

Transcript

Hilary Smith talks to Frank Steiner part 1

Duration: 0:17:41

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Presenter: The next episode of Deddington Discussions: Hilary Smith talks to Frank Steiner.

Frank Steiner: Compared with anything that came after it, they were remarkably secure and well adjusted days. Thinking back, I think of the regularity of the pattern of the household, as one would now think of Victorian times. Things happened at set times whether you were there or not. You were not late for supper because you got late from work, supper happened at a particular time and that was that.

Also, one tends to look backward through rose-tinted spectacles. In fact the 1920s and 30s in Austria were an appalling period of widespread poverty, civil strife, and the ever present threat from the totalitarian super-power next door, at least for the last five years. But there'd been two bouts of virtual civil war before then, but one didn't realise how awful it had been, and of course the world crisis sparked by 1929 on Wall Street, reverberated, certainly in Central Europe.

Hilary Smith: So even as a young boy you can remember...?

Frank Steiner: Yes, I can remember quite specifically that in 1929, when we went down from two maids to one, the one remaining maid was paid exactly half of what the wages had been before. Public finances

were in such a state that even senior civil servants were paid fortnightly because there wasn't enough money to pay them monthly.

Hilary Smith: This was an amazing crisis.

Frank Steiner: Yes.

Hilary Smith: How long did this go on for?

Frank Steiner: Well, it started in 1929, and things really didn't recover all that much until the mid 1930s, by which of course, the elephant in the bedroom was Hitler's coming to power and the uncertainty that that created. And of course hindsight is a wonderful thing where the wilfully blind were thinking that things would return to normal.

Hilary Smith: Yes. And this must have been very hard for people. And you mentioned to me before that your family: your mother and father's parents came from all over Europe originally, and settled in Vienna and then this happened.

Frank Steiner: All the grandparents and the great-grandparents [did actually live not all that much out 0:03:21]. The last member of the family, who lives in Austria now aged 90, lives in a village in Eastern Austria near the Hungarian border, less than a hundred miles from the

village from which the Steiner family originally sprang, at least as far as we can trace it backwards to 1757.

Hilary Smith: Goodness! So it's kind of gone full circle, settling back there.

Frank Steiner: Yes.

Hilary Smith: Were your parents very strict with you as a child?

Frank Steiner: By today's standards, certainly.

Hilary Smith: Yes, you talked about there being a regimen anyway.

Frank Steiner: Well, not only that. My father had lost a wife and child before the First World War in one go, and it rendered him absolutely ultra cautious that nothing should [be happening to the children 0:04:24]. So we weren't allowed to join the Scouts when we were fourteen because that could be dangerous; we were walked to school at later ages than many other children, and this wasn't helped by the fact that my mother had lost her only sister in a mountaineering accident when she was twenty, so she was a bit like that.

Hilary Smith: Yes. So both of them were very sensitive to....

Frank Steiner: To danger, yes, to perceived danger.

Hilary Smith: Yes. And how was school at that time?

Frank Steiner: Traditional.

Hilary Smith: Traditional: the Classics?

Frank Steiner: In my case, yes. My mother had been, before the First World War, to the only Girl's grammar school which did Classics only; most of the Girl's schools had a more mixed [curriculum 0:05:17]. Added to her natural gift for languages, it helped that many years after leaving school she could coach us in Latin and Greek in a way that few other parents could.

Hilary Smith: Yes, absolutely. That must have come in very handy...

Frank Steiner: It was.

Hilary Smith: ...because you'd studied Latin yourself.

Frank Steiner: Yes, I finished up doing Latin at Banbury Grammar School.

Hilary Smith: Oh did you? Teaching it?

Frank Steiner: No.

Hilary Smith: Oh yes, [so following up 0:05:47].

Frank Steiner: Mrs Hubbard, who had been a senior classics mistress at Banbury Grammar School for [over 0:05:56] thirty years, known all over Banbury as Miss Ashbridge, a woman who taught five generations of Banbury's shopkeepers, when she was forced into retirement against her will, when the school had gone comprehensive and they wanted to get rid of her and the Latin in the curriculum, organised a kind of workshop for adult and mature students, and for those students at Banbury school who wanted to take Latin for GCSE or A level when the school no longer taught it. So, Jean Hubbard organised this, and for five years I sat at her feet as an allegedly mature student in Banbury School.

Hilary Smith: Did you find that an exhilarating experience, taking up Latin after all that time?

Frank Steiner: Yes. The distressing thing is, that it's gone so quickly again. I mean, I know more Latin now than most educated teenagers, but...

Hilary Smith: Yes. It's the base of so much of our current language, but it's not the same as actual sentences in Latin.

Frank Steiner: Now, I went into the Bodleian Library the other day, for which I have a 'Reader's Ticket' which sadly I use very little, and I got out because it's a very – without waiting, on an open-shelf access...

Hilary Smith: Oh yes.

Frank Steiner: There were some Lib translations of the Classics, of Latin Classics, and I was horrified to find how much I needed the crib, which is provided by the Latin. You may not know the Lib Translations, they've got all the Latin Classics on one page; it's English, and one page is the original Latin text. And in the school books the Latin text has been vulgarised to make it simpler. However...

Hilary Smith: I see; a mixed story.

Frank Steiner: My contempt for the mentally lazy youth knows no bounds but I can't say that [while we're in here 0:08:25].

Hilary Smith: [Laughter] Well, you have just said it. Let it stand, because you're up to sterner standards.

Frank Steiner: My father had been, by the standards of his day, a useless schoolboy. He failed one year's [thing 0:08:44] and had to spend nine years doing the eight year curriculum of Viennese Classic at Grammar School; but even so, thirty years after leaving school he was better briefed in some subjects than we were, and we were relatively good.

Hilary Smith: Yes, it's interesting about the [changes 0:09:03].

Frank Steiner: That is not necessarily always desirable because in the Victorian schools of the day, which is what it was, my father went to school in 1897, the moral pressure must have been immense. I mean, I my father still had nightmares forty years later.

Hilary Smith: Goodness, because of the pressure put on him?

Frank Steiner: Yes.

Hilary Smith: So children lived in fear?

Frank Steiner: Exactly.

Hilary Smith: And we believe that fear doesn't help you learn at all.

Frank Steiner: Well, certainly I think the achievement was there, but was produced, I suspect, by terror which in our days has disappeared, and of course, [if we look at others 0:09:53] compared with now, our noses were kept to the grindstone.

Hilary Smith: Definitely.

Frank Steiner: But the other thing is, of course, where English secondary education, which can be very good, particularly if it's specialised, differs from Continental or Central European, is – it's less broad based and with my much quoted father leaving school in 1897, had to take the equivalent of A Levels in, I think, twelve subjects. And for instance, English History teaching produces great specialists, but it does not produce educated people, because people specialise in a particular period but they don't know the background. We, at the Grammar school in Vienna, had in our textbook – was actually a book written by the one of the Masters, curiously enough, because it's called 'Kleine der Welt Geschichte': 'A Concise History of the World', and that was the textbook for thirteen to fourteen year olds. So you didn't specialise on a period, you specialised on History [for History 0:11:12].

Hilary Smith: Yes, which do you think is better; do you have a view on that?

Frank Steiner: I'm full of prejudice. Anything that has happened in education since the year 1850 is to be deplored.

Hilary Smith: [Laughter] Yes, okay.

Frank Steiner: And that of course applies to music and painting as well.

Hilary Smith: Yes, of course it does, yes.

Did you have a chance – I remember we talked about being from Vienna, you love music; do you remember that being part of your life while you were living in Vienna?

Frank Steiner: Yes, it was taken for granted that you'd learn an instrument. And many a time had I failed to do my violin practice and eventually I was allowed to give it up because I was no good at it. The positive thing is, and my English-in-laws are always surprised at this, I was taken to see 'Carmen' at the Vienna State Opera at the age of eight and 'Lohengrin' at the age of nine. Very few English schoolchildren would be taken to an opera as a matter of course.

Hilary Smith: Exactly.

Frank Steiner: It's interesting that my mother took us because she was almost monstrously unmusical.

Hilary Smith: And she wanted you to be different?

Frank Steiner: Well, I suppose so. It was a hilarious thing when I was – we had piano lessons from a very gifted aunt, who was a professional music teacher, and I was struggling with practice at some time and I couldn't do it, and my mother was looking at this and then she said, "Well, this is what..." and she sat down and played it. And I said, "But I didn't realise that you played the piano!" and she said, "Well I don't." She said, "I was so unhappy that for seven years running, my first birthday wish was to be able to be allowed to give up my piano lessons." And she said, "After seven years I was a butt," she said, "You can't go through seven years of piano without being able to read music." And so she played this thing as it should be played, having not touched a piano for thirty years and having hated every piano lesson.

Hilary Smith: I think that's very interesting isn't it? That her body knew how to do it anyway, whatever, but her attitude was....

Frank Steiner: Her father – I mean her mother's family were very musical indeed. One of her grandfathers, my great grandfather whom I knew well because he lived to be ninety-four, had been, though an amateur of course, a lyric tenor and so was one of his two sons, and I think my grandmother was very musical. But my mother's father, my paternal grandfather, it was said of him that he was as musical as a dining room table. It was also said of him that he wouldn't

recognise the National Anthem if it was played next door to him; so no wonder my mother had a mixed heritage.

But I mean, actually, it's like in Italy, I mean, opera in this country is a bit of an elite sport; in Vienna it isn't.

Rosemary, my late sainted wife, was very surprised when on her first visit to Vienna, I took her to a shop where we had something to buy, which I had used regularly before. I introduced my new wife to [Franche DeFee 0:15:06], the manageress of the shop, and she said, "Is this Madam's first visit to Vienna?" and we both said, "Yes," and she said, "Well you must tell her that there's a new production of 'so and so'."

Hilary Smith: Oh, so that's the first thing, her welcome to the city, to go to the opera, yes.

So, you were brought up there, enjoying music and so on, but as you hinted, the political environment was getting more and more pressurised?

Frank Steiner: Yes, though mercifully we weren't aware of it, except that the Nazis started sabotaging in the early 30s with a thing called ['Ein Papier Bulla' 0:15:52], 'A Paper Bomb' which explodes with [mould and steam 0:15:56] and can smash windows, but it isn't otherwise – not dangerous. But my mother would worry endlessly [?? 0:16:04] after work at the – and of course, there had been, as I say, two bouts of civil strife. In 1934 there was the fighting between the State Forces and alleged [Socialist 0:16:02] rebels, who in fact were – it's a sad story that it ever came to that, but it's the first time I've heard a gun

fired in anger because our [feeling 0:16:45] was used to reduce the blockhouses [in which 0:16:48] – and in the same year, in the summer there was a Nazi attempt at a putsch, in the course of which the Prime Minister was murdered. And we were in the country, and there was fighting very near us where we were staying, and a group of unarmed volunteer police cadets, or something, were ambushed, and the bus in which they travelled was shot to bits. So at the age of twelve I saw my first casualties.

Presenter: And we'll rejoin Hilary Smith talking to Frank Steiner in the next episode of Deddington Discussions.

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