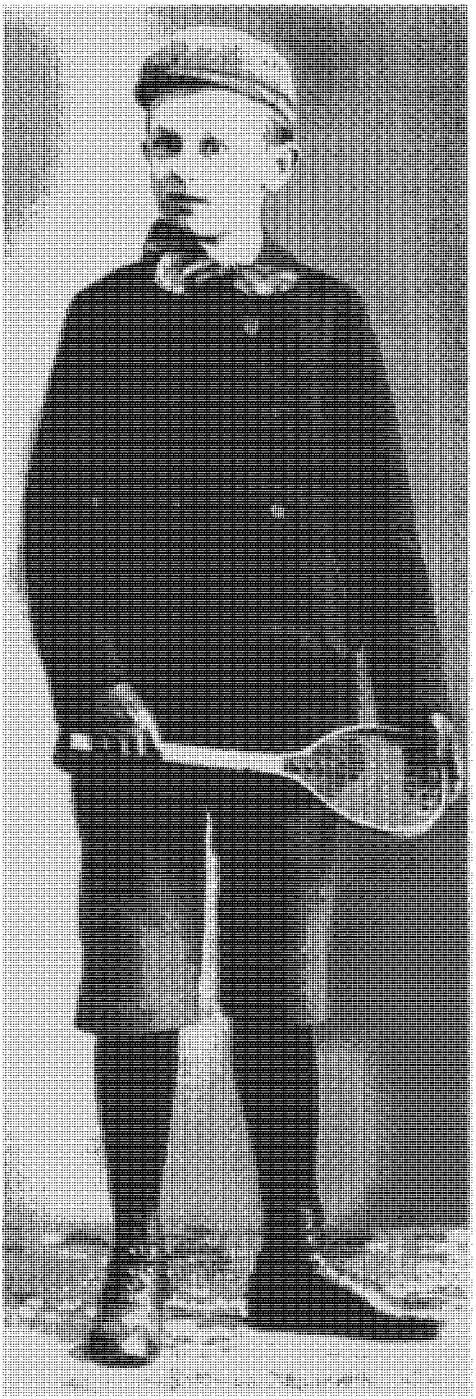
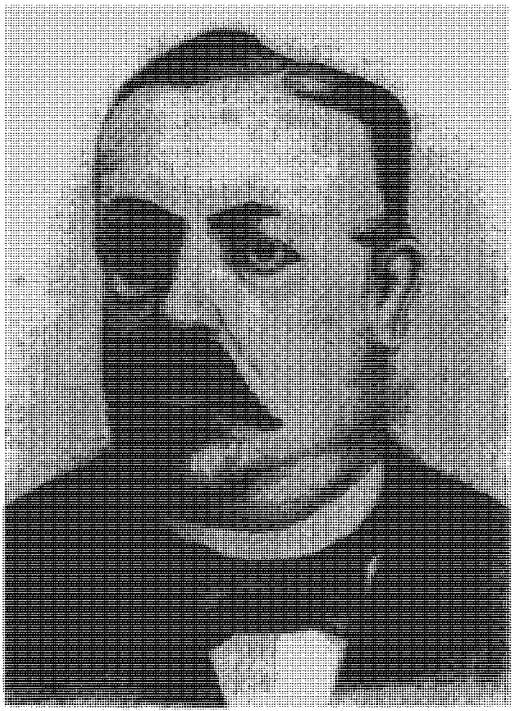
BEGINNINGS: POMERANIA

I only vaguely remember my father. He died when I was six. At that time we were living in Stolp, a small town in Pomerania. My father was steward and a working brother at the Freemasonic Lodge. The beautiful Lodge building was opposite the high school on a nice, quiet street leading to a large garden with tennis courts; in a second, less cultivated garden there was a mysterious, round pond full of tadpoles and frogs. Twilight tales ghosted that pond; it was said to be bottomless, a scary, endless hole overgrown with weeds and a paradise for mosquitoes. Only later, after it was filled in, did it become evident that it had been quite a modest little pond; and then all the hobgoblins and will-o'-the-wisps that our imagination had bestowed upon it disappeared.

Upstairs in my father's quarters, it was nice and cozy. I used to spend much time on the big rug by the warm, glowing stove, buried in sensational illustrations of the Russo-Japanese War or the German colonial troops fighting bravely in the African bush. Once a week the book club delivered the *Gartenlaube, Über Land und Meer, Fliegende* and *Meggendorfer Blätter,* and the *Deutsche Romanzeitung.* But nothing made me as happy as the *Leipziger Illustrierte,* which brought those wonderful drawings from the current theater of war—and there always was a war going on in far-away places.

Those pictures kindled my imagination. My father also sketched a bit on the large sheets of paper that covered the square table where cardplayers marked their scores at night. I remember sitting on his lap and watching the images take shape while he drew—little men, horses, soldiers—he had served in the Franco-Prussian War in the seventies, and had been at the Siege of Paris.





Young George Grosz and His Parents

My father had dark hair and blue eyes. He wore a mustache and a little tuft of hair on his chin that had been in vogue in the eighties and had not yet gone out of style. I liked being close to him and watching him manipulate the bottles and glasses. He was in charge of setting up the bar at the Lodge for the evening; I loved the bottles' different shapes and labels and the colorful pictures on the cigar boxes which I may occasionally have tried to copy.

A young noblewoman once came to paint on our garden porch. She only copied—it was a still life of peaches and plums—but I was enchanted. The way she rendered the melting, misty blue plums seemed to me the highest art, even if copied. I had no idea yet of becoming a painter, but how I would have loved to do something like that. I liked the idea of conjuring up something that looked like nature. This pleasure of straight, plain imitation has never left me. Sitting before a still life, time and again I see myself on that porch watching peaches and plums appear under the clever hands of that aristocratic young lady.

That was the first time I had seen real oil painting, with real tubes of paint. A great experience. I smell the spice of lavender and turpentine that hovered around her activity, every time I think of it. My greatest wish ever after was to own that sort of paint box and use it in the same way. The very tubes with their colored labels, the large one of white next to the small fat one of rose madder, the oval palette that I was once allowed to hold in my hand just like a real painter, the long brushes of hair and bristle, the knives and little bottles of resin: it was such a treat to look at all those things and see how they were used.

My father must have had a mischievous vein. Once on a moonless night he terrified my sister Martha and her friends by hanging a nightshirt on a rake and making it bob up and down. They squealed with fright, believing it to be one of those many ghosts that are said to inhabit Masonic Lodges. This building that the Masons used for their secret rites had a bad reputation anyhow. The neighborhood boys with whom I talked once in a while told me eerie things about the rooms upstairs: not of ghosts exactly, but there was supposedly a coffin there with the skeleton of the late Master of the Lodge. And somehow every Mason knew exactly when he was to die, not only the date, but even the hour....

That fed and directed my imagination. Except for a few social rooms, the upper floor was out of bounds, but I decided to explore that business about the coffin. So one day, when my father was going upstairs, I crept in stocking feet after him—only to be booted

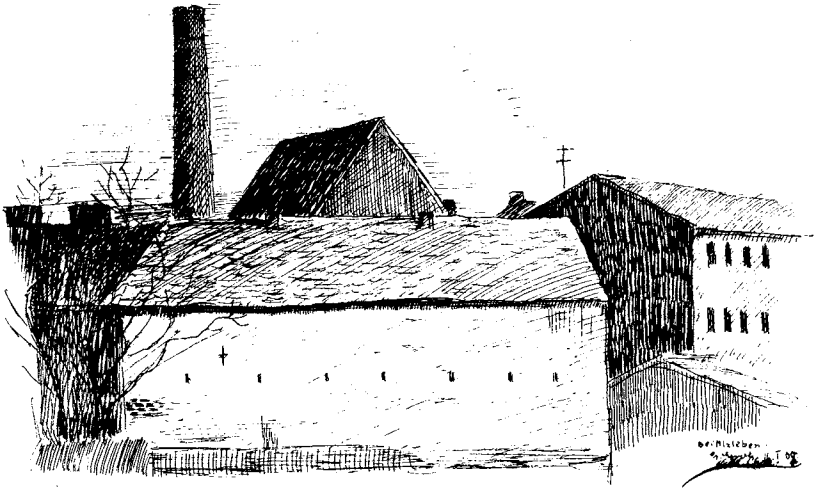
unceremoniously to the bottom steps of the first floor.

I used to enjoy spending time in the attic. In the middle of it was an opening under which a huge chandelier was suspended. You could look down into the large ballroom from there; the height made you a bit dizzy, and everything looked small, crooked, and funnily distorted: my God, what if the whole chandelier should fall down...! The charity parties were fun too, with all the pretty booths in the garden, the elegant ladies, and the fireworks late at night. The Lodge garden was great anyhow, modeled after the great parks of another century, harking back to an earlier great tradition. I loved the statues—cheap castings of Greek works—which peeked out of the foliage. We buried our canary there. I used to pick up paradise apples lying on the ground and collect them in a cigar box. Others were made into apple jelly. Sometimes when there were minor floods, my friend Seifert and I would build toy boats from bark and sail them around the harbors, islands and continents we constructed. I once built a real tent out of twigs, grass and moss, and would lie there for hours. The sun was shining, I was surrounded by greenish-golden twilight, and dreamed of adventures like those in my favorite books; I would, of course, be as infinitely good and noble as those heroes.

Today I sometimes yearn for that—how shall I say it—long-lost garden of my childhood. Life was without a care. Every summer we went to Stolpmünde, a Baltic beach an hour and three quarters away. My childhood was free of worries.

After my father's death, we moved to Berlin, where we lived on Wöhlerstrasse near Wedding, opposite a coal depot. I still have visions of those black crossed hammers, the coal trade's traditional sign, as an unhappy memento. Behind the fireproof wall was the typical city view of concrete and stone, and I longed for Stolp's woods, meadows, river and hay-scented summer days. My mother and aunt sewed blouses for a wholesale house, a job that was easy to get at the time: much work for low pay. Even though living was cheap and there was enough for our direst needs, now, there were always money worries.

Once in a while my big sister would come to see us and take me to a pastry shop or to Aschinger's. That popular pub near the Oranienburger Gate with its crystal and mirrored hot dog counter and the waitress in blue-and-white checks at the center seemed a fairy palace to me. Not far from us, on Chausseestrasse, were the barracks of the celebrated infantry regiment that would occasionally march by with drums beating and trumpets sounding. Because



I had known only hussars in Stolp, I enjoyed these different uniforms. We lived in a really proletarian neighborhood, but of course I wasn't aware of that at the time. The street teemed with life and was full of children; the baker's bread smelled wonderful, and a store with its window of trashy literature gave me lascivious shivers. Actually I have never quite overcome the peculiar shudder such lurid title pages give me.

I made friends with a bright neighbor who was my age and a prolific reader and who took me to the public library. Franz Kügler, that long-lost friend, was already talking about Haeckel and his then popular *The Riddle of the Universe.* He was excited about science and had a subscription to *Neue Universum.* I was greatly stimulated by all that and it somehow improved me—that is, made me full of good intentions—and filled me with awe for the inventiveness and ingenuity of man. Franz was also somewhat of a stargazer. There was something about him that attracted me and pulled me out of narrowness and confinement. Our unconscious dreams seemed closer to fulfillment when our thoughts, inspired by popular articles and drawings, soared far away, high above the coal depots, the teeming streets and crowded apartments of Berlin.

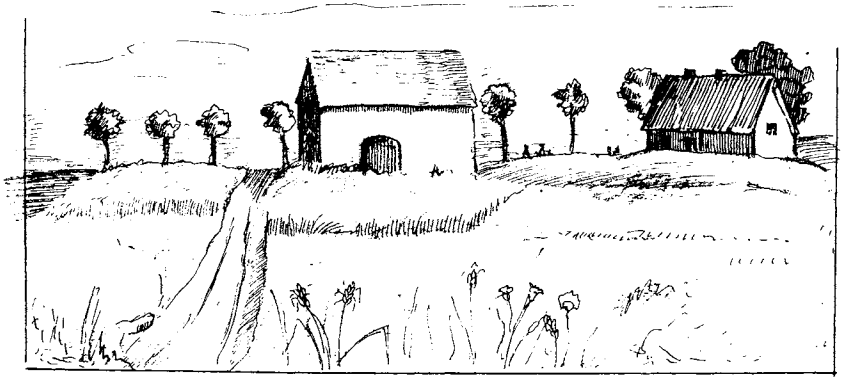
One day our luck changed. We moved back to Pomerania. Bedded on our trunks, dozing through the night, we travelled back to my beloved Stolp. Certain connections and recommendations enabled my mother to become manager of the hussar regiment's officers' club. The urgent, pressing cares concerning our daily bread came to an end.

Looking back at my youth in Stolp, I can say that, in the main, it was a happy time. I grew up in undisturbed freedom, as my mother

was busy all day with housekeeping chores, and was training new help besides. What a great time my friends and I had! We roamed the nearby woods and the banks of the river that flowed by our house. In those days there was still a huge meadow where people bleached their sheets. That was where we played cowboys and Indians. We shot each other with air rifles and homemade catapults. In one of the mighty, ancient willows we built a regular hunting box from where we terrorized the servant girls when they came to hang up the wash. Like real robber knights or Indians. The wet sheets, and particularly long underwear, gave us all the stimulus we needed. I still keenly remember the infamous battle against those underpants; it cost me my beloved gun, given to me by the club sergeant, Arndt.

We Indians and pirates were the terror of a small neighboring estate whose administrator with the peculiar name of Butterbrodt was our mortal enemy. We were often on the war path against him and his aides, and more than once planned a bloody death for him which included such niceties as hanging him head-first over an ant heap. So vivid was our imagination that we actually erected a stake for him. Every time Butterbrodt came along in his donkey cart he was the target for our verbal barrage delivered from behind the trees: Butterbread, freshly spread! He was very cruel to the donkey, an animal rarely used in Stolp, and as we were very fond of the beast, we felt we were exercising justice against its tormentor.

The Stolpe surfaces again before me, the little river that flowed past our house. In our youthful imagination it was the Hudson or the St. Lawrence, or even "Lake Glimmerglass." Sometimes timber was floated downstream to the small Baltic port, and we would ride along on it barefoot for miles. The logs then became



planks on one of the schooners of a Marryat buccaneer, and our catapult shots whizzed into the water. Occasionally we ourselves fell in. During one of those adventures I got under a slippery log and would certainly have drowned, had I not at the last minute noticed an opening above me. I had just learned to open my eyes underwater; that saved my life. I was plenty scared though, and on top of that got a sound thrashing when I arrived home all drenched and exhausted.

Woods, meadows and turbid nights on the moor come to mind again, puddles and small ponds. We would go out with specimen boxes and glass jars to catch all sorts of salamanders and lizards for our private zoos. Flowers and plants were carefully pressed and cataloged—only to rot later in the attic? No, not quite.

Our mentor for all this was our popular science teacher Herr Marquardt, who made us laugh. With him we used to wander through the countryside, his old-fashioned cape floating like a banner over our forays into the world of frogs, insects, bugs and butterflies. Schooled in the tradition of Humboldt, he aimed indefatigably to imbue his pupils with that great spirit of humanism.

I remember brooks bordered by willows where we caught river lampreys. At home they were pickled in vinegar and olive oil; they tasted wonderfully sour, and had no bones. It took patience to catch alburns, those hand-sized fish in the Stolpe. You had to sit for ages with your rod and worms before they would bite; but when pan fried, they tasted better than any of the big ones bought in the market.

And those marvelous, hot, innocent summer days when we were allowed to go and help with the haymaking, and then sank dead tired into those gingham feather beds to sleep dreamlessly till the rooster crowed at five in the morning. The bushes were laden with gooseberries and red currants, which we would pick lying on our backs and roll into our mouths until our tummies swelled up like

balloons. Utopia! You had to go past the saw mill to get there; the fresh boards smelled pleasantly resinous, and the saw buzzed like a big bumble bee on those cloudless July holidays.

We would cut rushes, strap them into two bundles to use as life preservers, and teach ourselves to swim, jumping in and out of the Stolpe like frogs. No need for instructors or bathing trunks. Every Saturday night we were scrubbed with soap in a tin tub brought into the big room next to the kitchen, with water heated on the stove. My cousin and I bathed together to save water and fuel and that usually ended in a small flood—to the distress of my aunt, who intervened with a snapping wet rag—and tears and water mingled on the floor.

It is good to grow up in a small town, half in the country. Nature is everywhere close at hand. Fields and meadows started right behind the houses and it seemed as though the wind blew fresh and strong straight from the sea. Just right for a growing boy. Concrete, asphalt and stone had not yet insulated you from the earth beneath. My love for grasses, for the constant motion of the wind-swept dunes, and even my concentration upon seemingly small things may stem from these childhood impressions. But even then, the mighty city of mechanical toys and machines began to appear on the horizon like a mythical, adventure-laden piece of reality.

My cousin wanted to be a commercial artist (he had an exquisite talent for drawing and painting and became quite well known in Berlin later on). He was apprenticed to a decorator, where he started to work his way up from the rank of house painter. Through him I met his boss, Herr Grot, who lived next door. He had studied in Munich at the well-known school of Wilhelm von Debschitz and with his big, black beret and blond Vandyke beard, he behaved like a real artist; he even owned an original drawing by Albert Weisgerber, whom he greatly admired and frequently mentioned. (Weisgerber was then drawing caricatures for the Munich magazine *Jugend* in a distinctive, sparse black-and-white style. He was later known as one of the few great new talents; his painting leaned toward the younger French, especially Cézanne. Unfortunately, he was killed in the early weeks of World War I.)

This interior decorator-painter Grot saw a sort of picture story I had done. I had painted a scientist who had an adventure with a whale. He had been swallowed, and after all sorts of comic happenings—or so they seemed to me—he came out at the back end. I admit that it was rather secondhand, but not copied; I had never heard of the Swiss, Töpffer. I did know Wilhelm Busch, loved him dearly, and had therefore made up verses that were properly rhymed, neatly written into my school notebook and colored with crayon.

As it happened, Herr Grot found me sufficiently talented to participate in the Sunday morning drawing course that my father had also mentioned. My artistic appreciation was of course not very well developed. My hunger for images, nourished as it was merely by those family magazines, meant that my artistic appreciation was not well developed at all; it was usually sensational impact rather than artistic value that attracted me. Now this was different, and new. Grot's little collection consisted mainly of art pages from *Jugend* and such. His folders astonished me: it was all completely new. Grot was also the first person to direct me to God's natural world, for which I remain eternally grateful. He often went out himself on free days and did landscapes, mostly in tempera.

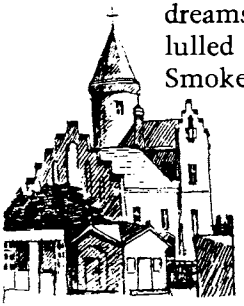
I must add that this decorator still maintained a tiny bit of a great tradition. It was still customary to paint the hallways of the better houses with flowers or landscapes with swimming swans. A tiny piece of the tradition of Tiepolo remained. And, honest artisan that he was, Grot preferred to obtain his models for decoration straight from nature rather than the customary pattern book. That

was good, of course, and he was a man one could learn from. In Grot's own description, he was a "linear stylist."

This term is meant to explain *Jugendstil*, art nouveau, best described as a mixture of water lily stalks and Japan. All lines swing, bend, curve and recurve, deviate and rejoin in half-rounds until the ornament is completed. A veritable spaghetti-orgy of lines. Marbling was used to produce a spiral motif caused by putting oil on water. Kolo Moser in Vienna was the originator of this "style." But I knew neither that, nor a lot of other things, when I was taking Grot's drawing course.

Based on the famous modern Munich teachers, Debschitz and Kunowski, Grot had figured out a system that, to me at least, seemed utterly distorted and complicated. Using the head of a live model, usually an old man, one was supposed to discover "form." Discovering the form meant to circle around the paper with not too soft a pencil, round and round like a bicyclist gone crazy, until eventually out of all the circles and ovals there emerged a sort of expression of nature. That maneuver was supposed to be the "search" for form. The actual purpose—possibly a long-forgotten baroque tradition by Bellangé, some misunderstood system of engraving or whatever—was never clarified. I had naturally thought one should begin with one single line if possible, but there this peculiarly circuitous route was chosen; I accepted it all in silent devotion and without contradiction, raced my pencil round in circles like a madman, and was happy when Mr. Grot praised me.

Besides myself, there were only five others in the course: an artistically inclined officer (in civilian clothes, of course), a forest ranger, a youngish lady and an elderly one, and my cousin. Outside of the class, I went my own way and looked for my own models. One of my favorites, for example, was the famous and infamous Eduard Grützner, whose art book I had received for Christmas. I never got tired of gazing at his pictures of monks and of drinking scenes. At night, with snowflakes falling soothingly outside and the regimental band playing a cakewalk to cheer the officers upstairs, I would often sit in the small front room and copy a Grützner picture with a hard, well-sharpened pencil by the light of the oil lamp. I would sit and sit, hearing nothing, until the stupid lamp started to flicker before going out. All the way into my dreams I still had my hard pencil and was drawing feasting monks, lulled by Abe Holzmann's then popular cakewalk, "Smoky Smokes."



Then again I would design daring, free compositions, for I also loved the historical painters, and the books were always full of mighty, armored military pictures. My free compositions were small, but maybe...maybe some day I too would paint with giant brushes and buckets full of paint onto huge sheets of canvas? Thoughts like that made me dedicated, mellow and satisfied. Damnation, to be that sort of a painter, that was really something. I would be overcome by the happiness of creating, in a completely youthful and innocent way. Possibly at the same time my friend, Heini Blume, was dreaming of an expedition up the Nile, surrounded by crocodiles and Muslims—a brave Livingstone....

Mostly I drew pictures of knights with romantic castles and drawbridges high in the background. I drew horses and soldiers in antiquated uniforms by their camp fires; also romantic itinerant journeymen taking leave of the mill down in the valley by the forest's edge. The soldier-scenes stemmed mostly from upstairs in the officers' casino where there were hundreds of water colors, large and small, of men in uniform or simply paintings of uniforms themselves. There were oils there too, immortalizing the military feats of the Blücher Hussars; I remembered a cavalry attack by C. Röchling for a long time. During the Russo-Japanese War, of course, I drew battles with lots of rows of little soldiers, as well as the Port Arthur naval battle with its beautiful spray from crashing shellfire.

An indelible impression was made on me by the horror shows at country fairs. They always had a stall with two galleries and peep holes through which you could look at pictures, cleverly lighted by lamps from the right and left. Sometimes real objects, strategically placed, would lend the picture greater reality, so that it seemed as though you were actually stepping into it. The illusion of perspec-