant.

"... Orphaned, yes . . . at an early age. From age three until age seventeen I remained in the care of an order of Catholic nuns in the South Tyrol."

He went on to add: "It wasn't your average orphanage, by any means. The nuns were quite well off. The building itself was a fifteenth-century *Schloss* that once belonged to Maximilian I. The sun shone perpetually on

that part of the world, or so it seemed to me as a young child."

I watched Strickland's face to see what I could learn from these disclosures. No shade of sadness passed across the handsomely aged features. His look remained radiant, his blue eyes emanated their usual crystalline clarity. He must have read my thoughts for he disarmed my questions even before I could frame them.

"Oh, my childhood wasn't at all sad—at least to the child living it. Solitude is always a great adventure and great advantage. There is no education like it," and he began to rhapsodize about his orphanage years, speaking with more emotion than I had known him to do before.

". . . One of my happiest memories is of returning from the Augustinerschule in the late afternoon to the orphanage on the outskirts of town. Usually I was alone, the other boys rushing off home or to the playground for their sports. A good hour remained before I had to be back at the orphanage and another hour before supper. Often I would stay out the entire time, roaming the fields and mountain slopes outside of town . . ."

The passage back in time seemed effortless for him. Clearly, amid the splendours of the Tyrol and its temperate climate, the man's deep love of nature had been struck, a love that would sustain him for the rest of his life.

"In my youth, the town was called Meran—it was renamed Merano after the area was ceded to Italy upon the collapse of the empire. Throughout most of the year the valleys of the Tyrol bask in a Mediterranean-like climate, protected by the great barrier of mountains to the north. Spring in Meran arrives six weeks earlier than it does on the other side of the Alps, and is a truly gentle season. Almond, peach, and cherry orchards explode in blazes of colour across the valley floors. Vineyards trellis hillsides—ringing the outcroppings of granite and the numerous Roman and medieval ruins found throughout the region.

"It was my first exposure to history, *in situ*—you might say. Here the alpine trench sinews westward towards Switzerland and southward towards Italy. The Brenner lies to the north—the great fissure connecting Austro-Germany with the plains of Lombardy. Tiberius and Drusus subdued the region in Christ's time. They brought these lands under the domain of the Caesars and opened a corridor to Europe. To this day the

run-offs from the mountains in spring uncover much treasure. The nuns had a trove of Roman coins and tools, and the Innsbruck Ferdinandeum a notable collection of imperial artefacts.

"The valley was a veritable palimpsest of history. Rome maintained a garrison there for five hundred years, until Teutonic marauders choked the empire by the throat. Then followed the conversion to Christianity, and a series of religious despots. In the fourteenth century the area became a Habsburg demesne and remained so until Bonaparte ceded it to Bavaria. The Habsburgs regained it again in 1814. But then it was bartered to Italy in 1919, in the Treaty of St. Germain. . . ."

The detail with which he resurrected his past was truly impressive. The solitary theme of his life had been struck then; his love of nature; his love of history, too—his scavenging for shards of the past and finding such shards, clues to history's rude beginnings, amassed layer upon layer as one civilization overturned and supplanted another, Celtic, Roman, Teutonic, Christian . . .

He described his life at the orphanage among the good nuns for what . . . fourteen years . . . until his departure at age seventeen for the Habsburg capital and his studies at the University of Vienna. One memory in particular stood out vividly for him and concerned an elderly priest; and I replay that memory here, for it encapsulates the boy's solitary nature—and the emotional levy that solitude placed upon him for the rest of his life.

"The priest, a monsignor, had inhabited a small cottage on the grounds of the orphanage—as the great Goethe had lived in a humble gamekeeper's cottage on his patron's estate at Weimar, preferring the rustic to the courtly life. The older boys nicknamed this monsignor 'the philosopher.' His cottage had belonged to one of the gardeners in the eighteenth century, when the nuns inherited the *Schloss*.

"Often I would see this priest from the study window, strolling about the property, breviary or book in hand. Sometimes we encountered each other on one of the paths, and he would stop and speak with me. He never used my name, however, and disclosed only his own first name to me and the other boys, Father Stanislaus.

"He had been a professor of philosophy at Vienna University but was now retired. One of the older boys described his cottage for me . . . it was

filled with books—books on the walls, chairs, bed. I never learned how the boy came to know such things and longed to visit the cottage myself. One day I walked Monsignor Stanislaus to his door, but he stopped short of inviting me inside. He turned to me, keeping the door ajar, and spoke the words: 'Young Streichland, I must leave you now. I have important work to attend to.' For the very first time he had spoken my name—and done so with real affection.

"I stood there until he crossed the threshold, hoping to get a glimpse inside. I saw bookcases filled with thick, dark volumes, and got a whiff of tobacco smoke, overlaying the smell of old books. He closed the door and I experienced a peculiar sense of loss, an emotion that has remained with me as a specific memory my entire life. I didn't know at the time that there was a secret regarding this priest and my own family—a secret that I wouldn't uncover until years later."

Never, in our dozens of hours of conversation, had Strickland's voice thickened with emotion as it did when he related this incident. Years later, when I came to know his life more intimately—from having studied his notebooks—I would understand the truth about this part of his life: that his childhood had been a painful one for him, though he was not fully aware of this himself at the time. He wouldn't become aware of it until much later in life; until his wartime years in Germany, in fact, when these early years came flooding back; when their pain seemed to grip him for the first time. "*Sorrow recollected and requited in retrospect*" was how he later described those years.

* * *

The boy didn't learn about his family until he was ten.

Then, one spring day, a young nun, who had grown fond of him and often invited him to accompany her on her walks about the grounds of the castle, provided him with his first glimpse into his past. She told him that his father had been a gifted musician as well as a dealer in art and antiquities and that his mother had published a volume of poems. He learned that when he was three his mother had become gravely ill and had been sent to a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. His father, wanting to join her in the

mountains, requested that the nuns look after baby Stefan for the duration of her convalescence. Then the mother died, and the father descended into a state of deep melancholy. The father himself died within the year. Since the child had no other family, he remained in the charge of the nuns at Meran.

The afternoon that the nun told him these things he set off on one of his long walks. It was early April—the local *Augustinerschule* where he attended classes was in recess for the Easter season—and spring was well advanced in the region. As he struck off in the direction of the mountains, there was no sadness in his heart—for there had been no sadness in the nun's voice. He had asked no questions because he could think of none. The life described, sorrowful as it might have been in an abstract sort of way, like a life encountered in a book, bore no relationship to his own life, which was already established and complete in itself. The nun's revelations changed nothing. They did, however, change one thing—they give him an interesting story of his own to share with the older boys when they talked about their pasts.

That afternoon, he wandered farther afield than ever before, reaching a steep hill at the end of the valley that had an ancient watchtower on its summit. He had seen the tower in the distance on previous expeditions, a kind of sentinel on a height separating several valleys, and knew from his history class that it dated back to medieval times, but had never visited the spot. When he reached the tower he found that its stone steps were still in place and he could climb to its uppermost platform. Near the top, cut into the rough granite, were three oblong windows, shoulder high apertures that someone had placed there for the fine view that they provided of the valleys conjoining there.

From one of the windows he could look northward towards the Brenner and Innsbruck, and beyond the high peaks to Munich and Germany, or so he imagined that afternoon. The sky in that direction was like a cave of ice. From the second window, he could look eastward towards Salzburg and Vienna. The sky in that direction was already darkening. From the third window, he could look southward towards Italy. Here the sky was the warmest blue of all, with none of the coldness of the skies to the north and east.

All of Europe was visible, at least to the eye of the mind, and that was

why they had built this tower. He felt happier than he had felt before in his life, though also lonelier and more isolated. Soon school and exams would be over and he would have two months to himself. His mood of mixed joy and loneliness grew and soon he was weeping uncontrollably. He didn't know why he was weeping but tears flowed down his cheeks. The sun was dropping swiftly below the horizon and the valleys were beginning to darken. He forced himself to descend the tower and set off across the meadows homeward, his feet churning quickly only because he compelled them to do so.

It was dark by the time he reached the orphanage. Two young sisters were pacing impatiently in front of the castle's great arched doors. They stopped and began talking excitedly to each other when they saw him. The stern looks on their faces told him that he had done something wrong. But they didn't scold him. When he entered the castle, he was greeted by the Mother Superior and the young nun who had told him about his parents, the pair standing under the huge timber crucifix that dominated one wall of the foyer. When the young nun saw him she lowered her head and entered the chapel across the hall. The mother superior began scolding him for staying out so late but without any anger in her voice. He apologized and went to his dormitory room. He had missed supper.

The following morning, he awoke with a sore throat and pains in his legs. He tried to get out of bed but found that he was too weak to move. The nun who was the orphanage nurse came to see him. She felt his forehead and sent him to the infirmary. Soon the doctor from the village farther down the Tal arrived. He pricked his finger and sucked some blood into a thin glass rod, which he stuck in a piece of Indian rubber on the bedside table. The following day, the doctor returned to check on him again. By then a watery substance had formed on top of the blood in the glass rod. The solution resembled the liquid that oozed to the top of the blancmange pudding served at Friday supper. He was excused from his examinations and instructed to get better.

For a month, he lay in the infirmary bed, feeling weak and sleeping much of the time—rising only to visit the toilet and once a week to take a bath, supervised by one of the nuns. His school books were brought, but he lacked the energy to open them. Each afternoon he was brought a bowl of

meat broth and a slice of black bread, and after supper a glass of milk and tablet of chocolate wrapped in fine tissue. Some of the boys visited him but weren't allowed to stay long. They described everything that was happening on the estate now that spring had arrived.

One day the young nun who was his friend visited him and told him that Monsignor Stanislaus had died. The funeral had been the week before. She asked if he had known the monsignor and he said that he had. She told him to pray for the priest's soul. Another priest, who heard their confessions in the chapel each week, visited him and heard his whispered confession. Next morning, he brought him communion and excused him from Sunday mass for as long as he was ill. Each week the doctor arrived. He pricked his finger and sucked the blood into the glass rod and set it upon the rubber mound. Later in the day, he returned to check on the result, by which time the blood had settled and a pale, liquid of a syrupy consistency had formed on top. He came to understand that his illness was measured by this liquid that separated itself slowly from his blood.

By early summer, his blood was less watery, and he was allowed to dress and stroll about the corridors for an hour each day. Then, one morning, the young nun who had befriended him invited him for a walk about the grounds. The mountains that day were the clearest they had ever been. The sky was a sapphire colour like the granite peaks, though a shade lighter in hue. Blossoms hung from the orphanage's rose bushes—a delicate apricot colour. Strung to trellises along the castle walls, they filled the air with the sweetest, most fragile of scents. The nun and he strolled down the lane to the fish pond, past the priest's cottage. Windows of the little stone structure were wide open, their lace curtains removed. A strong smell of books and tobacco issued from inside. But the walls were without books—the rooms lacking furnishings of any kind. Everything in the cottage—all the priest's possessions—had been removed.

The fish pond was the same brilliant blue as the sky. On the other side of the pond, the elderly gardener was working in the rubbish dump, poking a smouldering heap that refused to catch fire. The man saw them and waved. The boy suggested that they walk around the pond to speak with him, but the nun said that he had walked far enough for one day, and should return to his room to rest. On the way back, she discussed his

studies—explaining that he would need a tutor because of his missed lessons and offering to help him in the afternoons. She described his illness as *Rheumatismus,* an illness that weakened the young heart. He would need lots of rest to become healthy again, she told him. But he felt that his heart was strong today and almost too full. Everything looked fresh, and the smell emanating from the courtyard roses was wonderful. He was happy, except for the small burden of his upcoming examinations, which weighed heavily upon him.

Before leaving him, the nun stopped off at her office to give him a book, which she said had belonged to Monsignor Stanislaus. Returning to his room, he opened the book that the nun had given him. The book, in soft red leather and stamped in real gold, was very old and emitted a musty odour. It told the life of a priest who had died many centuries ago; a cleric, the nun said, who would have become a saint had it not been for his enemies. But he was unable to read a word. The heavy print, stamped deep into the thick vellum as if with a mallet, hurt his eyes, and the words were too big and numerous for his concentration. He hid the book in his cupboard.

The following morning, he examined the book in the morning light but had to quit once again. He wondered if his weakened heart had affected his ability to read. He didn't like the book—its musty odour seemed to sicken or poison his heart—and he wished that he could remove it from the room. Someone, he noticed, had torn a page from the front. For a moment he was afraid that the page had fallen free and that he would be blamed. But he couldn’t find a loose page among the bedclothes or on the floor.

A few days later, he was allowed out again, accompanied by one of the other boys. They passed the priest’s cottage, whose windows were now shut and the lace curtains restored. They moved on to the fish pond in search of the gardener. When they couldn’t find him they went to the dump. They were forbidden to go to the dump by the mother superior, but his companion, who was older than him, assured him that the rule didn’t apply to him. He visited the place often, the boy said, and found all kinds of treasure there, including a gold pocket watch.

The dump gave off a cold, charcoal smell. The boy began sifting through the piles of debris with his shoe, while he strolled to the spot where

he had seen the gardener at work a few days before. The remains of a fire were still in evidence. The gardener had been burning a large pyre of books. Many were still crisp or only half burnt, their covers consumed by fire, their pages singed black. Some, with tiny metal latches enclosing their pages, had only been licked by the flames. Many of the books were like the one that the nun had given him, bound in similar plum-coloured leather. There were also a large quantity of black leather notebooks filled with writings—but these had mostly been consumed. Finding nothing of interest, his companion joined him. The boy stooped and picked up one of the burnt books that had a metal clasp attached to it.

"You'd like to know what these are, wouldn't you?" the boy said with convincing authority.

When he gave up, the boy said: "These were the priest's books. No one wanted them so they were burned. It took three days to burn the lot. The cottage was full of books and writings. Me and another boy helped the gardener carry them here." The boy stood back proudly, his arms folded across his chest, like the etching of Julius Caesar in their Latin textbook.

"Promise you won't tell. Last week, I found a cigarette case full of cigarettes. It's a silver case with the emperor's gold eagle on top."

The boy held the wedge of half-burnt pages that had once been a book and, clutching him by the collar, told him to watch: "I'll show you a trick you haven't seen." The boy ran his thumb over the seared edges. The pages exploded in a cloud of brown dust.

Back in his room, Streichland picked up the book that the young nun had given him, *Das Leben und der Tod des Savonarola*. Its soft cover emitted the scent of a rabbit that one of the boys had once caught in a cruel trap, whose matted, bloodied fur he had smelled up close; the book's thick paper emitted a different odour, like stale, unwashed skin. He examined the book by the open window to lessen the smell. Its deeply scored print was black and sharp, unlike the print in his school texts, which was often smeared in the printing and hard to read, and its leather binding soft and smooth, beautiful except for the smell, like the soft black gloves worn by the nuns when they travelled to Innsbruck for the day. He wondered why anyone would want to burn such beautiful books. Yet he had seen such books in the fire that morning. He ran his finger over the spot where the

page had been removed. Someone had removed it, using a sharp blade. He held the book to the light and saw that there had been writing on the missing page. The writing had passed through the paper onto the underlying sheet as happened when his pencil pressed too firmly on the paper in his school jotter. He knew the trick whereby you could rub a pencil over such an impression and bring the missing print to light. He did this after much fearful deliberation. The writing revealed itself as a faint skeletal script against the black pencil background.

What he read was a place, date, and name. The place was Vienna. He had heard stories about the Habsburg city and anticipated a trip there when he was in the higher grade. The date was 189—. Some of the letters in the first name were smudged but those of the surname were unmistakably clear . . . *S t r e i . . .. n d* . . . his own family's name. He copied the words onto a piece of paper and then erased, as best he could, the pencil rubbings that had rendered them visible. But he could make no sense of his discovery.

2

At age seventeen, he concluded his preliminary studies at the *Augustinerschule* and, encouraged by teachers and nuns alike, enrolled in the programme of history and philosophy at the University of Vienna. The year was 1917, Austria was at war, a war whose battlefront had been creeping closer and closer to the Tyrol, and there was the matter of conscription in the Austrian army to be considered.

Upon turning seventeen, he was told to present himself at the government registration offices in Innsbruck for a medical examination. The physician to whom he was sent lived in a grand Italianate villa on a linden-lined street near the university. He presented the man with a letter from the orphanage physician who had treated him during his illness years before. The physician made him jump in the air a dozen times and then listened to his heart. He told him that he had a heart irregularity. The irregularity was due probably to the *Rheumatismus* that he had contracted as a child. The older man, who had a suntanned face and silvery hair, had

been a heart diagnostician on the faculty of the University of Vienna before retiring to sunny Innsbruck. He had treated many famous patients during his lifetime, he told him, including the renowned composer, Gustav Mahler. He had been recalled to Vienna as a consultant during the latter's final illness but had been unable to save the dying composer. "You've not heard his music, no doubt, but I must tell you . . . it's the music of transcendence. Of despair, too, the despair we must undergo before we achieve transcendence."

The fellow was quite the eccentric. He described what the composer's heart had sounded like, with its ominous murmur. "But I must tell you, Herr Streichland, it was like the composer's own music, a missed beat and then an unexpected rush of beats, but with this ominous murmur or echo like a muffled bronchial cough."

The physician began tapping his finger on the desk to simulate the erratic rhythm of the composer's heart. "Like this! *Tap, tap, taaap . . . a fitful and poignant stutter*."

He continued this strange but compelling tapping upon his desk, which he enhanced with a tune hummed deeply in the throat. It was quite the display. "Don't you see—the music patterned itself on the composer's irregular heart beat. The heart had transposed its arrhythmia to the music."

Of course he didn't know what to say, as he had never heard of this composer or his music. He had heard almost no music at all, in fact, except for the occasional band concert in Meran's town square.

"You have a most unusual heart of your own, young man!" the physician told him and began beating out its irregular rhythm on the desk, while continuing this strange musical humming deep in his throat, presumably from the dead composer's music. "We shall have to watch out for this heart of yours!"

Because of his arrhythmic heart, he would be excused from military service, the physician assured him. "But you must make good use of that heart! God grants us our infirmities for a purpose. It is up to us to find that purpose!"

The day before his departure from the orphanage, the Mother Superior invited him to her quarters for afternoon tea. His friend, the sweet-faced young nun, escorted him there, taking him through a section of

the castle that he had never visited before to a room almost as large as the chapel, panelled in similar blackened, worm-eaten wood and draped with portraits of former directors. The mother superior sat rigidly behind a miniature gold-brushed desk that accommodated her tiny frame perfectly. She wore the formal white robes and swan-like headdress that she wore on Sundays and holy days, her starched linen bib stiff and white as a communion wafer. A high-arched stained glass window towered above her. The window, which was one that he had often noticed from the courtyard on winter evenings, when the room was illuminated from within, depicted scenes of cruel martyrdoms in dazzling azure, crimson, and emerald glass. But the colours, the scenes, were even more vivid when illuminated by the sun's rays than by the faint light of the electric lamps.

"My dear Streichland, after all these years you are about to leave us and your comfortable life here," the Mother Superior greeted him from behind her miniature desk. "Tomorrow, it is hard to imagine, you shall begin your new life . . . your bright new life. You will do well, your teachers assure us, in your studies at university."

He was instructed to sit across from her in a maroon velvet armchair similar to the ones lining the chapel altar. She poured pale tea into cups whose china was as white and brittle as her starched headgear and passed him a silver platter filled with apricot tarts. Her linen wimple, which was drawn tightly under her chin, made her head seem small and precious.

"The reason I have called you here master Streichland is to bid you farewell . . . but also to talk to you about your parents."

The Mother Superior's eyes were cold and grey, without hint of moist life, like river stones dried in the sun. They didn't flicker or close as she spoke through her thin and equally pale and dry lips.

"Many years ago your father sat where you are seated now . . . and we talked not about his future but your future. He was a cultivated man, a lover of art and music. He approached us initially because your mother was ill and had to be sent to a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. He wished to be near her, you see, during her illness. I told him that you were too young—you were barely three at the time—but then he told me something that changed my mind. We came to an agreement, a temporary agreement we all thought

at the time, and your parents delivered you here a few weeks later, on their way to Switzerland. You were a serious child even then. There was a sadness in your eyes like your father's . . ."

He watched the nun's eyes to see if they flickered or closed, but they did neither. Light, illuminating the agonies of St. Catherine and St. Bartholomew, poured through the stained glass panels above. He watched the small purse of a mouth as it dispensed every word. The tiny holy being, seated primly behind her miniature, gilded desk, was perfection itself in its demeanour; a perfect speaking mouth and pair of perfectly observant eyes.

"Of course neither returned. Your father was an unhappy man, I am afraid. I could see that unhappiness when we spoke. Your mother, you understand, was gravely ill and should never have carried you. She had a weak heart and then contracted tuberculosis. She had only a year to live when your father came to see us. He told me this and this was why I agreed to accept you. After she died, he tried to stifle his anguish . . . but unsuccessfully, I am afraid. He entered a monastery but found no solace there. His own health abandoned him and, within two years of your mother's death, he took his own life . . . a terrible act."

The perfect speaking voice stopped there. The tiny lips closed like a purse, and the eyes waited quietly like a bird's for something to stir in the large, chapel-like chamber. He wasn't shocked by what he had heard. The mother superior's words blended with what he already knew about his strange family to create an unreal or distanced effect; words that didn't affect him directly but that could be saved for future consideration, when he was alone by himself and could repeat every word—every word of which he memorized as he did his Latin declensions.

When the Mother Superior saw that no reaction was forthcoming she began to speak again, opening the prim purse of her mouth as though to give the driver of the Innsbruck tram a bright new silver Schilling.

"Your mother had been a delicate child. When your father committed that terrible deed against himself and against his God, some of his things were sent here—furniture, paintings, books. Some of the books, I believe, were given to you. He left our order a generous bequest and one to yourself, which now you shall begin to draw upon for your education and future life. A lawyer in Vienna will attend to the matter and will communicate with you

shortly.

"And you remember our monsignor, Monsignor Stanislaus . . . the priest who lived in the little cottage? He was your father's older brother and your uncle. He could never speak of your father's terrible deed against his God but prayed until his dying day for your father's soul. He was our confessor here for a time, which was how your father came to know of our orphanage. There is nothing more I can tell you about your family."

She reached in a drawer of her miniature desk and withdrew a photograph in a silver frame and passed it to him. "Your uncle wanted you to have this when you reached a responsible age."

He looked at the photograph but then quickly turned away. The nun discussed the matter of his accommodations—he was to reside at one of the archbishop's houses on the Ringstrasse—and mentioned again the lawyer, a friend of his parents, who would contact him once he was settled in Vienna.

"And, of course, you must write to me should you need anything," and she instructed him to finish his tea.

Then she reached to take his hand in one of her own, while fondling the heavy ebony and silver crucifix about her neck with the other—kissing the metal figure softly. She prayed, she said, that he would benefit from the gift of faith in his new life. Her hand was weightless and as cold and smooth as ivory. Again she kissed the crucifix softly. Her eyelids closed to reveal thin, membranous lids, as translucent as the layers of an onion, the only time that they had closed during their meeting.

Before he rose to leave, she instructed him to take some *Aprikosenblättergebäck* back to his room. Obediently, he did what she commanded. When he lifted two of the cakes from the silver platter he noticed a finely tooled escutcheon at its centre, below a gold-incised Habsburg eagle. A pair of initials were beautifully scrolled amid the intricate pattern. They were his own initials: *SS*.

Back in his dormitory room, he examined the photograph by the fading light of evening. The image was a marvellously sharp and clear one, tinted in brownish tones, set in a beautiful frame with the markings of the silversmith stamped on the rim. The name of the artist's studio appeared on a vermilion seal on the back: Studio Ephron, Wien, and the date—1898. The photograph showed his parents in a lavishly panelled room, possibly

the library of their grand Viennese villa, his mother seated in a tall wooden chair that was arched and fretted like a chapel window, his father standing solemnly beside her. The figures didn't have the frozen looks of most studio photographs—such as those of former nuns that hung in rows on the walls of the school library.

His father was a good deal older than his mother; his mother about the same age as the young nun who was his friend. His mother's polished black hair cascaded to her shoulders where it formed soft masses that resembled a pair of sleeping kittens. No hint of a smile touched the angelic face but instead the look of a frightened child. Large curious eyes, as jet as her hair and her husband's patent leather boots, bore into the camera lens. The skull was narrow and frail. She was the most beautiful woman he had seen in his life, and he felt with an instant thrill that he was in love with her.

His father's face was mirthless and forlorn. It was fuller than his mother's, with creases of age descending diagonally from the eyes that gave it a tragic look. Mouth and eyes attempted a smile but a smile reserved for himself alone. A glare in the eyes evoked some imminent loss. Oval spectacles added the delicacy of glass and gold wire to an already fragile face.

That night, he lay awake for hours. During the past few months, he had experienced the expectant emotions of impending departure, but tonight these emotions seemed to gather menacingly and descend upon him all at once, like pummelling blows. A deep sadness overcame him. He experienced something else as well, his erratically beating heart. He recognized the beat from the other times that he had heard it resonate against his chest wall at night—*arrhythmisch,* as the kindly Innsbruck doctor had observed, replicating its stuttered rhythm on his desk, skipping a beat every so often and then accelerating the pace to make up for the missed stroke. *A fitful and poignant music!*—the doctor had described it.

And the thought struck him that his life would have this irregular beat as the underlying rhythm of its being; that the music of his life, if indeed one could think of life as a kind of music, would be like this: smooth and fluid one moment, broken and anxious the next. . . .