

Snatched from the fire

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I passed by and saw you kicking about in your
blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said
to you, “Live!”

Ezekiel 16:6

I'm lying on my bedroom floor, my arms and legs covered in blood, thinking about what has just happened. Total apathy. It's a long time since life was fun. Heroin - I need heroin just to get by. My brother Ruedi's voice slams into my thoughts: "Are you crazy? Guess you'll be the next corpse we find!" He's screaming. I wonder why? He's a junky too, just as addicted and endangered as I am.

But he's right. In these golden October days, my will to live is growing weaker day by day. I've just finished rehab, with forced withdrawal from methadone. The dream of being able to live a more or less normal life on this drug is shattered. Since my discharge from the psychiatric clinic I've been obsessed by thoughts of suicide. I'm greedy for whatever kind of drug I can get my hands on, so I keep overdosing. And when I come to, I'm angry to find I'm still alive. I have just tried to shoot heroin, but in my messed up mental and physical state I was just stabbing uncontrollably at myself, searching for a vein, any vein, anywhere on my body. Furious, Ruedi stormed out of the room leaving me overwhelmed by an indescribable helplessness. I was lying covered in blood on the floor, wondering how this could happen.

There have been two or three moments in my life when I horrified myself: this was one of them. But what was I to do? We – that is, I and my two brothers, Heinz and Ruedi – had been drug addicts for years. Already heavily marked by our addiction, all we had to look forward to was prison, hospital and early death. Our parents had been divorced since 1971, and our mother just had to face the fact that her three sons were all junkies. Since then, both my brothers have died from the consequences of their drug abuse. Never, in that October of 1979, in my wildest dreams, would I have entertained the idea that I might escape the same fate and that my life could be completely different.

But let's start at the beginning

Stolen Childhood

My Parents

My parents grew up in the beautiful Bernese Oberland. Mother was born in 1937, purportedly in an old barn. Her mother was barely sixteen at the time. She came from a large family, earning a very modest living as farmers. Mother's father, however, belonged to a different social class. Later, my mother had a sister but for some unspoken reason they were not brought up together. Mother's grandparents stepped into the breach as well as they could, and enabled Mother to have a happy childhood. Mother often said that she was only able to keep going later on in life because she had enjoyed such good times in her youth in Meiringen.

My father grew up on a mountain farm above Meiringen, with his mother, stepfather and two siblings. As the son of a mountain farmer and railway employee, he had a tough time. That was not only because of a lack of material goods. One of his favourite stories was that when he was seventeen, his mother had beaten him because he had spent his first earnings on a pair of mountain boots. His stepfather also often beat him. As a small child, I never liked visiting my father's parents. Father was my mother's childhood sweetheart, and although his reputation was not the best, they married in the spring of 1958. The fact that I was already there was no doubt one reason for the marriage.

I had been born in November 1957 in the Cantonal Hospital of Berne, and spent the first few months of my life with my mother in Meiringen. Then we moved to Lucerne with Father. After their wedding, at the beginning of May 1958, we moved to Zollikon in the Canton of Zurich, where my brother Heinz was born in March 1959. In May 1960 we moved again, to a village in Emmental, called Wannenfloh. This is where, in the same month, my youngest brother, Ruedi, was born.



Wannenffluh, Emmental, BE

Early Memories

There's something puzzling about memories that stick. I can recall, as a small boy, playing with a St Bernard dog outside the house, although I was barely three years old at the time. This must be where my love of dogs comes from. I have fond memories of this place, but why? Perhaps because my great-

grandfather was still living with us then. I don't know very much about him, but I liked being with him and we had fun. His after-lunch nap, for instance, was sacrosanct to him, so he locked his door to keep us children out. All the same, I still managed to disturb him by crawling through the old tiled stove that was built in between his room and the living room. When I think of that place, even today, it feels like home. Maybe that's because it reminds me of the few carefree moments of my childhood?

In those days, we little boys had no notion of the troubles already weighing on our family. My great-grandfather, however, had no illusions, and one day he was simply no longer willing to put up any more with my father's feckless, moody behaviour. He went back to Meiringen, where he died a short time later. That little farmhouse in Wannenfluh could have become our home, but we didn't stay.

In 1961 we spent three months in the Canton of Aargau, and from October to the end of March 1962 we lived in Interlaken (Bernese Oberland). I don't have the faintest recollection of that at all. I have never been able to feel attachment to a particular place as home, and even today I don't really know what it means to say "This is where I feel at home". Many years later, a psychologist and careers adviser commented that whenever anything started to grow in me, a lawnmower would come and

mow it down. At the time, I thought that was rather an exaggeration, but now, looking back at my early years, I recognise that it's only too true.

After brief stays in the cantons of Basle (no idea where) and Bern (in the region of Brienz), in June 1963 we landed in Zeglingen (rural district of Basle). Once again, we were living on a small farm. Revisiting this farm recently, I was amazed at how much I remembered. I was now just five years old. For us kids, this new place was one big playground. Just outside the village there were woods, meadows and farm outbuildings where we could play to our heart's content.

The most important animal was our only cow, because of the milk. We children got our milk ration in the evening in the cowshed. Each of us had his own coloured plastic beaker. At milking time we were allowed into the shed and could drink as much milk as we liked. But that was all, and nothing else afterwards, to make sure our bed sheets stayed clean overnight! We also had about eight bullocks, and the other usual farm animals. But this all meant a lot of work for our Mother, as Father was usually working away. We also had to help as well as we could. I can see myself even now, running along behind the hay wagon, wielding a great rake. Looking after animals was part of my regular duties. In particular, there was a billy goat. To this day I don't know why we had that creature. This billy goat always managed to escape, even if it meant biting through his tethering rope. For me, that meant trouble, and not just because I had to go looking for him. It was, however, two other events, quite different, that had a lasting effect on me.

My First Shocks

One evening I had been fooling around with the milk can on the way to the dairy and had spilled the milk. When Father heard of it, he gave me a knife and told me to go to the wood and cut a switch. He was very calm,

and it took me a while to realise that I was now going to be beaten with this switch. It wasn't unusual for us to be smacked, but this was something else. I don't remember the actual beating, but I'll never forget the way it was done.

The second event took place on the eve of St Nicholas. We were eating our supper without Father, when suddenly and unexpectedly, St Nicholas burst into the room. Right from the start, he was acting grim. At least, I thought he was. In the course of the evening, St Nicholas declared I was a naughty boy and had to be put in the sack. I didn't like the joke, and ran out in tears into the living room, where I crept under the table in fear and trembling. Somehow I guessed that St Nicholas was my Father dressed up, but I wasn't quite sure.

The name of our little farm was "Lostel", and this is where I was supposed to start kindergarten. I have a mental picture of my brother Heinz and me standing screaming in a room full of toys. Mother was talking to a woman – presumably the kindergarten teacher - and then some time later we were back home again. That's how come my time in kindergarten did not last much more than one hour. Anyway, I didn't have to go again, possibly because after only nine months of living on the farm, we moved on once more.



Again and again

I don't know where we moved to after that, or if I will ever find out. My next memories are of Effretikon in the Canton of Zurich. I still know approximately where we lived. I remember a teacher, too, who for some reason wanted to cane my hand. I pulled my hand away from

Farm: "Lostel"

the bamboo cane in fear, and that sealed my reputation in that school. This was only made worse by my first theft. Together with a classmate – and I think it was actually his idea – I stole a fountain pen. We got caught, and I lost my friend because he was then grounded and forbidden to associate with me as I was a bad influence. I, on the other hand, instead of going home, hid in the cellar for fear of my father. My mother found me in the middle of the night, and as she didn't want any trouble, either, my father - fortunately for me – never found out about my misdemeanour.

It was around this time that I had the bright idea of using my father's military logbook as my personal diary. Sadly, he didn't appreciate my originality. Nor did he appreciate my musical talent, when – thanks to my mother – I started to learn to play the accordion. On his return, he immediately forbade me to have any more lessons. After eight months we moved again, arriving in Mörschwil, Canton of St Gallen, in July 1966, where we stayed only until October of the same year.

At that time, I was spending every free minute playing football. Once, as I reached for the ball, a heap of cow dung got in my way. I was covered in manure from head to toe. My father saw me, and straight away turned the garden hose on me. Everybody thought it was very funny, and we all laughed. So yes, there were happy moments. The irony of it all is that those moments which reflected a semblance of happiness could turn sour in seconds. Here's an example: one time when we were enjoying ourselves, I jokingly called my mother "Mamuschka". I have no idea why I did it, but as a reward Father boxed my ears and made my head ring. I was amazed – no idea what I had done wrong!

School – A Nightmare

In this district of St Gallen, school became a nightmare. Right from the start, I felt I didn't belong and I had no

idea of what was going on. I can still feel the pain from the hard knuckles of my teacher boring into my head. This was the standard punishment if you didn't know the answer or arrived late. Consequently, I often skipped school. I would wander about in the small village, and at home time I went home. Strangely enough, the many absences recorded on my report didn't arouse any reaction at home. I didn't mind, anything was better than a beating.

On my ninth birthday we moved to Rickenbach, Canton of St Gallen, and stayed five months. I recall neither the school nor our home. Not until we arrived in Neschwil (Zurich) in April 1968 for a full ten months do I have any recollection of events. We lived in a very nice house in this small village. Mother kept a little shop on the ground floor. Behind the house we kept rabbits, which I had to take care of. This is probably where my idea of our Sunday dinner comes from: mashed potato and rabbit meat.

Father loved hunting, and so he was the one who slaughtered the animals at home. Whenever a rabbit was due to become Sunday dinner, it was my job to hold it. Every time one of these poor squirming creatures bled to death in my hands after Father had shot it, I felt awful. One time Father decided to kill a pig. The pig escaped, but was brought down nevertheless in a nearby meadow and I had to run back and forth with pans full of blood, which sickened me.

Usually, Father spent little time with us and we boys ran wild. That was anything but easy for our mother, and we drove her to the limit. When Father was there, he imposed a military-style discipline, and when he wasn't we made the most of it. The first time I was aware of this was when Mother lost her temper at lunchtime and threw the cutlery at me. I must have provoked her somehow. I realised how frustrated she was when I fell down the stairs and she just went on hitting me like

crazy. But I didn't know how to deal with it and as soon as I could stand up, I fled. Nothing more was said about it. Somehow my life was getting more difficult. Anyway, I seem to remember thinking quite early on that life wasn't worth living. I felt that lots of things were not fair, and my powerlessness frustrated me.

Irresponsible

My father was of the opinion that, as the eldest son, I should learn to take on more and more responsibility. In other words, whenever our parents weren't there or were busy with other things,



My brothers and I (centre)

I was supposed to take charge. At this time, Father communicated mostly through eye contact. One glance and I knew what he wanted me to do. For instance, I was supposed to tidy the kitchen. Of course, my brothers were also supposed to help but they weren't ever going to obey me. As soon as I was alone with them, there would be a row.

One day my brother Heinz made me so mad that I completely lost control and hurled him as hard as I could across the bed. He banged his head violently. Ruedi and I stood there frozen with fear. After a while, Heinz suddenly came round and threatened to tell Father. With hindsight, I see that this was one of those situations where we were protected from worse consequences, and there were many of them.

Most of my memories of this tiny village of barely fifty souls have to do with my mischief-making, and luckily most of them involved narrow escapes. When I went to mow grass for my animals I was allowed to use only the

small scythe. The large scythe was taboo. But I wanted to do what I had seen the farmers doing, so one day I took the forbidden big scythe. All was going well until Heinz came along and ran in front of me. It was very hard to convince our parents that the nasty deep cut on Heinz's leg had been made by the small scythe! This lie gave my brother a handle on me, of course. The worst rows were when we were all three together. Once, my brothers pushed me into the bath tub. That had far-reaching consequences for me, as it left me with a gap in my teeth that greatly diminished my self-esteem for many years. I just could not accept myself with a gap in my teeth, but yet again, nothing was ever said about it at home.

Something else struck me here for the first time: all at once I was interested in the opposite sex. Suddenly I had sexual thoughts that I couldn't figure out. I was ashamed of them and didn't know if they were normal or not. Luckily, there were other things like football that could chase away all the tormenting thoughts that I couldn't banish from my mind.

Of course, I also went to school. Every day the school bus picked us up and took us to the neighbouring village of Mädiswil. I liked my teacher there, as she was decent and fair to me. And yet of all people, she was the one I raised my hand to, over nothing, and I almost hit her. I remember thinking: Now I've spoilt things with her, too.

No Laughing Matter

I must add a note here about starting school, as this is relevant to my later behaviour in school and especially towards people in authority. Up to now, I have not been able to find out where I first went to school. Inquiries in the various places I lived have not shed light on this matter. Therefore, I can't say exactly where the following took place. We used to have little black slates to write on

with chalk. One day we had to write our name on the slate, which I did with great eagerness. I tried hard, but I spelled my name wrong. I think it was a female teacher who held me up to ridicule before the whole class. This image of myself standing, humiliated, in front of the class stayed with me.

As a result, I only put my hand up when I was absolutely sure of the answer. I practically stopped asking questions, and I often just pretended to understand. This experience and others like it made me more and more wary of teachers.

Father was there

Looking back, there were also some positive events. One of them was my first football game with FC Fehraltorf. Father came with me and was in a good mood. He seemed to be pleased with my performance. For a short while there was something like harmony between us, although I could never be quite certain. For us children there were occasionally relaxed times with my father, and for a long time his really dark side was hidden from us. Outwardly, he knew very well how to play the charmer. But once behind closed doors, my parents' behaviour was making it obvious that a crisis was pending, getting closer by the day. It was about money. Father didn't pay his bills, and marital fidelity didn't matter to him either. And what we boys didn't know was that our mother was constantly asking herself, "How much longer can I put up with this?"

In June 1969 we moved house again. We went to Opfikon and I joined the football club FC Glattbrugg. I remember, with distaste, the school there. They kept saying, "He could do it if he only wanted to." I can still hear the chats with my mother, encouraging me to do this or that, and then it would all turn out fine. I had similar talks with my teachers. But they didn't seem able to reach me in my own world. More and more, I felt my life was worthless



Many years later, Father wrote me a letter that was the first step towards a possible reconciliation ...

Dear Walter

I was very pleased to get your letter. You have no idea what it was like for me not to hear from you all for so long. I always hoped you would get on OK. Since I received your letter, I've been thinking of you all day and night. Today I know that I did everything wrong, but I always wanted only the best for you. I know how hard life is, and that's why I was so hard on you boys. I thought it would make life easier for you later....

I'd be very happy to see you again sometime.

Your Father

and I really didn't understand what the people around me wanted of me. Often, I had trouble falling asleep, I had stomach aches, and I escaped into my dream world. The meaning of my existence was more and more of a mystery to me. Contact with my father now broke down completely, and he never asked about me or my brothers. I was only just ten years old, but I had never ended a school year with the same schoolmates I had started with. On average, I had never lived for nine months in the same place. Once I told a teacher what I had experienced in my school life, but I soon noticed that he had difficulty in believing all the details I was pouring out to him. But it was the truth. Sure, I was no angel, but some of the things that teachers, male and female, dared to do would be classed as abuse nowadays. What was worst for me was moving house all the time. I constantly had to fight to catch up with schoolwork and to make friends. It could only be a matter of time before I gave up this struggle for recognition and relationships. For me, home had no meaning. It was a place of necessity, never a place I enjoyed being. My brothers and I spent as much time as possible outside and avoided our parents as well as we could.

No Chance



We had several dogs, but sadly few of them stayed with us for long.

I think that sometime around the age of eleven or twelve I gave up the inner struggle and just drifted, more or less. I had no strength to face life or its challenges. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that I had no idea what life was all about. There were a few weak efforts to make something of my life, and each time I hoped it would get better, but good intentions are not enough to master life.

Finally, what had to happen, happened. My parents' divorce was finalised in 1971 and we moved again, this time into the town of Zurich. We were now living in a district that was home to pimps, prostitutes, rockers and hippies. This was the start of a new era in my life, in an entirely alien world.

Lost Youth

First Drugs and...

Very early in the seventies I started smoking, at first more out of curiosity and in order to be accepted. My father smoked a lot, and Mother had to smoke in secret because Father had forbidden her to do so. Alcohol also began to play a greater part in my life. Strangely enough, I felt revolted by myself if I had too much to drink and so after my first real binge I didn't actually stop drinking, but I became more careful. Girls were also important, of course. I don't know any more who all the people were, but we set up a little party cellar. Naturally, that easily led to promiscuous behaviour. We had no idea about sex. It was assumed that it was enough if we got our sex education from magazines, but I was teased for a long time for believing that babies were born through their mother's navel. To be honest, I was totally inhibited in the presence of girls.

Unhealthy Liberties

My brothers and I were now living as latchkey-kids. After her divorce, Mother had to find a job and this meant she was out all day. Consequently, we did whatever we liked and Mother simply did not have the energy to deal with us three boys, now in our puberty. When Father was still with us he had laid down the law in his domineering way, and now we ruled the roost. As well as financial worries, this made extra problems for our mother. To make things worse, right after the divorce and the move to Zurich, she had an accident on her bicycle and broke her collarbone, which prevented her from working for some time. With no savings, money was tight. There were no relatives to help out, as they were either dead or not on good terms. Mother didn't get any money from the divorce, and Father had to pay her 150 francs per child alimony that never arrived. Finally, social services had

to intervene. It wasn't for several months that I realised how much financial pressure was burdening my mother. To get by, she took out small loans at horrendous rates of interest. For a while, there was talk of our going into a home, but Mother refused to be parted from us. Instead, social services appointed a guardian, but we rarely got to see him.

End of School and an Apprenticeship

My compulsory schooldays were slowly drawing to an end. During my last year at school, I did what was known as a "work year", presumably because nobody really knew what they could do with me. First I attended metalwork classes and then building trades classes. I was supposed to finish the year in the subjects where I thought I had the best chances of finding a job. Although I detested the metalwork teacher, I went back to that department because I just wanted to work with metal. When it came to applying for jobs, one of the career advisors said something that made me furious. Without discussing my ideas he recommended I should become an apprentice chimney sweep. The positive aspect of this was that I turned my back on him at once, and took the initiative myself. I got hold of a newspaper and began picking out apprenticeships to apply for.

Finally, I applied for jobs at two very well-known Swiss companies. To my amazement, Schindler AG invited me to go for interview. I was interviewed by two men, and then I had to do a test. When the news came, a few days later, that I could begin a four-year apprenticeship as a metal constructor, I saw it as a huge ray of hope. I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity, although physically I wasn't the ideal candidate for such a demanding job.

Nevertheless, bursting with anticipation, I began my apprenticeship in 1972. In the meantime we had moved house in Zurich. I tried to get some order in my life and to hang out with "sensible" pals. Sensible? Well, these

guys had some crazy ideas sometimes, too, but they didn't do hard drugs or, at least, they knew their limits. However, I didn't really feel comfortable in their company. There were over a hundred apprentices and right from the beginning I was drawn more to the "freaks". And so, slowly but surely, I drifted more and more towards these freaks. I finished my first year reasonably well but increasingly, marihuana was determining my daily routine. I saw nothing dangerous in that: some drank wine and I enjoyed my pipe – what was the difference?

My Brothers, Too ...



My brother Heinz towards the end of his life. Memories of him and his life are still painful. ...

In my second year, we moved house again in the city of Zurich. Mother still lives in that same apartment. Though I was unaware of it, my two brothers were also going off the rails at this time. Heinz fell more and more victim to his schizophrenia. Even today, it's a mystery to me how he managed to get into drugs. His story is a tragedy in itself. There were times when he communicated with us only by hand signals. He lived in a world of his own. All

possible therapies and time spent in clinics failed to help and in the end he had three terminal illnesses. He died in 1995 of a stomach haemorrhage. Ruedi got involved with hard drugs at around the same time as I did, I don't know how or through whom. In the beginning I didn't want to drag my brother in,



Ruedi – what might he have achieved? He was probably the most gifted of us all.

and presumably Ruedi felt much the same way. Later, though, we were often out together. Ruedi died of an overdose of methadone in 2005.

First Love

At the beginning of my second year, I was still only on the threshold of my infamous junky career. That winter I met my first love during a ski trip. I was head over heels in love. Being together with Rosa had a motivating effect on my life. This was good for my apprenticeship, of course. For about a year there was a shimmer of hope on the horizon of my life. Unfortunately, her parents divorced and as I myself was the child of divorced parents, hers drew me into this process, as a kind of support, which I found discomfoting. In her distress, which I didn't really appreciate, Rosa clung to me more and more. I wasn't able to bear this closeness, and this led to a painful separation. I hurt her badly by my behaviour, which she couldn't understand, and I am deeply sorry about that. The tragic thing is that a victim also makes victims of others. In time we lost track of one another and never saw each other again.

Friends at Last

Meanwhile, I was now well integrated into our freaky group, and as banal as it may sound, I felt accepted and at home here. For the first time in my life I had something like friends. Unfortunately, they all did drugs and some of them even injected heroin. To start with, I was strongly against hard drugs and claimed I didn't need them. But my world wasn't right unless I was high, so I was opening myself up for new experiences. I smoked heroin for the first time at an open air concert. The feeling was awesome, a taste of heaven on earth!

I also tried out other things. For a while, like most hippies, I searched for happiness in the Indian religions and met up with Hari Krishna disciples, but something about

these encounters was repulsive to me, and I backed off. I also had a go at being a medium, but the whole thing scared me. The occult always held a certain attraction in our circles and so there were points of contact that were not without danger. Once, a friend from whom I had stolen 100 franks cursed me by drawing a head on the wall and sticking several needles into it. This was to wish excruciating pain onto the thief, who was unknown to him. For years I suffered from very peculiar headaches!

A Major Decision

On the whole our lives were determined by heroin and finding the money for it. Since smoking heroin was becoming too expensive, I took a major decision one day: to inject heroin. Partly because smoking hashish wasn't giving me the effect I wanted, and partly because I had no other prospects in my life. Today I'm at a loss to explain why I had heroin and a syringe at home. I think I remember they belonged to one of the many freaks who came and went at our place. These weren't just my friends; there were my brothers' friends, too. Although I was alone, I locked myself into the bathroom with all the "gear". While I was getting everything ready for my first shot, a thought took root in my mind: "Walter, it doesn't matter when you die, but before you do, make sure you try everything!"

It is well known that the effect of heroin is simultaneously relaxing and euphoric. It sweeps away all unpleasant feelings like fear and emptiness. Problems and conflicts are wiped out. You feel perfectly at peace. And that's how it was. Heroin freed me from "the real world" that I couldn't stand unless I was high. What I refused to accept at that time was that this feeling is short-lived and gets weaker over time. The physiological and psychological consequences are hard to foresee. Gradually, you lose everything that makes life meaningful and finally you

die before your time. As far as I know, none of my friends from that period of my life have survived. My best friend hanged himself in despair. Another friend just walked into his room without a word, took down his army rifle and shot himself. He spoke to no-one beforehand and no-one really knows what was going on in his mind. I could list several more similar cases.

I was now a junkie, but still at the stage where I didn't want to think about where it might lead. Only in the following four years did I discover what it means to be addicted.

My Apprentice Master

As time went by it became increasingly difficult to hide my addiction, and my apprentice master also noticed it. He did everything in his power to prevent me from giving up my apprenticeship, even if he had to pick me up at home and take me to work. When the final exams came around, thanks to him I was well prepared for the practical assignments. These weren't a problem, apart from my minimalist attitude. I just scraped through the theoretical examinations. I was very divided. On the one hand, I would have liked to get good results, and on the other I behaved as if I didn't care. And so, the evening before a four-hour drawing exam, I was high on LSD. In spite of that, I passed, though hardly with merit.

And yet, during our trip to celebrate passing our finals, I upped my drug intake. We went to Hamburg and visited the Reeperbahn, the red-light district that I found more interesting than any of the other sights of the city. We were celebrating the end of our training, so during this trip we were very euphoric, surrounded by pimps, prostitutes, rockers and other shady characters. Most of us spent more money than we intended on alcohol, women and tattoos. I remember visiting a tattoo shop with a friend. While my friend was having a giant picture tattooed on his arm, I considered doing the same. It's

only due to the emptiness of my wallet that I don't have any tattoos.

A Dirty Needle

To my surprise, I was allowed to continue working in my trade at the company until it was time for my military service. My routine was simple. At work, things went quite smoothly, but outside I just chased after drugs. For all addicts, the greatest challenge is obtaining the necessary funds. For a while, I got the money I needed from the bank. It was relatively easy to get three or four loans, as I had a steady job – each time a sum amounting to between 8,000 and 15,000 franks. Even as I walked out of the bank with the money in my pocket I knew that I had no intention of paying it back.

It's fairly certain that I was infected by a dirty needle just before I went to do my military service. At the time it wasn't easy to get hold of a needle and if you had one, you used it as long as possible. I hate to think of what I did when I finally had my fix in my hand: if necessary, I'd use water from a lavatory bowl or a puddle. When the point of the needle got blunt I'd sharpen it with an ordinary file. We swapped needles among ourselves without a thought. So it's hardly a wonder that, unknown to me, I had hepatitis when I went off for my basic training. It remains a mystery to me that I was eligible for military service at all, and even more so that I was assigned to a cycling platoon. My physical condition was certainly in no way suited to that division.

Away with the Fairies....

A junky lives in a pretend world. Reality passes you by and you overestimate your abilities by miles. I wanted to make use of my time with the military to get clean. It didn't work. The first night I slept really well, still under the influence of whatever I'd taken the day before. Next morning I heard a faraway voice and had no idea where

I was. The man assigned to wake me couldn't care less. He lifted the foot of my bed and dropped it with a crash. I reacted with a few swear words and one thing was clear: we were not going to be good friends. The daily routine was new to me and tough. With all the physical exercise, by the evening I was exhausted, but I couldn't go to sleep. For a long time I thought that was a withdrawal symptom, but one morning my comrades noticed that my eyes were yellow so I had to do something about it. My first visit to the M.O. was a failure: I was stationed in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and couldn't make myself understood, so I had to go back on parade. However, I was getting more and more tired and resting every free minute I had. I remember having a craving for salad. Ultimately, the day came when I could no longer go on. I told my "friend" who had woken me up so gently the first day, and he fetched the lieutenant. When he saw me, he said, "Finish the next exercise and then we'll take you to the hospital."

As soon as I arrived at the hospital I was put into quarantine and on a strict diet. The diagnosis was a serious case of jaundice. That ended my military career, and after about ten days of isolation in this provincial hospital I was transferred to Zurich. However, I was barely in the Waid Hospital when I started shooting heroin again. The staff were not very happy about that and it's probably one reason I was discharged pretty quickly.

A Very Narrow Escape

Somehow I managed to pass my driving test, and immediately I bought my first car – on credit, of course! I used the other loans to deal drugs. I made regular trips to Italy or contacted local drug peddlers. However, I never broke even because I used most of the drugs myself or gave them to friends. Thus my debts kept mounting up and I was obliged to look for other ways of feeding

my heroin habit. Some of my friends kept breaking into pharmacies, one after the other, and as I was on the fringe of this gang I was also arrested by the police. Burglary, however, wasn't my thing so I kept on dealing. I was at war with the police from the moment that one of them stuck his gun against my temple and threatened me. He only wanted to scare me, and he succeeded.

Repeatedly, I was arrested, interrogated, and - luckily only for a short while – put into custody. Still, it was only a matter of time until something more serious would happen. My physical condition was permanently worsening and I didn't realise that my hepatitis wasn't cured. There was no question of going back to work, as my body was far too weak. I could no longer hide my poor condition: I weighed only 55 kg, and was continuing to lose weight. The day came when I had to go to the doctor, who immediately referred me as an emergency case to the hospital. Under the influence of drugs and a cocktail of medication, I was in no pain and no hurry. I told the doctor that I'd go to hospital by myself, which of course was a lie. I had no intention of following his advice. Instead, in my dreamy state, I decided to take a trip into the mountains. I'd just drop in at home to pack my basic necessities. As soon as I got there, I lay down on my bed. When I awoke it was evening and I felt weird, somehow in a different world. Everything seemed unreal and slow. I told Mother I was going to see a friend and pay him back some money I owed. That was true, so I took my car key and set off. Mother started to say something, but hesitated. No more was said, and I only know what happened in the next few hours from the information I got from the police and the insurance company. I couldn't remember very much, and still can't.

I did in fact arrive at my friend's place. On the way there, it seems I almost ran a woman over and damaged several parked cars. I smoked a joint with my friend and, although he urged me to stay, I drove off again. I

wanted to go home, but I left a trail of damage behind as various obstacles got in my way and the police were already searching for me. Back in town, I ran into the rear of the car in front of me at a crossroads. I got out, apologised, gave the driver my address and just drove on. The poor driver didn't even get a word in. Frustrated by this accident, of which I was aware, I changed my mind about going home and decided to go and buy some heroin in Niederdorf, the red light district. I didn't get far. It was spooky. Somehow, my reactions were delayed. Suddenly I saw brake lights go on ahead of me, so I braked too, but too late: another crash. Vaguely I recall policemen dragging me out of my car and leading me away in handcuffs. A sea of lights and echoing voices surrounded me and nothing made any sense.

Not until next morning, when I woke up in a locked cell, did I come to. I had no idea where I was, and when a man in a white coat came in I grabbed him by the collar and he fled. The door was locked behind him and I broke down in a flood of tears. When the door opened again, I swore to the man that being locked in drove me crazy. I was in a psychiatric hospital, and was then allowed into the open ward. Of course, there was a legal sequel to my involuntary running amok. I don't dare to think what would have happened if I'd killed someone.

A Deceptive Experience

Some days later I was discharged from the clinic but had to go straight to the hospital. Although my liver was continuing to get worse, I still went on shooting heroin. My friends visited me regularly in the hospital. One evening we were sitting in the hospital chapel, and I don't remember all the things we were taking, but suddenly I felt very unwell. I said goodbye to my visitors and went quietly back to my room. I was in a two-bed room, with my bed by the window. I climbed into my bed and started to dream. I was going along a marvellous tunnel of light,

so special and so beautiful, I can't find words to describe it. I saw myself going towards this great bright light and had no feeling of grief or pain. With my whole being, I just wanted to be wrapped in this light.

Suddenly I awoke with a pounding headache and saw, very indistinctly, the face of the night nurse. We were in a room I didn't recognise, and several people were standing around me. My head felt as if it would explode with pain and I heard the night nurse say, "You've been very lucky, Mr Bachmann! Any minute later you wouldn't be alive." I was so frustrated and I screamed at this kind woman, "Why didn't you let me die?" She tried to calm me down and continued to attend to me with touching care. It seemed to me that nothing could replace what I had just experienced. But she repeated what she had said, and made it very plain to me that I had been very, very lucky.

She told me that I had been lying in my bed facing the window, which was open. There was a draught bothering my room-mate, who couldn't see me, so he wanted the window closed. As I didn't react to him, he got up to close it himself. Seeing my face was blue, he pressed the emergency button. The hospital staff took me to another room and so my life was saved yet again. Since that experience I have felt calm about death, but at the same time it also upset me. Somehow I guessed that life doesn't just stop afterwards.

Simply Hopeless

Soon after this I was discharged from the hospital and the doctor told my mother, "Unless your son does something, he'll be dead in four months." At my mother's urging, and that of social services, my brother Ruedi and I went off to Tessin for about four weeks. We actually managed to come off heroin, but drank enormous quantities of red wine instead. Back home again, however, we carried on where we had left off. Eventually, the doctor prescribed

methadone for me. He didn't think there was any point in me trying any more withdrawal therapy. I naturally thought that was great, as I could work again. In the summer of 1979 I was working on a building site. I picked up my dose of methadone after work, and then I just made it home to my little flat. Most of the time, I was so worn out, that I just fell asleep.

One day I fell asleep with a burning cigarette in my hand, and my mattress began to smoulder. That day, my mother came to collect my washing. She found me in a room full of smoke. She couldn't rouse me so she called an ambulance. I didn't wake up till the next morning, back in the psychiatric clinic, where I had to go through withdrawal from methadone. When I was discharged three weeks later, I had undergone a huge mood swing. I was overwhelmed by a yearning for death. I had been cursing my life for a very long time, and my wish for my birthday was to die. After this last rehab, I was even more apathetic.

I believe it is extremely difficult to assess the effect of methadone. I played with my life in suicidal indifference. I consumed any drugs that I could lay hands on. Often, when I woke up, I had no idea what had happened. I usually just wandered about, apathetic and irritable, and didn't recognise myself. Towards the end of 1979, my family realised that I had no will to live. When I wasn't at home I was in the red light district of Zurich, Niederdorf. A pimp I was friendly with told me about "Best Hope" but he hadn't the faintest idea what this "Best Hope" actually was. He just said that someone he knew had been there and it wouldn't hurt either of us to spend some time there.

That must have been early in December 1979. Shortly before Christmas I was totally burnt out and had absolutely nothing left. I had sold everything that could bring in any money, my driving licence had been confiscated, and I owed a mountain of debts. Frequently,

the doorbell rang and I was faced by a bailiff. Outwardly, I appeared indifferent to all of this, but inwardly I knew that I had no future in society. My drug habit had long stopped having any effect or giving me any pleasure. I just needed heroin to get me through the day without pain. The whole thing had been no fun for a long time, but somehow I was trapped and either I couldn't or wouldn't stop. The pimp gave me the address of "Best Hope" and, unlike him, I wrote a card. A few days later I actually received a reply. But one sentence in this invitation led to a row with my mother. It said that there was no smoking in this institution, so I threw the documentation away. Mother was very disappointed. She had hoped so much that there might be a change at last. But I forgot about this invitation.

Not Again!

On Christmas Day I was not well at all, going cold turkey again. Mother had decorated a Christmas tree and she kept on asking us to celebrate Christmas in peace. Heinz, in an advanced state of schizophrenia, was pacing uneasily up and down. He was impossible to talk to, and I was waiting irritably and impatiently for Ruedi. When he came at last he gave me a tiny packet of heroin with the remark that it would have to last till tomorrow. I took little notice and went to the bathroom, where I took the whole lot. When I came out, my mother asked, "Walter, can we now start celebrating Christmas? Here's a present for you." I can still hear these words, which were the last I heard. I had overdosed, and fell to the floor. When I came round next morning, Mother's words were still ringing in my ears. That was a moment when I scared myself. I was ashamed and at the same time it made me even angrier. Mother told me that I had gone blue in the face and I recognised the fear in her eyes. She had been taking sleeping tablets for a long time, to enable her to cope with the fear she felt for her sons. I

was so preoccupied with myself that I hadn't noticed.

It's difficult to describe this endless helplessness and hopelessness. That is not meant as an excuse. It is simply so. If you are an addict, the world consists only of you and your compulsive desire to satisfy this addiction. Now and then, you notice that you are hurting many people you love, but in the end your habit is stronger and it's your habit that drives you to do things you really don't want to. It's anything but easy to escape from this vicious circle, but it is possible.

If You Exist...



My mother with her granddaughter. She is a heroine for me: I can't express my admiration for the fact that she never abandoned us or gave up on us.

Who can wonder that my mother gave up? All of her children were on drugs. Every time the phone rang, or when the doorbell went, or if we stayed out a long time, she suffered indescribable terror. She never knew what was going on. Over Christmas 1979 it was all building up to a climax, and there was an almost perceptible shadow of resignation over our home. In this darkness I remembered that the documentation from "Best Hope" must still be somewhere

in the flat. I found a phone number and tried to reach someone but there was only the answering machine. Later, I found out that they were all away at a ski camp. I sat there in our living room and thought, now you're really going crazy. Pure desperation enfolded me, and in this state I was capable of anything. I was tormented by suicidal thoughts, but at the same time I wanted revenge. Thank God that I didn't have a gun in the house at the time. Suddenly and totally unexpectedly, I saw a weeping face before me. This person looked very alive, his torso bare, his hands stretched out, and tears pouring down

his face. It didn't occur to me to think about who this person might be. I just screamed aloud, "If you exist, help me!" The image disappeared and I carried on as normal. The New Year started, and by January 1980 I had forgotten or repressed the "weeping face". Somehow, every day, I had to get hold of some "stuff".



Heinz, Walter und Ruedi. When things were still all right with our world...

Snatched from the fire

My Last Day as a Junkie

On 21 January I was in Niederdorf, as usual. That day I met a young man who asked me to sell drugs for him. He was acting very strangely, but the only thing that I cared about was that he had heroin. I dealt for him the next day; too, at least until he told me he wanted the rest of his drugs back. I didn't get this, but he invited me to go with him. Hoping to get my hands on his drugs somehow, I went along with him. After walking for what seemed like miles, we came to an apartment and a young man opened the door. Very soon, he began to ask me questions, like, "What are you doing about your habit?" I lied, telling him that I had the prospect of a place in therapy on Friday, 25 January 1980. It was true that I had an appointment at "Best Hope" on that day, but I had no intention of keeping it at all. But this guy didn't let up, and kept asking. "What are you doing till Friday?" I answered that I'd been an addict for so long, that three days made no difference one way or the other. Then I heard him say, "Wait a minute!" He left the room and came back after a while, and announced cheerily that I could spend a trial day at "Best Hope" the next day. He said he had just called the person responsible and everything was OK. Again I tried to get out of it, and said, "That's fine. I have to go home now. I need a shower and a change of clothes. I can't go like this." He didn't agree, and replied dryly, "Oh, you can sleep here and I'll drive you to the station tomorrow." And as if that wasn't enough, he informed me that my new partner, the dealer, would go with me.

Turnaround through Prayer

That's what happened. Early the next morning, after a very difficult night, I found myself on the way into Appenzellerland. At 10 am I was sitting in a large living



My parents met again at my engagement. After many years of separation (1971) they had come to a reconciliation as well as they were able. They stayed together until my father's death (1987).

room with a bunch of strangers. Their behaviour was weird. I was not aware that I had landed in a Christian home. Anyway, there I was now, in their midst, deep in my own thoughts. Somehow I had to get hold of cigarettes and drugs – quickly. A voice broke into my thoughts: “Walter, may we bless you?” I said yes, whatever, with no idea what he meant. I even said yes when this same person asked me to kneel down. I don’t know what these people prayed. But two hours later, I realised that my craving for cigarettes and a fix had gone.

In the afternoon, the Director of the home, Hanspeter Vogt, asked me what I intended to do. I explained that I had no wish to go on living. However, a slight hope was beginning to grow in me that I might yet have a chance in this house, if only I was allowed to stay. I was indeed allowed to stay, and officially changed my address that same evening. My mother and brothers thought I had joined an Indian sect. Two days later, on 25 January 1980, the day of my original appointment; I surrendered my life to Jesus. I had forgotten the weeping face that I had cried out to only four weeks before. But Jesus hadn’t forgotten my cry for help, and from that moment on my life took a totally unexpected turn.

Completely Different

I had now been in “Best Hope” (Therapy Centre Nieschberg, Herisau) for several weeks. Led by Hanspeter and Anita Vogt, very mixed assortments of about twenty people were living here together. What a change! And it took some getting used to. My whole daily routine was turned upside down. I learned to get up at seven in the morning, to have meals at regular times, to work and to do sports again. For a long time, I had turned night into day and had been doing as I liked. It really was a 180° turn, which of course contained a great deal of potential conflict. Ever since they had prayed with me on my first day I truly had no desire any more for drugs

or cigarettes. The internal compulsion, that made me totally indifferent to anyone else, had disappeared. My body and my mind were still subject to violent swings. Nonetheless, most of the time, I felt a sense of being cared for that I couldn't explain. Even though I didn't sleep well at night, I had no withdrawal pains. Sure, from time to time I also considered secretly running away, but though I couldn't explain why, I stayed.

True Faith Brings Peace

There was a lot of talk about God at "Best Hope", we also read the Bible and prayed. When the inevitable tension or conflict arose, I sometimes challenged God, asking Him if He really lived in this house and could help me. He did, and I could no longer deny Jesus. But somehow, in spite of all that I had been through, I didn't understand life as a Christian. I was very far from the Christian lifestyle. I was puzzled by many things, and there was a lot I didn't understand. It was a world where rules and customs were strange to me. At this time, I felt much better when I could be with others like me in the therapy programme. I had been living as a sort of Christian for a good six months, but my "faith life" hadn't yet clicked. I didn't really understand all this stuff about "faith". I thought to myself: you don't need any drugs any more, but in your heart you are still a freak.

This all changed one day when I found time to be alone with God for half a day. It was a lovely warm summer's day and I was sitting under a tree, praying and reading. As well as the Bible I had a book by Derek Prince ("Faith To Live By") with me. While I was reading, an entirely different kind of perception opened up to me. A faith was born in me which I had never experienced before. I felt an indescribable feeling of security and strength flooding over me, that couldn't possibly have originated within me. This book said: "True biblical faith comes from the heart and determines the way we live. It is not only an

intellectual idea produced by thought; it is a real, active force that takes effect in the heart.”

Even Those Who Did Not Ask For Me

A supernatural energy was released in me, relaxing all the deep tensions in my life. Even before this, experiencing God had been something exciting and powerful for me, but practising my faith became something strenuous. Now I had turned the page. Ever since that day, I know that my life is God’s business. During my junkie days, I often had the feeling that someone or something that I couldn’t grasp was directing me. But those were dark, cold, lonely experiences. This, now, was utterly different. I knew I was fully accepted and deeply loved.

At the end of the summer in 1980, I was only at the beginning of my life of faith, still greatly in need of forgiveness, deliverance and healing. But without this experience I would not have come through all the ups and downs of the past thirty years. Derek Prince says: “Faith is a substance, something that is already present here and now.”

I still had a long way to go, and there were still many temptations, struggles and setbacks ahead of me. Yet in the last thirty years I have travelled paths that I would never have thought possible on my own. In all those years, I was able to experience for myself that this “substance of faith” still makes a difference today, and enables me to stay afloat in my daily life. The Bible says, in Romans 10:20, “I (God) was found by those who did not seek me, I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.” That is what happened to me. Jesus showed Himself to me



In this rather crazy but beautiful house I was able to be a child again. For eighteen months I experienced life in one big family, an unforgettable, marvellous time.

when I was closer to death than to life. He helped me, although I didn't seek Him or ask for Him. He saw me when I was lying covered in blood on my bedroom floor, and said, "Live!"



I dedicate my story especially to my dear wife Jasmine and to my daughter Sarah, without whom my life would be so much poorer. They put up with my faults and foibles, and have supported me throughout my processes of change, which have not always been easy. I love you!

Postscript

There are some passages in the Bible that urge us not to forget how God deals with us. Psalm 103:2 in particular makes this very clear: "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." After being free of addiction for thirty years, I find many things have become normal daily routine with the usual joys, sorrows and suffering. It's only human to forget a lot under these circumstances. You just don't think about what used to be, and how "fortunate" you have been. It's a long time since I said goodbye to my past as a hippie, drop-out and rebel. My life today has virtually nothing to do with that any more. All the same, I don't want to forget or to hide where I come from. And most of all, I don't want to forget who I owe my present life to.

The God of the Bible - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - can be experienced. He intervened in my life, and that is the only reason I am still alive. People often think that it is my strong will that led me to freedom. But the truth is that my will alone would never have been enough. At the lowest point of my weakness, and without any notion of what it actually was all about, I surrendered my life to Jesus in 1980. I know that this is no great achievement when you have reached rock bottom. It is a quirk of human nature that we are open to many things, but not so quickly ready to accept Jesus and His way. I wish we could all take to heart a word from the Bible: "The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth." Ps 145:18.

Living with Jesus does not mean that everything gets easier. Life is still filled with challenges, but with the basic difference that we know we are in strong and safe hands. I wish that for all of us.

God bless you.

Walter Bachmann



My deepest thanks go to the many
people who have supported and
accompanied me on my way in these
last 30 years.

We have known Walter for 30 years. He was a total wreck when he came to us at “Best Hope”. Now he is in charge of the Messianic Fellowship in St Gallen. What a contrast! Light and dark! Jesus poured out His love over the junkie who came to us for a day’s trial at Nieschberg, Herisau. This changed his life and awoke his trust in God and in people. In the beginning it was a hard, difficult path. A major event in Walter’s faith life was forgiving his father. He had nothing but bad memories of him. Yet there was reconciliation, and his father also acknowledged his mistakes. How true are the words of Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Following his therapy he first worked in his trade as a metal constructor, then as an assistant in Best Hope (street worker and reception unit). After that he attended the Theological College IGW in Zurich, with a study year in Jerusalem. We have a great God, who still works miracles today. To Him alone be the glory!

Anita und Hanspeter Vogt
Schachen-Herisau