

SWEET AND SOUR

WHEN I was twelve, my great ambition was to own a delicatessen. I had shown only erratic enthusiasms for such run-of-the-mill juvenile pleasures as electric trains, chemical laboratories, magician's kits, and loose-leaf postage-stamp albums. (Interchangeable pages were a necessity in 1918, when kingdoms were folding up like badly managed night clubs.) At that time, I lived with my widowed mother and my seven-year-old brother, Max, on the top floor of one of the few four-story stone buildings in Moravská Ostrava, a fast-growing coal-and-steel town in eastern Czechoslovakia. Two of my uncles and their families occupied the second and third floors, and on the ground floor was the family bank, which had been founded by my grandfather and managed since his death by these uncles. Most of the city's substantial businessmen lived thus, above their offices or stores. Our family building was right in the middle of the business district, near the City Hall square, a convenient and fashionable location.

I was never particularly impressed by the capitalistic grandeur of the bank. I liked to watch my cousin Nellie, the cashier, count banknotes with what seemed to me incredible speed, and it was pleasant to dip into the bank's supplies of fresh pencils, erasers, colored envelopes, and paper clips. But on the whole I was delighted when my mother told me, with much excitement, that we had lost the family bank and that the ground floor had been leased to a delicatessen.

In the wake of defeat and postwar depression, many small, privately owned banks were wiped out or, like ours, swallowed up by one of the big trust companies. My mother didn't explain to me how bad the family's financial reverses were. We continued to live in the top-floor apartment of what I still considered our house, and I thought the change from bank to delicatessen on the ground floor would be a definite improvement. The delicatessen would add to my social prestige in school.

There were two delicatessens in the town—the one that was to replace the bank, and another that was owned by the father of Otto, one of my classmates at the local *Gymnasium*. By virtue of his father's smoked eel and paprika bacon, Otto had long maintained a hold upon our classmates that I had tried in vain to break. I owned the only available soccer ball and for this reason had been elected captain of the class team; even so,

Otto's prestige was greater than mine. He had set up a formidable system of barter. We other boys did all his homework—a difficult set of algebra exercises in exchange for a slice of goose liver, a written theme for a small piece of imitation-Emmentaler cheese. With sweet butter, which was a rarity in those days, Otto even managed to bribe the Latin-and-Greek professor, a poor, shrivelled, coughing man who suffered from tuberculosis.

Every day, when I got home from school, during the remodelling of our first floor, I stood and watched the gradual transformation of the bank into a delicatessen. The smoke-stained oak-wood panels came down and the walls were painted white, an audacious color in a town notorious for its dirt and coal dust. The bank's customers' counter, covered with pencil marks and ink spots, disappeared and a shiny, silvery aluminum showcase took its place. The dim chandeliers were replaced by modern lighting fixtures. Where Cousin Nellie's cashier's booth had stood, the workmen installed an enamel-topped table with a newfangled meat-slicing machine. When there was nothing left of the bank but the old, familiar shield displaying our family's name above the entrance, the shield came down and was replaced by a modern, gold-and-black sign that read, "S. Bitter, Lahůdky—Delikatessen."

On the day the store opened, the window displayed what I assumed to be a champagne supper laid out in a *cabinet particulier*. There were a table and two chairs, and on the table, which was covered with beautiful white linen, stood a magnum of French champagne in a silver bucket, a big can of the finest beluga caviar (label in French), one of whole natural goose-liver *truffée* (label in French), and a big wheel of cured Edam cheeses (label in Dutch). A painted sign beside the champagne magnum said, "Finest Imp. Specialties Sold Only Here." And indeed, no other food store in town had any such imported specialties. The best Otto's father's delicatessen could offer was Hungarian salami and Polish ham, neither of which had any exotic appeal.

Just inside Bitter's new store, flanking the entrance, were two big barrels, one containing dill pickles, the other

sauerkraut. A large wooden spoon lay across the top of each barrel, and above each hung a hand-lettered sign saying, "Free for Our Customers." The shop window could not be opened from inside the store, and when a customer wanted a piece of Edam cheese, Mr. Bitter had to go out on the sidewalk, open the window, remove the cheese, take it inside, cut off a piece, and then go outdoors again with the cheese and put it back in the window. He was a small man with a long, tired face and a drooping lower lip, which he snapped up with a gasp at the end of each sentence, as though he were afraid of losing it. He wore a beautiful white apron and a battered gray derby. I presumed he wore the hat because he was afraid of catching cold, but the next day at school, Otto told me that Mr. Bitter wore it because he was self-conscious about his baldness. I doubted the truth of this statement and suspected that Otto was suffering from envy. His father's shop window displayed a dusty, dreary arrangement of inferior sardine and anchovy cans, and a couple of moldy salami.

I HAD taken it for granted that we would trade at Bitter's, and I was dismayed when my mother said we were going to keep on patronizing the other delicatessen. "It wouldn't be fair to run out on them," she said. This loyalty, I soon sensed, was only a secondary reason for my mother's attitude. A few days after the opening of the delicatessen, some friends came to call and stayed for dinner. My mother told me to run over to Otto's father's store, which was five blocks away, and get a dozen dill pickles and half a pound of imitation-Emmentaler cheese.

"Let me go to Bitter's," I said. "He's giving the pickles away free."

"We don't want anything free," my mother said sternly. "Besides, I don't want you to ever set foot in Mr. Bitter's place."

At the other delicatessen, Otto greeted me with a sardonic grin. "I thought you wouldn't come here any more," he said. He didn't let me choose the dill pickles myself but reached into the barrel with his dirty hands and picked out the smallest, most shrivelled specimens. The place smelled of old Moravian sausages and *tvarůžky*. These last were little, moldy cream cheeses, which you could buy at any ordinary grocery store and which smelled like overripe Limburger.

Later, I learned the principal reason why my mother wouldn't let me go to



the new delicatessen. Bitter had been a depositor at our family bank, and when it was swallowed up by the big trust, he had lost some money—though not much compared to the various members of our family, who had put all the money they had into the bank in order to save the depositors from severe losses. Like every other depositor, he had got back eighty-five per cent of his deposits, but he had made a scene at the bank when he learned of the forthcoming merger and had shouted in front of all the employees that he was going to fill the sacred premises with the smell of old *tvarůžky*, if it was the last thing he did. Of course, Bitter's delicatessen was too refined a place to sell *tvarůžky*, and, of course, he was renting the place simply because it was ideal for his new store. Bitter's threat was much discussed around town. My mother and my uncles were outraged, and began a feud with Mr. Bitter. Once or twice, we had to buy at his store, when people dropped in for an after-dinner snack and Otto's place was closed, but even then my mother wouldn't let me make the purchases. Instead, she called up a friend and asked her to, so Bitter wouldn't have the triumph of selling to a member of our family.

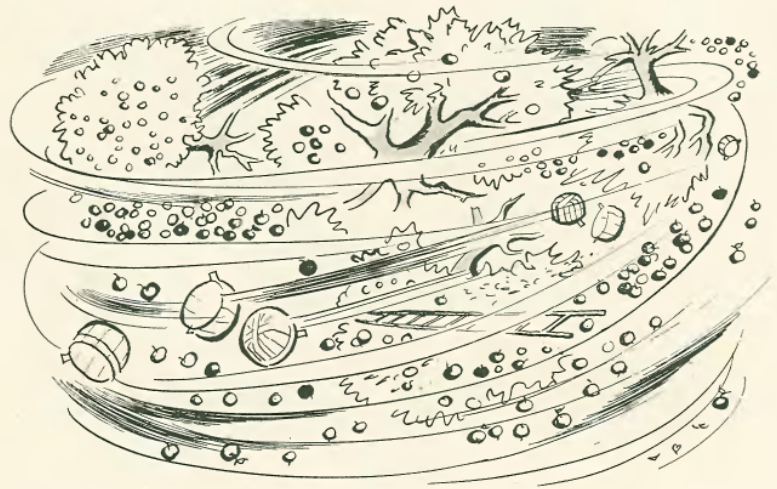
I had looked forward to hanging out at Bitter's place after soccer games and when my homework was done, and now that this was impossible, I used to stand in front of the entrance, looking wistfully into a forbidden, wonderful world. Through the open door came the bewitching aroma of French Roquefort, Rhine salmon, Italian sea food, Belgian *salmis de perdreaux*, Westphalian ham, Rumanian *mititei* (small, grilled hamburger sausages), English Cheddar cheese, Danish *matjes* herring, and other imported specialties.

There were three booths on one side of the store where people could sit down for a glass of wine, a snack, or a meal. Spread out on the counter were large wooden plates filled with ready-to-eat appetizers, which I was told about—small pieces of roast goose liver, fried calves' brains, *ichor de carpe* (a mixture of carp roe and caviar), eggplant toasted and baked in oil, Russian salad and Italian salad and *salade tartare* and *salade de bœuf*, Bismarck herring in dill sauce, cold duck, saddle of venison, Italian mushrooms in *sauce vinaigrette*, local *klobasy* (small, fat frankfurters), cold and warm pâtés, sweet and sour cream, chicken livers with onion, barbecued meats, and warm Prague ham. Everything was prepared fresh twice a day by Bitter and two assistants, and

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everything was delicious, according to the unanimous comments of the customers, which I would overhear as they came out of the store. Even Bitter's hard-boiled eggs were said to be remarkable. They were prepared after an old Jewish recipe; the eggs were simmered in their shells for twenty-four hours in a concoction of black coffee and onions. They were served with fresh caviar.

At the end of the day, most of the happy customers were men. They started to arrive about six o'clock, when the stores and offices closed. They were divided into two groups: the bachelors, who didn't have a home to go to and so had their dinner at Bitter's, and the married men, who dropped in merely for an hors d'œuvre. The bachelors would help themselves to a plateful of specialties at the counter and sit down comfortably in one of the booths; the married men would stand around the counter and snatch a few things here and

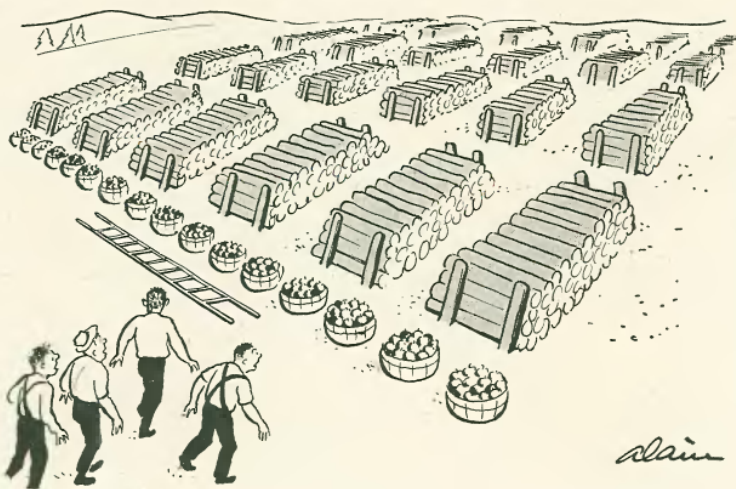
there, looking guilty and casting nervous glances at their watches. I could see that they hated to go home to their dull dinners of potato soup and boiled beef.

The outstanding figure among the married men around the counter was usually the chief of police, a sharp-eyed, stoop-shouldered man with an immense black mustache. "I've tried every method known to the criminologist to conceal my visits to this place," I once heard him say to a couple of married men standing at the counter. "Gentlemen, it's no use. We are up against feminine intuition. They sense our lack of enthusiasm as we sit down at the dinner table." The bachelors in the booths behind him laughed maliciously. I decided to remain a bachelor, so that when I grew up I could have dinner every night at Bitter's, where a man was assured of independence, the company of other men, and a plentiful supply of imported delicacies.

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One night, when I was standing near the entrance as usual, the chief of police began telling his friends a story. His voice was low and I couldn't quite hear what he was saying, but the men listened with heads bent together, and every once in a while they would laugh. Two ladies walked into the store, and the police chief nodded politely and waited until they had left before going on with his story. Trying to get in on what I assumed to be the history of a sensational criminal case, I moved through the entrance without realizing what I was doing. Mr. Bitter saw me standing next to the barrel of dill pickles and he came out from behind the counter and said, "Well, well! If it isn't young Wechsberg! What can I do for you, young man?"

The customers turned to look at me, and the chief of police, who knew my mother well, said, "Grab yourself a handful of those wonderful things, but

don't tell your mother I told you to!" Everybody laughed.

"Sure, my boy," Mr. Bitter said. He lifted his derby, mopped his head, which was bald, with a corner of his white apron, and then put the derby on again. "Take whatever you want."

Like someone hypnotized, I stared at the plates on the counter—the roast goose liver, the twenty-four-hour eggs, the barbecued meats, the imported cheeses—all within easy reach. The temptation was terrible.

"I don't have any money," I said, stuttering stupidly.

"Never mind about the money," Mr. Bitter said grandly. "It's such an unexpected pleasure to see you here, young man."

The aroma of smoked eel, warm ham, and pheasant Demodoff was overwhelming, but the faint irony in Mr. Bitter's voice brought me back to reality. I saw that the chief of police and

the bachelors were smirking at one another. A new and somewhat painful emotion began to surge up within me—loyalty to the honor of my family. I closed my eyes, tried not to breathe in the tantalizing smells, swallowed hard, and said with what I thought was supreme dignity, "Thank you, Mr. Bitter, but *we* don't buy here." Then I turned and walked out, heartbroken but proud.

For a few moments, while I was climbing the stairs to our apartment, I felt that I was a richer and better man than Mr. Bitter. By my sacrifice, I had saved the honor of the family and fulfilled my moral obligations. I was almost moved to tears by my own greatness, but this feeling didn't last long. When I sat down at the table and Marie, the cook, brought in the meat loaf, boiled potatoes, and carrots—all of which I hated—I was more miserable than I had ever been in my life.

"I'm not hungry," I said, and got up from the table. My mother looked worried and asked whether I felt sick. I said, "No, I'm not sick," but I couldn't have touched the meat loaf for anything in the world.

IN spite of the ill will that my family bore Mr. Bitter and the trick that he had tried to play on me, I realized that he was an unusual man in many ways. He sent his only daughter, Lilya, a dark-haired girl of about my age, away to a French-language *pensionnat* near Lausanne. This caused the raising of eyebrows among the other merchants and professional men, all of whom sent their children to the local schools. Mr. Bitter was said to have announced that he wanted to give his daughter all the advantages in life that he himself had been denied. This seemed a lot of rubbish to me; what could a man expect or desire from life beyond a practically unlimited choice of imported specialties?

In the late spring, before the end of the local school year, Lilya came home for the summer vacation. The Bitters lived in another part of town, but she spent a lot of her time at her father's store. She was often standing in front of our building when I came home from school. She always seemed to be waiting for somebody, but as soon as I appeared, she would start to polish the window or would step inside and stir the pickles in the big barrel. Usually she wore white, which I had to admit made her look rather pretty. Two of her best friends confided to me that Lilya had told them, under oath of secrecy, that she had a crush on me. The thought was not

unpleasant to me, though I had not begun to pay much attention to girls, and I hardly had time for such foolish matters, what with my interest in the delicatessen and in playing soccer. One day Lilya actually spoke to me. She said that she was helping out at the store, and I wondered if she was also eating all the good things there. Whether the Bitters ate nothing but imported specialties or whether, now and then, they fell back upon potato dumplings and meat loaf was a problem I often pondered.

That spring, our class team was having soccer practice every afternoon. I would rush home from school, change my clothes, and hurry back to the playing field. One day, when I came downstairs on my way to the field, Lilya was waiting outside her father's store. "Hello," she said. "Where are you going?"

I told her, and added that our class team had qualified for Sunday's final game for the chief of police's trophy. "I'm captain of the team," I said. "I play center forward."

"I'm sure you'll win," she said. "I'll keep my fingers crossed."

I stole a glance at the dill-pickle barrel, and she must have noticed it, for she said, "Would you like one? May I bring you something from inside? We have—"

"Thank you, no," I said quickly.

She sighed and said, "It's a shame you're not interested in food."

"Why?" I asked.

"Just because," she said, shrugging, and then she said, "We have real French food in our Swiss *pensionnat*. Our French chef makes crêpes Suzette. You know, cooked in flaming brandy."

I nodded. I hadn't the faintest idea what crêpes Suzette were, but I knew they couldn't be bad if a French chef cooked them in flaming brandy. Mr. Bitter appeared in the entrance for a moment and looked at us, and I thought I'd better leave. We had just learned in school about the Capulets and Montagues, and Romeo was the last person in the world I wanted to emulate. "I've got to go," I said, and started off.

"Wait," Lilya said, clutching my arm. "Wouldn't you like to go to the Bobrovnik tomorrow after school? We can take our bicycles and have a picnic there."

The Bobrovnik was a small, wooded hill a little way outside of town. Sundays, it was always crowded with picnickers and bicyclists, but during the week nobody went there. The idea of

going to the Bobrovnik with Lilya was a startling one, but I saw that it was also my one great chance to taste the imported delicacies without jeopardizing our family honor. "We have soccer practice at four," I said, but my voice lacked firmness.

"You get out of school at one o'clock," she said. "Could we meet at one-thirty?"

I nodded. "And you'll bring the food?"

"Yes," she said. "Tomorrow at one-thirty."

"Wait behind the Evangelical Church," I said. "We must be careful not to be seen, of course." My friends would have ragged me if they had seen me going off alone with a girl, and my mother would never have approved of my associating with Mr. Bitter's daughter.

"Of course," she said, and ran into the store, giggling.

THE next day, Lilya was at the appointed place with her bicycle. I noticed immediately that a rather big closed basket was tied to the handle bar and that she was carrying a plaid blanket, presumably to sit on. I had taken my own bicycle to school in the morning. Ignoring her friendly greeting, in order to calm my pangs of conscience, I reminded her gruffly that we had to be back by four o'clock. We started off. I was hungry and quite excited about the contents of the basket, and I set a fast pace. We went by way of the less frequented streets. Twice, Lilya made me slow up. "I can't ride so fast," she said. I was impatient, but I had to wait for her. It took us over an hour to get to the Bobrovnik. Lilya wanted to sit down somewhere under the trees where it was cool and shady, but I spread out her blanket on a mossy spot in the sun. She untied the basket and sat down next to me.

"You wouldn't believe how one gets fed up with crêpes Suzette, pheasant à la Souvaroff, eggs cocotte, and French bread," she said as she began to take one package after another out of the basket. "Ever since I came back, I've been simply starved for good, simple food." She spread out a couple of paper napkins and opened the packages. I gasped. They contained slices of cold meat loaf, black bread, potato salad, a piece of Hungarian salami, a cold *Wiener Schnitzel*. I could have killed her. There were a couple of dill pickles and two coffee-boiled eggs, but they seemed hardly worth the long, dull

bicycle trip and the danger of being seen with a girl—especially with Lilya.

"I first thought I'd bring a few things from the shop," she said, "—goose liver and caviar—but then I thought there's nothing *personal* in those things. I made the meat loaf with my own hands. I also made the potato salad—" She saw my face and stopped. "Don't you like—"

"Come on," I said. "Let's eat and go back. It's late."

The meat loaf tasted of garlic, which I loathed, and the eggs, minus caviar, were just eggs. I was so furious I didn't even touch the dill pickles.

"What's the matter?" Lilya asked with tears in her eyes. "Don't you like pickles? *Everybody* likes pickles."

"No!" I shouted and jumped up. That was all I needed, tears. I walked over to my bicycle and pumped more air into the rear tire, though it didn't need any. I despised myself. For meat loaf and potato salad, I had become a traitor to my family. Lilya sniffled and dried her tears and suggested that we sit down for a while and talk, but I had had enough. I told her we had to get back right away. This time, I started off even faster. When we had gone a little way, Lilya fell off her bicycle and hurt her knee. She cried, and it took me some time to persuade her to get on her bicycle again. We had to ride very slowly, because of her knee, and it was long after four when we reached the center of town.

At the crossing of Sokol Street and Prokeš Square, we ran into Otto and a group of my classmates coming home from the playing field. They whistled after us and made foolish remarks. The next day, they told me that they had waited three-quarters of an hour and then decided that it was useless to practice without me, since I was the captain. During the rest of the week, at practice sessions, they kept asking me pointed questions about my trip with "the beautiful Lilya." I played badly.

On Sunday, I played badly, too, and we lost the game for the police chief's trophy by a score of 3-0. I was forced to resign as captain, and Otto was elected my successor. During the following season, we lost a great many matches, but after the games, Otto handed out goose-liver sandwiches and dill pickles and they provided consolation.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

As you no doubt know, production difficulties are not as yet back to normal.

—Letter from Sears, Roebuck & Co.
Give 'em time.