

Claude - In His Own Words

It all started when I was born. Mother, living at that time an agreeable life in a little country town in Southern Germany, felt all of a sudden that it was high time, and was forced to rouse Mr. Hartmann, the chauffeur, in the middle of the night. In the early morning they raced towards the next hospital, located in another little town about twenty miles away. My poor mother's hair must have turned grey during that fateful trip, especially at the moment "when Mr. Hartmann over-ran a rabbit and insisted, despite the extreme emergency, on stopping, in order to pick up that piece of precious meat. It was not much later than two A.M. when I finally opened my eyes in a world then new to me. Obviously dissatisfied with my surroundings, I started out with a healthy yelp, screaming my bitter way through the first four years of my life.

It was at five when I first discovered my ability to cause trouble. My friend, the son of some petty county official, and I were pretty well known, and I dare say feared, among the more respect-able Citizens of our town. We delighted, for instance, in studying the psychological effect on people on whose head a little stone dropped from the second-story window. We liked to place flower-pots on top of a staircase and then hide to see what would happen when somebody opened the door on the top floor. Once I painfully raised a horde of tadpoles in my own bedroom (need I mention that my mother was delighted?), only to pour them afterwards into the desk of my teacher. However, when I played "wood-cutter" one afternoon and kindled a little fire in our attic, my parents thought it was high time Vto send me to some school where my talents would be guided into the right channels.

So, shortly after my tenth birthday I had to say good-bye to my beloved little home town, and for two days I travelled North. First the train carried us over the green, wooded hills of the Thueringer Forest. The adventure of travel was then new to me, and I delighted in the lovely scenery, the jolly red brick houses and the grazing cattle flashing past us. My first night in a train was not less exciting, but sleepiness overpowered me and I did not awake until we glided rapidly through the flat, endless prairies of Ostfriesland. For hours there was nothing else to see but the green pastures of that famous Ostfriesland cattle, only interrupted once in a while by very straight irrigation channels filled with brown muddy water. Finally the train stopped at the big sea — the North Sea, — but this was not the end of my journey. Together with many other boys and girls who

had accumulated at each intersection as the express rushed towards the coast, I boarded a little, chummy steamer which took us in four hours across the calm, silent “Wattenmeer” to the Island of Juist.

Juist was a very small island consisting of “nothing else but rolling dunes, grass, a few huts owned by poor fishermen, and the school. Juist was quite an unusual school. It belonged to a group of educational institutions which were new and widely criticized in Germany at that time. “Free Schools” they were called, with the aim to prove the advantages of co-education as well as to bring out the individualism of the student and to educate him in such a fashion that he would be self-reliant, self-confident and independent at a very early stage of his youth. The whole school was managed mostly by the students themselves, whereas the teachers stood at our side to teach in the first place, but also to help and guide us through the various difficult stages of boyhood.

Although I was desperately unhappy and homesick the first few months, I eventually got to like the system under which; we lived so much that I am still influenced by it to the present date. It was a rough life on this lonely island far out in the North Sea. In winter, boat service was often discontinued, and only the most necessary victuals, medical supplies and mail were dropped and picked up by the daily plane. There were lonely winter nights, when the sharp north wind tore around the corners of our barracks. But especially those nights were full of spiritual richness and close companionship. We used to sit around the fireplace, each one working on some sort of handiwork, while somebody told a tale full of ship-wrecks and souls of haunting sailors. As it was up to the students to keep the buildings and property of the school intact, we had only four classes a day, whereas the afternoon was spent in painting fences, paving a decayed corner of the court or planting ‘helm’, a peculiar weed which keeps the sand from flying away. Life on Juist was almost a continuous fight against the sea, which year after year seemed to take a bigger share of the already narrow strip of land.

Three glorious years I spent on this little island in the North Sea. Three unforgettable years of work, study and play. Then all of a sudden, on the 1st of March, 1933, a black storm cloud appeared on the horizon. Hitler, who for years had threatened to overthrow the government, to destroy everything we held dear in order to mold a horde of grim fighters out of a peace-loving nation, finally succeeded in coming to power. From then on, things went from bad to worse. Little by little our small community on Juist fell apart,—cracked first here, than there until it finally split into two hostile camps. It was a day of bitter disappointment for many of us, as we had always thought of Juist as a fort-ress, an impregnable Maginot

line against the forces of the outside world. It was so remote from that world of politicians, bureaucrats, small business-men. But today I realize that the end had to come, just as the United States of America was bound to get involved in the present struggle. The disaster could not have been prevented. Three times a year we packed our packs, streamed down to the landing dock, crossed the blue sea and rushed South-ward, homeward bound. We spread out fanlike, all over Germany, to the South, the West and the East, only to meet and reunite a few weeks afterwards. At the time of Hitler's election many did not come back. Many came back poisoned with ideas of fascism and revolution. At first nothing could be seen. To the outsider, life in school seemed as happy and serene as usual. But in the heart of the student body the seed of hatred and racial persecution was sown. It expanded, multiplied like mushrooms in a green-house. I packed my trunk for the last time at Christmas, 1933, and with the last boat that could get through to the mainland before the island was marooned for the winter, I left, — but not without shedding a tear for my once so beautiful Juist. Life in Germany seemed to become unbearable. Already at that time Hitler was obviously steering towards the present war, and to escape humiliation and suppression I moved on to Switzerland, where I was sent to a very well-known international school.

That was quite a different affair than Juist. After all, now that my energy and my characteristics were directed into the right channels, it was necessary to polish and smooth the coarse surface. In other words, it was high time for me to learn how to behave in Society. These two years of molding my character anew were a pretty tough job for some of those, bearded professors, Doctors and Directors, and more than once they proclaimed me desperately a case who would never be a success in society. Well, this was perfectly all right with me, as I never intended to be a success in that regard and probably never will be one. Anyhow, as the months slipped by, my unhappiness changed to indifference, and in the end after two years of intense study of various subjects in the commercial field, I began to like it pretty well.

But enough was enough, and after two years I thought I was quite capable of judging what I should do and what not. I was tired of the kindergarten methods used by the Institute. During vacation at home I persuaded my mother to let me go to Neuchatel in order to learn French and continue my commercial studies at the Ecole Superieure de Commerce. The family readily agreed, and after spending a lovely Easter vacation in the southern part of Switzerland among palm trees, orange groves and snow-tipped mountain peaks, I travelled all alone to Neuchatel to attend the above mentioned school. Mother, who had prearranged the place

where I should stay and the people with whom I should live, just gave me the address and left me to my fate. During the first hours and days in Neuchatel I hardly knew a word of French, whereas the people I was staying with hardly knew a word of German. As it was I already had considerable difficulties at the station when I tried to find out if that gesticulating lady in that funny dress was somebody from Travelers' Aid, a lady from the Salvation Army, or the person who was supposed to meet me.

Neuchatel was a lovely, little, typical University town, and the means of living of its citizens depended mainly on the students, who streamed there from the farthest corners of the world. Every house seemed to be a boardinghouse or a "Pension", and those that were not, probably were schools. The classes were extremely international, and students of all nationalities sat and studied together. I once had a very old-fashioned teacher, who wore nothing less than a stiff, starched shirt and tails to class. As I was one of the few Germans in his class, he told me time and again in a rather reproving way, that I was not at all like the now so prominent Nazi Youth leader, Hermann Hesse, who had been once upon a time one of his ace students. At that time I was rather dumbfounded whether to consider this statement a compliment or an insult, but now, being considerably older and more enlightened about Nazi Education in general, I am almost sure that I could accept it as a compliment.

In Neuchatel I spent two lovely years. After school there was fortunately neither a Professor nor a Director to prevent me from roaming the countryside, and almost every week-end one could see me hiking up some lonely valley. On other occasions I took my trusty bicycle, cycled to Lausanne, Geneva, or other historic spots to admire all the beauty and to enjoy the peace only to be found in such places.

But time marches on, and the black cloud which had appeared years ago on the blue, endless sky over Juist, caught up with me. This time it loomed blacker and bigger, more sinister and terrible. WAR was plainly written on its greyish face, and sensing disaster, my family again took its little Claudius under its providing wings. This time the trip was considerably farther, and more adventurous than ever. With a touch of tragedy that bit into the heart, I left, never to return again.

It was midnight. The last mail and express packages were hauled on board. All of a sudden the whole deck trembled under the impact of the roar of the gloomy sirens which howled their unmelodious song through the starless, empty night. Slowly the S. S. Manhattan nosed its way out of the harbor, carrying Claude with his hopes and fears toward a new destiny.

Mo-Li's Note: *In early 1938, Claude arrived in Cleveland from Germany. He was sponsored by his grand-Uncle Gus. His wife Pauline treated Claude very badly. Claude was not allowed to enter the house through the front door. Uncle Gus was not permitted to give him a ride in his car and Claude had to walk a few miles to the Cleveland High School to study English.*

Aunt Pauline - Cleveland 1938

She pounced on me like a tiger on its prey, as I entered the kitchen door and tried to ascend the back-stairs unnoticed.

"Where have you been all day and what is the idea of coming home so late? Uncle worried all evening and you know the doctor said he should not get upset on account of his heart. How can you be so ungrateful?"

Thus started a verbal down pour on my unsuspecting head. An outbreak of accumulated rage, envy and hatred which was worse than all those which had filled the previous weeks.

It was obvious that Aunt Pauline enjoyed those scenes. The deeply engraved lines, sloping downward from the corner of her mouth were taut. The flabby, soft flesh of her cheeks did not quiver. Her sharp, mean, mouse-like eyes darted about, taking in everything from my dust-covered boots to my disheveled hair and the pack which hung limply from my shoulders.

"You German refugee you," she sneered, "if you behave like that you can't stay in my home."

A dark figure appeared on the top of the staircase. Looking against the light I perceived the broad shouldered, slightly stooping silhouette of my uncle.

"Pauline," he said, with a strongly noticeable German accent in a voice which was soft and melancholic, "leave the boy alone."

Aunt Pauline quickly turned around.

"Gus," she said patronizingly stern, as if talking to a naughty boy, "you go back to your room, I can handle this."

"You leave the boy alone," my uncle repeated somewhat discourage, but nevertheless turned reluctantly and disappeared in the hallway.

"You see," Aunt Pauline hissed, "you, who ought to be thankful to be in this country, do nothing but aggravate your Uncle."

"But Uncle gave me permission to go on a hike," I retorted, though knowing that this statement would provoke another wave of abuse.

"We don't want any tramps in our family, and if you want to gallivant about like a bum we don't want you."

I was furious. The last words cut into my consciousness like a whip, like the slogans which used to greet me in big red letters on a white flag which was stretched across the street on the entrance of many a German town and which read: "Jews are not wanted in this community."

"If that is the case," I yelled, now trembling with rage, fright and humiliation, all of which had accumulated within myself during the last bitter months, "I might as well go right now," And almost on the verge of tears I pushed past my Aunt and ran upstairs.

"I wish you would," I heard the shrill voice of Aunt Pauline calling after me, as I slammed the door of my room.

'I wish you would, I wish you would,' it echoed and heartbroken, homesick and miserable I threw myself on the bed and cried.

Those were bitter tears that wet my pillow. Tears of utter misery and loneliness. Tears of rage and impotence. Tears of stubbornness and humiliation. Never had anybody treated me like that and I swore that night that I'd never give a chance to anyone to do it again.

It was late when I calmed myself, and still with an occasional hiccuping sob but full of resolution, I pulled my battered suitcase out of the closet and began to pack my few belongings.

Only two months hence had I spent a vacation in St. Mortiz, Switzerland's foremost winter resort, hopefully waiting for my visa to the United States, the land of opportunity, freedom and wealth. Wistfully I remembered the long, kind letters of my Uncle, giving me hope, courage and a sense of security:

'Dear Claude' he wrote, 'now it is only a few weeks until you will join us in Cleveland. Although there is a depression over here, there always is an opportunity for those who wish to make good. Above all, you will have the rights to the four freedoms which we cherish and which you have lost in the Old Country.'

The prospect of leaving Europe where persecution of race, hatred and the threat of war became ever more eminent every day, almost made me glad to forfeit the sheltered atmosphere of my home, in exchange for a life of freedom though uncertainty. A life in the country where all men were equal, with equal opportunity for all.

I remembered too that my Uncle was one of the most influential people in town, and though cautiously, a ray of hope and optimism tinged his letters.

'...Things are still very bad here. Last week a strike crippled our plant for a few days until we came to terms with the Union. Unions are detrimental to business in this country, but don't worry, once you get here, I will find a way to take care of you.' 'Take care of me' I reflected bitterly, he could

not even give me a home, though he lived in a huge house alone with his wife, Margot the maid and Julius, the colored chauffeur who had his den in a little cubicle above the garage.

My thoughts wandered back. I saw the SS Manhattan anchored on a grimy pier in Le Havre. It was close to midnight. Most passengers had gone to bed long ago. None of them were on deck. Only a few stevedores stood smoking in little groups on the wharf underneath the bright, naked arc lights. Their voices came and went like the surf on the beach. I could not understand their word, nor did I care what they were saying. Clouds of cigarette smoke hovered over the little groups.

There was another person on the pier. A little woman - dressed in a tidy blue-gray suit, a neat blouse with ruffles in the front. She wore a blue-gray felt hat which covered her already graying hair and which matched the suit. She stood by herself, away from the talking groups. It was my mother. She looked so forlorn insignificant in contrast to the gigantic coils of rope partly secured around massive bollards. She looked lost and forlorn compared with the immense black hull of the steamer, which looked dark and ominous above her, already a chasm that could not be bridged between the two worlds.

Occasionally she called and her voice reached me faintly: "Good luck" she cried, "be good," and dabbed her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief that she had pulled out from her sleeve. "Regards to Uncle Gus and Aunt Pauline" she called, "and don't forget to get your board money from the purser." All unimportant things which had been discussed a hundred times before but which were brought up again since there was nothing else you could say.

Then a tremor ran through the ship. The sirens droned three deafening blasts. The groups of stevedores broke into bustling activity, clearing anchor tows and pushing down a canvas covered gangway which had been left there for last minute arrivals. Now all connections with the vessel and the land – the continent of Europe - had been severed, and slowly the SS Manhattan moved away from the pier.

It was a matter of minutes until the ropes, the people, mother, and the arc lights became one blur of light, with lights from neighboring piers moving rapidly in on both sides, soon forming a solid row of lights which grew quickly dimmer and dimmer until they were swallowed by the darkness. The SS Manhattan had set her course, her bow heading West towards the promised land.

The voyage, New York, the Greyhound Bus Lines, Scranton, Syracuse, Buffalo all skipped rapidly through the invisible projector of my mind,

leaving only blurred images on the screen of my memory, until the arrival in Cleveland slowed down the speed of my thoughts.

Aunt Pauline was at the door when a timidly rang the bell.

"Hello Darling," she said in a whining, artificially affectionate voice, pressing her dry, lifeless lips on my cheek. "You should have got out in East Cleveland, dear. Julius has been waiting there for hours," she stated with a note of resentment in her voice, showing both the inconvenience the arrival of a refugee caused her and the annoyance that her chauffeur was frittering away time for which he was paid, at the station.

"How is Uncle Gus," I asked, as I set down my suitcase in the forerom.

"Scht, Scht" Aunt Pauline said gravely, "he is a little indisposed today and I hope you will not cause him excitement.

"I am sorry," I mumbled bashed, "I hope I am not too much trouble.

"Frankly, Uncle really shouldn't be troubled with you," Aunt Pauline said with a wicked smile which I came to know later only too well. "He has so many worries in his business and I warned him that the doctor said that excitement..."

"Pauline, Pauline," my Uncle's voice could be heard suddenly, "did the boy arrive?"

"Yes, Dear," she called, "I'll send him right up."

Then she turned to me: "I hope your shoes are clean; in America there are no servants to clean your shoes. People who cannot afford to have them shined must shine them themselves. "I might as well tell you right now," she continued with a lecturing voice, "Don't let me catch you making dirty finger-marks on my wall paper, and after this, please use always the back-stairs for the Persian rug on this staircase is very valuable and should be walked on too much." During the latter part of this conversation we had walked upstairs and were now entering my Uncle's bedroom.

"Here is our boy," she said beamingly, padding me on the shoulder, "I just told him how happy we are to have him with us."

"And lucky too," my Uncle smiled, pressing my hand warmly. "Let's forget all about Germany. You are now in America and you want to forget. All I want is that you will become a good American."

My Uncle. Whom I had never seen before, was a broad shouldered tall, kindly looking man. As he lay there he had a paradoxical expression of fondness and pride of having brought one of his kind to this great country.

He immediately admonished me in the two things that he considered most important, namely, that a man should never tell a lie or sleep with a woman unless he intended to marry her. As these two points were

somewhat remote from my mind I could readily reassure him, just before I was ushered out of the room by Aunt Pauline who said benevolently: "Come Claude, dear. Uncle Gus must rest now."

Her voice changed again to the brisk cold business tone as she opened a door exclaiming that this was to be my room.

"We keep the shade down all day to prevent the sun from bleaching the wall paper," she said by way of explaining the semi-darkness in which I was to live the following weeks.

"It is our guestroom and I hope you always keep it orderly and clean. Never lie on the bed, and before sitting on a chair you must cover it with a newspaper," she said in a tone that gave me to understand that I was only tolerated in this room.

The weeks that followed this first day were terrible. I was homesick and miserable, a condition aggravated by my aunt's constant nagging and the senile, good-natured, but ineffective protest from my uncle.

"Its women" he would tell me confidentially when we were alone," you must humor them in America, and," by way of explanation and justification, "I am just her guest – I have lost so much money during the depression.

I went to school for a while as I did not have a job and to improve the "very, very poor English" I spoke according to Aunt Pauline's evaluation.

Though our way was the same and we both left the house at eight-fifteen, Uncle Gus was always driven to work by Julius in an immense new Packard, while I was instructed to walk regardless of weather conditions.

"It does the boy good to walk" Aunt Pauline would lecture Uncle Gus, who was trapped occasionally by her when waiting for me with Julius around the corner, "and I do not wish him to ride in my car."

Uncle Gus would then protest by gesticulating silently as if struggling for air, getting a very red face and stamp upstairs into his room, slamming the door in defiance.

After such scenes Aunt Pauline would turn furiously upon me blaming me for breaking up their peaceful home and threatening to throw me out. The only peaceful moments I had during my stay in their hospital home were some hours spent with Margot and Julian in the kitchen, who listened to my tales of woe with sympathy and understanding, for theirs was not an easy lot with Aunt Pauline as their employer.

I had finished packing the few belongings and defiantly snapped the locks of my suitcase. 'Thank God this is over' I thought as I deftly slid out the backdoor to freedom into a cold starry spring night.