

Jiri Munk In 2nd Grade Of Elementary School



This photograph was taken when I was attending 2nd Grade of elementary school in Brandys nad Labem in 1939.

Before starting school I hadn't attended any nursery school or kindergarten, as I had my own nanny, who devoted herself to me. So then I went right into 1st Grade of elementary school. It was an all-boys school, as back then schools were divided into boys' and girls'. There were a lot of us in the class, around 25 children, maybe even more. Despite not being used to children, I don't remember it being any sort of a problem for me. The other children didn't pick on me. I know that a few times some kids wanted to fight, but all I had to say was, 'I've got a brother that's four years older, and he's big!' and from that time on they left me alone.

My experiences from school weren't bad, in general. Our teacher was the kind Mr. Karhan, who in the first grade called my father in for a meeting and told him that I've got perfect pitch and that I should take music. Unfortunately, and this is probably what I regret most in my life, I never had the opportunity to devote myself to music. I think that I'd have been much happier. In the second grade we then had some man and lady teacher, but I don't remember them at all, I've only seen them recently on a school photo.

My greatest impression was of this special smell the school had, which I'm not able to describe. It's a smell that gives me an anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach, but on the other hand isn't completely unpleasant. It was some sort of mixture of chalk, sponges, blackboards and the children that were afraid, you could smell that as well.

In Grade 1 and 2 I did well in mostly everything, it was only with handwriting that I had problems. But I got all A's. I know that in our class there was a huge difference between children of better families and poor families. Already back then this social instinct grew up in me, because the children from poor families had to work, were poorly dressed, didn't have lunches and so on. Already in Grade 1, you could clearly see the class differences.

I've actually only got two grades of public school, Grades 1 and 2. By third grade I was already not allowed to go. Luckily they accepted me into Grade 1 prematurely, it was in 1938, when I wasn't six years old yet. That's because I was born in November, so theoretically I wasn't supposed to go until the next year. Otherwise I wouldn't even have the two grades. In the next school year, 1939/40, I was already ending, because then Jewish children weren't allowed to go to school any more. For Grade 3 they then hired a special teacher for me, who used to come to our house and teach me, but in time she grew too afraid.

After the war I went straight into third year of council school. I didn't know how to read and write properly, I was missing four grades. I didn't know grammar, math, the basics. Even by university I didn't know fractions and had to make up for it. So I didn't get much schooling during my childhood.