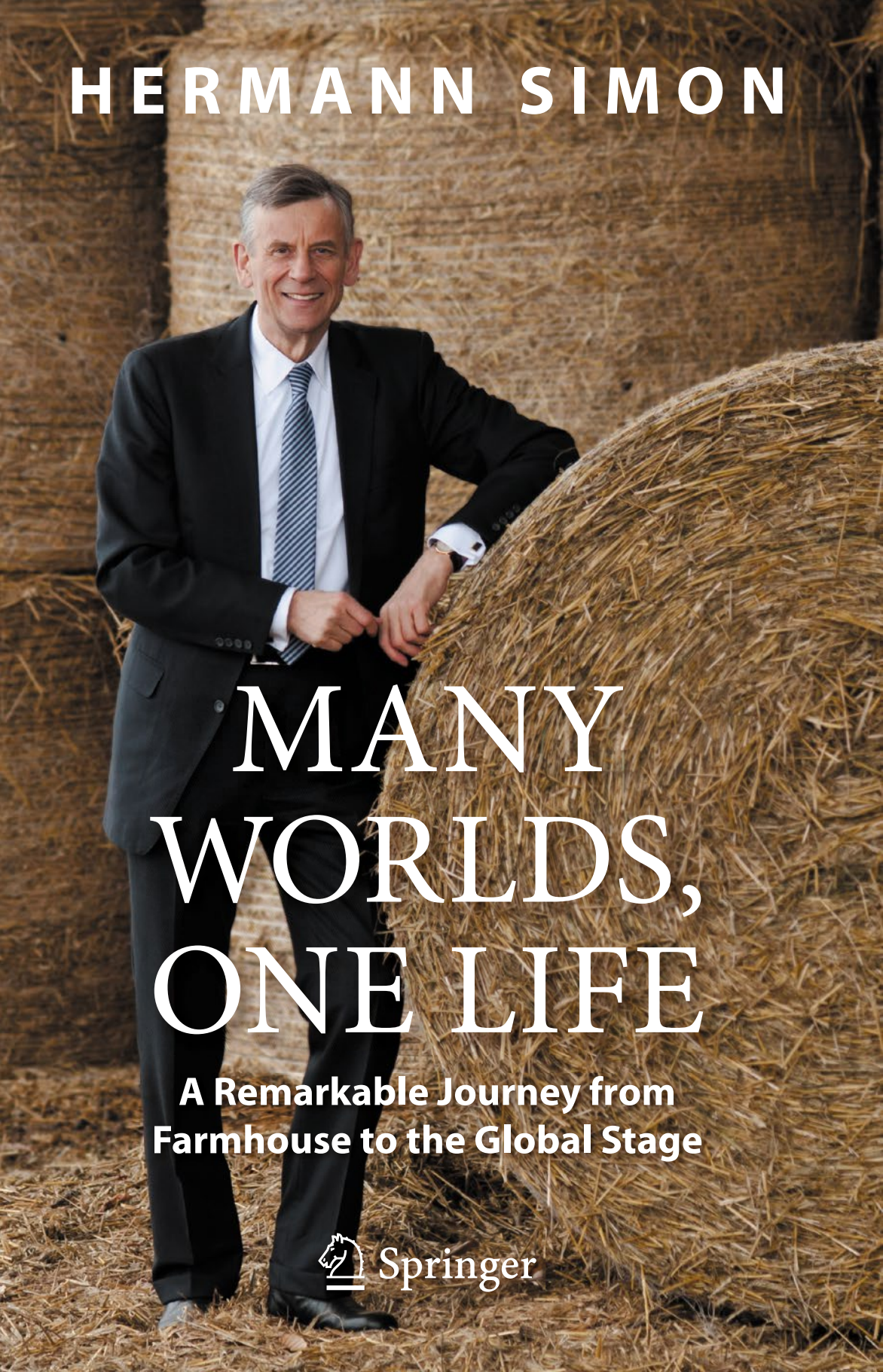
HERMANN SIMON
MANY WORLDS, ONE LIFE
A Remarkable Journey from Farmhouse to the Global Stage
Springer

Many Worlds, One Life

Hermann Simon

Many Worlds, One Life

A Remarkable Journey from Farmhouse to the Global Stage

Copernicus Books is a brand of Springer

Hermann Simon
Bonn, Germany

Adapted from Original German Language Edition Zwei Welten, ein Leben: Vom Eifelkind zum Global Player by Hermann Simon Copyright © Campus Verlag GmbH 2018
ISBN 978-3-030-60757-9 ISBN 978-3-030-60758-6 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60758-6

This Copernicus imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface

The perceived midpoint of one's life, according to a US publication, lies at age 18. Roughly speaking, that means that the first two decades of one's life subjectively seem to last as long as all the decades that follow. I can confirm that this hypothesis applies to me. My first world—where I lived until shortly before my 20th birthday—was a small village in the Eifel Mountains, a region sometimes called Germany's "Wild West," and in former times its "Siberia." Time passed very, very slowly during this phase of my life. In the ensuing 50 years, my life changed radically. Time seemed to rush by faster and faster, so that I really feel as if I have spent the same amount of time in each world.

I have indeed encountered many new worlds. Defined in regional terms, these worlds span Europe, North America, and Asia. Defined in professional terms, they include the military, science and research, consulting and entrepreneurship, and even some brushes with politics. My development from farmhouse to the global business stage was neither destiny nor predetermined. It did not follow any plan or prescription. In contrast, it came about step by step, with outcomes often driven by luck and coincidence. Time and again, forks in the road emerged, offering opportunities that I usually seized.

The encouragement of my wife Cecilia played a decisive role in many of those choices. Her standard advice was "of course you'll do it" and I followed it. My children Jeannine and Patrick played along, both when we "schlepped" them around the world and when their father was constantly on the road. I thank all three for their invaluable contribution to the person I was allowed to become.

In the early years of my professional career, my orientation pointed primarily toward the West, in particular the American and European business schools. But the time I spent in Japan in the 1980s left an indelible impression on me. Later in my career, the Asian countries—especially China, South Korea, and Japan—would become increasingly interesting and important. Asia turned into a late love for me.

Despite my role as a global player, I have preserved a close relationship with the small village I grew up in. I believe I can say that I have lost neither my roots nor the down-to-earth attitude those roots nurtured in me. Whenever I want to escape the industrialized world—which I often refer to as "Globalia"—I retreat to my old village. Staying at our old farmhouse transforms me into a child of the Eifel. The polarity between the boy from the village and the global player shone through on the occasion of my 70th birthday in February 2017. My family prepared two surprises that touched me deeply. The first was for the village child: an appearance by three local choirs with a total of 70 singers. The other surprise was directed at the global player. They showed 25 video greetings from friends and colleagues from 12 countries.

Global stage and farmhouse are not incompatible, but rather the two inseparable sides of my life.

Bonn, Germany

Hermann Simon
Spring 2021

Praise for Hermann Simon's *Many Worlds, One Life*

"Hermann Simon is one of the very few people who combine a truly global mindset with strong local roots. This rare combination makes him a superb bridge-builder at a time of increasing friction in our global trading system. World-renowned management scholar, successful entrepreneur, engaged citizen—this book tells his life's amazing story in a compelling way."

— U. Mark Schneider, CEO, Nestlé

"From the moment I met Hermann Simon, through each successive encounter, I have enjoyed increasing returns which are rare in most relationships. Hermann, please continue to open further fields of inquiry in business theory and practice, always with an eye to aligning profit, high purpose, and passion."

— Philip Kotler, Professor Emeritus of Marketing, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

"This book describes the life of a truly global citizen who supports companies in globalization and thus promotes understanding between countries and peoples. Personally, I learned a lot from Hermann Simon for my own Hidden Champion strategy. I have also noticed that more and more small- and medium-sized enterprises in China are beginning to implement the Hidden Champion strategy and benefit from the theories he proposed. I recommend the book to each entrepreneur with global ambitions."

— Yang Shuren, Owner and CEO, Shandong Moris Technologies, Inc.

"Hermann's description of the handling of the nuclear bombs in the fighter bomber squadron is very impressive and illuminating. Most people today are not even aware of how lucky we were that nuclear weapons were not used dur-

ing the Cold War. We must not under any circumstances return to such a situation."

— Helmut Ganser, General, German Army

"Since our first encounter in 1983, our paths have crossed many times. His books led me to the world of pricing. Each encounter with Hermann Simon was intellectually enriching. This book tells the exciting story of a wanderer between many worlds, enticing and relevant for both practitioners and academics."

— Takaho Ueda, Professor, Gakushuin University Tokyo

"This book shows what can become of a boy growing up on an almost medieval farm in the age of globalization. A great encouragement for all those who come from modest backgrounds."

— Martin Richenhagen, Chairman, President, and CEO,
AGCO Corporation

"Hermann, surely you sometimes look back on your life and think 'this can't be true.' You have truly experienced a spectacular life and are still incredibly active."

— Gert Assmus, Professor Emeritus, Tuck School,
Dartmouth University

"This book tells the fascinating journey of a global citizen, brand builder, and networker. Hermann Simon, the inventor of the Hidden Champion concept, is himself a hidden champion from a farm in the middle of nowhere. He mastered the omnipresent but neglected topic of price management and successfully bridged the gap between theory as university professor and hands-on management practice. The perfect role model in challenging times."

— Bernhard Steinruecke, Director General,
Indo-German Chamber of Commerce, Mumbai

"Among the politicians, officials, scholars, and entrepreneurs that Hermann Simon has close acquaintance with, it is a great honor that I am writing a letter of recommendation for this book and Dr. Simon.

As a worldly renowned business manager and scholar, his wise words have always inspired and awakened business leaders (and engineers) like me. I bought the book and finished it on the spot before I left the bookstore.

This book is about his life rather than his studies. This book also proves that he is a good essayist as much as he is a scholar. As you navigate into his youth in a German farmhouse, you will notice that he has always captured the details of daily life and social surroundings. It is the encounter of such details and awak-

ening of his senses that have led him to become the pride of modern Europe's business management studies.

My favorite part in his book is the chapter, 'The School of Life'. He has listed the things he has learned throughout his life and said they are 'subjective and incomplete.' As I read through his book, it felt as if I were having a cup of tea with him over family, future, health, management, leadership, time management, and other lifetime subjects. His value and love for humanity is truly special.

In this book, he acknowledges that his life is divided into two: one from his Eifel village and one from the globalized word. The division of the old and the present, or the division of time and space, which usually starts from village and ends in a city, was unavoidable to anyone our age who has gone through rapid urbanization and industrialization. Such sense of separation, however, does not always lead to enlightenment. The enlightenment that he is sharing with us is the fruit of his lifetime effort.

When you read his stories from his childhood to recent research and studies, you will learn the never-changing truth that 'Great discernment is cultivated rather than is born.' I also think this book will be a milestone for the younger generations who still have more road to travel."

— Dr. Chang Gyu Hwang, former CEO,
Samsung Electronics and KT Korea Telecom

"Rarely have I been so fascinated by the times you describe. Memories came back, like the short phase we served in the same squadron."

— Andris Freutel, Starfighter Pilot and General, German Air Force

"There are thousands of books on globalization, but only this one offers a personal story by one of the most inspiring business thinkers of our times. He writes about the unlimited opportunities offered by the globalized world."

— Dr. Marek Dietl, CEO, Warsaw Stock Exchange

"Hermann, though this is a down-to-earth book about your life, it brought the poetry of Goethe and Erlkönig to my mind. I was reminded of the beginning *'Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind…'* ('Who rides so late through night and wind?') Is that not what we do in our careers and lives, travel through night and wind?"

— Evert Gummesson, Professor, Stockholm School of Economics

"Hermann, in your ingenious, inimitable way, you have connected your own career with the current events of the day and their philosophical considerations.

I didn't put the book down. Your development process from the 'agrarian Middle Ages' to the internet age is probably unique. Your research on price management and Hidden Champions have become global benchmarks."

— Dr. Michael Thiel, Investor, Munich

"What particularly intrigues me is how Hermann has felt at places I myself have visited. The book also proudly reminds me that we have shared lots of common experiences in the past three decades."

— Pil Hwa Yoo, Professor, SKK Business School, Seoul, Korea

"Your book has given me great joy and enriched me with many insights."

— Klaus Brockhoff, Professor of Innovation Management,
WHU Beisheim School of Management, Koblenz, Germany

"The exciting chapter about his time in the Air Force is very good. The personal experiences and feelings are wonderfully integrated into the overall security policy context. Compliments!"

— Joachim Rodenkirch, Mayor of Wittlich, Germany

"This work is really very impressive. It's a lifetime achievement that hardly anyone else could boast of."

— Eckart Zwicker, Professor, Technical University of Berlin

Excerpts from Published Reviews of the German Edition

"It's a book about a career and the growing up of the Federal Republic of Germany. And about the contradictions of the modern world. Rooted in humility, it counters the vanities of the elites."

— Hans-Jürgen Jakobs, Former Chief Editor**,** *Handelsblatt*

"In his autobiography, Hermann Simon describes his fantastic journey from the Eifel village to the great world of management. He writes about adventures, encounters with great personalities of world history, his time in America, Japan, China, and many other countries, and gives advice for readers of all ages."

— Peter Doeppes, Chief Editor, *Eifelzeitung*

"It's not in Tokyo, London, or Stanford, but in the Eifel where Hermann Simon, feels most at home. When the 71-year-old management consultant, who is counted among the world's most influential management thinkers, wants to leave the global business world through which he continues to jet for his lecture tours, he is drawn back to his tranquil village."

— *Volksfreund*

"This autobiography is a story of globalization. Hermann Simon describes his path from his parents' farm to becoming an internationally successful management consultant known for his analysis of medium-sized world market leaders."

— *VDI-Nachrichten*

"This entertaining book is the ideal companion for a long reading evening by the fireplace or in a hotel room. Whoever is interested in business stories and biographies can dive straight into it."

— *Managementbuch.de*

"Simon not only writes about his life story. He also delivers lessons for brand and market success in the global competition of the twenty-first century."

— *Absatzwirtschaft*

"In his memoir, Hermann Simon always searches for the universal, the interesting, the things that take a reader further. The question of 'why?' and the search for the pattern behind the individual runs through the accessibly written book like a red thread. Anyone who has read it will understand Hermann Simon's pattern for success."

— *General-Anzeiger,* Bonn

"Hermann Simon fans get their money's worth: from elementary school to his academic stints in the United States and elsewhere to his consultancy work, Simon describes his career in every detail. The personal merges with the professional."

— *Harvard Business Manager*

"Open and honest, the 74-year-old describes his very rich life between his home village and the big, wide world. It is also a book about the German post-war period in which Hermann Simon grew up. It is a book about globalization and how Simon became its role model."

— *Manager Magazin*

Contents

1

Roots

Time and Space

"Where am I from?"

At some point, most people will inevitably ask themselves that question and search for deeper answers.

The former German finance minister Theo Waigel—who gave the Euro its name—was asked how former German chancellor Helmut Kohl succeeded in winning over guests at state visits. Weigel answered by saying "That was an art. He would ask them where they were from, what their parents did, and what they have done with their lives."[1]

The *"Where are you from?"* question interests me because I myself am rooted to a particular place. If I want to withdraw from my current global business world for a few days or even a few hours, I return to the place of my childhood. When I meet people for the first time, I often ask where they are from and where they grew up. The answers always have "time" and "space" dimensions.

I am no exception. The farmhouse where I was born stood in the "Prussian Siberia," in the Eifel Mountains, far away from bustling city centers.[2] The rugged volcanic landscape has molded me and left its marks on me. To this day, one can hear my Eifel roots in my accent.

[1] *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 7, 2017, p. 4.

[2] The exact coordinates are 50 degrees, 3 minutes, and 10.03 seconds north and 6 degrees, 54 minutes, and 37.01 seconds east.

H. Simon, *Many Worlds, One Life*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60758-6_1

But do I also come from a time? I entered the world at 2 a.m. on Monday, February 10, 1947.[3] So I missed earning "Sunday child" status by only two hours. Like every living being, I was the latest link in an endless chain of ancestors. Each of them exists only because this chain never broke. This thought, of course, is not new. As the Roman philosopher Seneca said, no one comes from nothing. Our ancestors extend from the origins of time to the present day.[4] The German-Jewish historian Michael Wolffson dedicated a book about the history of his family by saying "Ancestors—they have shaped us more than we know" (Wolffsohn 2017). Another observer wrote "Where we come from is more than a historical or genealogical question. It is something philosophical. And one feels frustrated, because one in the end does not quite know how to answer that question. Something vague and mysterious has been poured into the foundation of our existence" (Kleinschmidt 2017). We have all emerged from the depths of time. The development and the experiences of our endless line of ancestors have coalesced in our genes and been transferred to us. How and where we are raised leaves marks on this foundation and accompanies us our whole lives.

Deeper Connections to the Past

One evening years ago, I arrived at Alpine University in Kitzbühel, Austria, which is McKinsey's European training center. I had not eaten supper yet, so I went to the restaurant. Only one guest was there, who had likewise arrived late. Because I had met him before, I asked if I could join him. He welcomed me, and we struck up a conversation as we ate together.

After about an hour, perhaps shortly after 9 p.m., another guest entered the lounge and joined us. He was American, so we switched to English. My two companions at the table quickly discovered things they had in common. We became immersed in a discussion that lasted past midnight. I was more an observer than an active participant, asking a question only every now and then.

The guest I had joined was Reinhold Messner, the first person to make a solo climb of Mount Everest. The American who joined us was Robert Thurman, who edited *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a classic text about afterlife and reincarnation (Thurman 1993). I had read Thurman's book after it had caught my eye in the library of my long-time friend, Professor Pil Hwa Yoo in Seoul.

[3] Between February 10, 1947 and the day I first wrote these lines (March 15, 2017) a total of 25,601 days have elapsed.

[4] Seneca, *Aus den moralischen Briefen an Lucilius* (English: *Letters on Ethics: to Lucilius*) Position 6406 in the Kindle Version.

After Thurman had suffered an accident that cost him an eye, he settled in Tibet and became the first Buddhist monk with western roots. During this time, he studied with the Dalai Lama, with whom he remains close friends to this day. When he returned to the United States, he gave up his monkhood and became professor for Buddhist studies at Columbia University. He also founded the Tibet House in New York City together with actor Richard Gere. The Academy-Award-nominated actress Uma Thurman is his daughter.

The meeting between Thurman and Messner—whose own connections to Tibet and the Himalayas run deep—was a meeting of two kindred spirits. I was privileged to eavesdrop on their discussions about reincarnation and about Buddhist teachings. People in other cultures believe in more comprehensive connections to the past. Thurman's version of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* provides detailed conceptions about the transition from the previous life to the new life.

Do I also come from the depths of time? Right now, I know as little about the answer to that question as I did 20 years ago. But that does not change how some things seem strangely interconnected.

On a trip to India, I read in a book about reincarnation that souls of the dead enter a state of waiting between two lives. The souls prefer to remain within their own families and return in the next-born children. The teachings of reincarnation explain that one's fears in the current life stem from experiences in prior lives. Someone who has a fear of water drowned in a previous life. Personally, I have a fear of water, especially deep water. I do not swim very well. But is the number of people who have drowned not much less than the number of people who have a fear of deep water?[5]

The theory of the return of souls within one's own family made me think about my own life. The last person in our family who passed away prior to my birth had drowned in the depths of the Black Sea. After he had endured and survived life-threatening dangers in Russia in World War II, he finally appeared to have been rescued. In Sevastopol, he boarded a ship that was supposed to bring German soldiers to safety. But the ship was shelled and sunk by the Russians. That happened in May 1944. We only learned about this tragedy eight years after the fact. In 1952, we received a message from the Red Cross that a comrade of my uncle, Jakob Simon, had seen him board that ill-fated ship. He was declared dead and was honored with a funeral service in our home village.

---

[5] In the year 2016, 537 people in Germany died from accidental drowning. But that number seems high to me, relative to the number of people killed in traffic accidents (3214 people), an historic low. See also "Wieder mehr Badetote," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 17, 2017, p. 6.

Why am I afraid of water? I cannot recall any direct experiences around water that would have instilled that fear. And why has my uncle Jakob, whom I never met, appeared to me in a dream with unusual clarity?[6] But then another tragedy of an ancestor emerged. My wife Cecilia, with whom I had shared my thoughts on reincarnation and my fear of water, recalled a story about an event that happened almost 150 years earlier.

"Your uncle Jakob isn't the only person in your family who drowned," she said. "Have you forgotten what happened to your great-grandfather in Paris?"

My great-grandfather Andreas Nilles came from Lorraine. He took a job as postman in Paris and moved there with his wife. Shortly after the birth of his first son Johannes on November 18, 1875 he was assaulted and thrown into the Seine, where he drowned. His widow moved back to her family in Lorraine, which had since become part of Germany after the war of 1870–71.[7]

Two family members drowned. Their direct descendant has a fear of deep water. Is that a coincidence? I do not know. I cannot say that I believe in reincarnation. But I know many people from Asia who are convinced that it is real. And what reasons should there be to consider that teaching any less plausible than the Christian belief in life after death?

Across Centuries

"What is time?" wondered Augustine of Hippo.

His answer was merely: "I know what time is if nobody asks me; if somebody asks me then I don't know."[8]

Albert Einstein was more pragmatic with his simple definition: "Time is what the clock says."[9] In the mid-1800s Heinrich Heine warned that the "elements of space and time have become shaky. Space is killed by the railways and we are left with time alone" (Kortlaender 2014).[10] According to Henri Bergson, we have a grasp only of space, but not time.

It seems clear, then, that our notion of time is less concrete than our notion of space. We use words such as short, long, far, and high to describe space. Yet

[6] See Chap. 13 of this book.

[7] After World War I, Lorraine once again became part of France.

[8] https://www.osho.com/osho-online-library/osho-talks/einstein-mystery-saint-augustine-4452b948-65c?p=356d142ff374e5e1e80cbae079cfe69e.

[9] https://www.philosophie-raum.de/index.php/Thread/24555-Gehirn-Bewusstsein-Nichtlokalit%C3%A4t/?postID=544600; the original quote is in German "Zeit ist, was die Uhr zeigt."

[10] The original quote is German "die Elementarbegriffe von Zeit und Raum sind schwankend geworden. Durch die Eisenbahnen wird der Raum getödtet, und es bleibt uns nur noch die Zeit übrig."

we also use the exact same adjectives to describe time. We say that life is short, but we also speak of long periods of time and of things far in the past. If something must be done urgently, we will say that it is "high time." The mathematician Kurt Gödel has said "the world is a space, not a time" (Yourgau 2005). The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson understood space and time to be a unit, as he said "the sense of being … is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed."[11] But perhaps the German comedian Karl Valentin expressed the most succinct way to reduce space and time a common denominator: "I don't know anymore whether it happened yesterday or on the fourth floor." In any event, it is no wonder that the place I came from seems much more concrete to me than the era I grew up in.

Having said that I have made my way through life in equal measure along the dimensions of time and space. In previous centuries, a person might have traveled a grand total of 10,000 miles in his or her life. Farmers went into the fields and occasionally ventured into town to buy or sell goods in the marketplace. Once a year, they would make a pilgrimage. The distances they traveled were always short, unless they were going off to war or making a pilgrimage to a distant location. Thus, the accumulated distance during one's life came to a few thousand miles. Even the soldier Johann Peter Forens, who came from my hometown and fought in wars all across Europe with Napoleon, is said to have traveled "only" a little over 10,000 miles in his lifetime. The 72nd *Wehrmacht* (German army) division, originally stationed in our regional capital city Trier, fought on all fronts in World War II and covered about 4000 miles on foot.[12]

Nowadays, we cover a distance anywhere from 20 to 190 times faster than our ancestors, depending on the mode of transportation. A person can walk three miles per hour, but a car can travel at 60 miles per hour and a high-speed train runs at speeds of 180 mph and higher. A passenger jet reaches speeds of 570 mph. The distance between Seattle and the famous shrine at San Luis Capistrano in southern California is approximately 1200 miles. If a pilgrim walked 20 miles per day on average without a day off, the journey would take 60 days. A flight would take less than three hours. In other words, the journey by air takes 1/524 the time of walking. People today travel as much in a few days as people centuries ago did in their entire lives.

[11] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self Reliance (Illustrated)* Kindle Edition, p. 14.

[12] See also *Die 72. Infanterie-Division 1939-1945*, Eggolsheim: Nebel-Verlag/Dörfler Utting 1982.

Today when I fly to Beijing to give a speech, I can return to the Frankfurt airport two days later and will have traveled a total of roughly 10,000 miles. A one-way trip from Frankfurt to Sydney takes 20 hours and covers 10,250 miles. I completed my fastest around-the-world journey in seven days, flying from Frankfurt to New York, then to San Francisco, then Seoul, and finally back to Frankfurt. That distance was 17,340 miles. In my 70-plus years, I have traveled several million miles, a distance that in times past would have required several generations, if not centuries to cover. Measured in miles, my journeys have taken me—metaphorically speaking—through many centuries. Andrzej Stasiuk, the most highly acclaimed contemporary Polish writer, expressed a similar thought: "Those who travel live several lives."[13]

Moving now from time to space: when I was born in that small village in the Eifel Mountains in 1947, life there was not much different than it was in the Middle Ages. When I compare living conditions then with today, I can observe that more has changed in those few decades than over the many preceding centuries. My feeling is that the extent of change between my Eifel village of 1947 and what I call the Globalia of the twenty-first century is much greater in extent than the change in the period from 1650 and 1850, and probably also more than in the century from 1850 to 1950. But perhaps every generation that has lived since the Middle Ages feels that its own era has been the time of greatest change.

In Chap. 2, I will go into greater detail about that transformation and will attempt to make a more objective measurement. But the statement that I have "traveled" centuries through time and space does seem accurate. Many people of my generation have traversed even greater metaphorical distances. One example is Mohed Altrad, who was born to Bedouins in the Syrian Desert. He does not know his exact birthdate. In France, he became a billionaire and a member of the French Legion of Honor. He said: "I grew up similar to Abraham, who was a Bedouin and only knew the desert. When people ask me how old I am, I answer '3000 years.'" He is expressing that he has experienced a development in his life that in the course of history took millennia to unfold.[14]

[13] "Im Gespräch: Der polnische Schriftsteller Andrzej Stasiuk," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 9, 2017, p. 40.

[14] *The Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 016.

The West, Warsaw, and Back

Answering questions of ancestry begins with one's parents. My mother Therese Nilles was born in 1911 in the village of Hemmersdorf, which is located in the Saarland close to the border with Lorraine.[15] My father Adolf Simon came into the world in 1913 in Hasborn, a small village in the Eifel Mountains. Both of my parents are thus children of the far western part of Germany.

How did they meet? Given the distance of about 100 miles between the two towns, it would have been unlikely for the two to have met under normal circumstances. In that day and age, almost all people married within their own neighboring towns. That a spouse would come to the Eifel from such as "great" distance would have been extraordinarily rare. The roll of the dice that brought my parents together—and altered the course of many millions of other lives—was World War II.

My mother trained with the Red Cross as an auxiliary nurse. She was drafted at the start of the war and stationed first at the Hotel Schulz, a beautiful classic lodge on the shores of the Rhine in the town of Unkel am Rhein, near the famous Bridge of Remagen. The well-known hotel and the nearby church-run convalescence home had already been converted into military hospitals in 1939, in preparation for Germany's invasion of France. As that campaign progressed westward, she was stationed in Metz (today part of France) and then later Wiesbaden, before the transfer came that would change the course of her life. In 1941, she was relocated to Warsaw, where she worked for the next three years. That is where she got to know Adolf Simon, a lance corporal in the medical corps. They worked in the same hospital the Red Cross had set up. These two children of far western Germany first met far in the east, more than 700 miles from home. Something must have sparked between the two of them, or otherwise I would not be here to tell this story.

They married in May 1944 in my mother's hometown. One day after the wedding, my father had to travel to the Atlantic coast, where his next assignment awaited him. Only a few weeks later, on June 6, 1944, the Allies landed on the beaches of Normandy and the Germans began their retreat from the western front. My mother, who had taken the family name Simon, did not return to Warsaw. The Soviet troops had already reached the outskirts of Warsaw by July 1944. They stopped their forward march there because Stalin had no interest in supporting the Warsaw Uprising, launched by the Polish underground resistance. He allowed the Germans to brutally crush the uprising (Borodzie 2004).

[15] Lorraine belonged to Germany at that time, but is currently part of France.

I have never visited the place where my parents were stationed in Warsaw. To this day, German–Polish relations remain under the shadow of history. I have Polish friends and know many Poles. But my oldest Polish friend suffered greatly under the Nazis, as did his family. I know that he speaks and understands German, and occasionally I have sent him German newspaper clippings, which he read. But even though we have known each other for 40 years, we have never once conversed in German. Many people from that time still carry the scars of what they suffered from Germans.

Germany's unconditional surrender on May 8, 1945 brought World War II to end in the European theater. My father was held as a prisoner by the French, while my mother returned to her hometown. Because public transportation had broken down completely, my mother rode by bike from there to the Eifel. That was a precarious adventure because of the chaos all around. The war had reduced streets, bridges, and entire cities to rubble. On her journey, she had to pass through French and American checkpoints. Nonetheless, she arrived safely in the Eifel. That was also the first time she encountered the small village and the farmhouse where she would spend the rest of her life. Had she imagined her future in that way when she fell in love with the farmer's son Adolf Simon in Warsaw? The contrast between the agricultural and "backward" Eifel and the comparatively modern, industrialized Saarland must have been striking to her.

My mother's family had its own turbulent history. Shortly before the outbreak of World War II and several months before the invasion of France, the region around her hometown was declared a Red Zone. That meant that the entire population from Basel in the south to Aachen in the north had to evacuate with whatever they could take with them. My mother's family—together with their livestock and all their household goods—was resettled in Thuringia in central Germany. They left behind a small farm, a grocery store, and a wagoner's shop. The war officially began on September 1, 1939 when German warships attacked Danzig (now Gdansk) in what is now Poland.

In May 1940, the German army attacked its western neighbors France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. After the German troops had passed through the Red Zone and reached Paris, the residents of the Saarland were allowed to return, but what greeted them was a shocking surprise. My in-law's house was gone. Confronted by a curve too narrow for their tanks to pass, the German army had leveled the house completely. The family was left with nothing.

Exactly 50 years later, I accompanied my mother and her sister (my godmother) on a visit to Unkel, where my mother was stationed as a nurse when the war began in 1939. The Rheinhotel Schulz was still in operation, and we

entered it through a stone archway. A sense of calm and comfort permeated the courtyard. Because the hotel is right on the shores of the Rhine, the terrace offers an unobstructed panorama that includes the ruins of the famous Drachenfels Castle. It is exactly the perspective that many artists in the nineteenth century used to paint their romantic pictures of the Drachenfels and Nonnenwerth Island in its foreground.

We told the young lady at the reception about the events of September 1939. She was interested and for her age she knew a lot about that period. The waitress who served us coffee knew even more. She was older and had grown up in Unkel. She also told us that the hotel owner was still alive at age 88. My mother remembered him.

As we looked out onto the Rhine, we were moved by the sight of an unusual ship traveling downstream. On the ship's deck, which had been transformed into a stage, a band played music and songs from around the time the war began. Individual soldiers in military dress from different eras stood aboard ship as if they were keeping watch. Chills ran down my spine as the remembrance of that time came to life before our eyes.

The ship served as the setting for a theater production of Bertolt Brecht's *Ballad of the Dead Soldier*, which was being performed in the cities of Verdun and Bitburg, on a ship on the Rhine, and in the city of Bonn. Brecht originally wrote his ballad with World War I in mind, but the contemporary producers shifted that focus forward by one World War. In Brecht's World War I setting for the ballad, a German soldier dies at the Battle of Verdun, one of the longest and deadliest battles in human history. He is buried in his imperial military uniform. He is then dug up from his grave and sent back to war, this time World War II. He dies in battle again and is buried in his *Wehrmacht* uniform at the military cemetery in Bitburg. That is the same cemetery that attracted headlines worldwide after the controversial visit by US President Ronald Reagan and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on May 8, 1985, the 40th anniversary of Germany's unconditional surrender.

In this updated version of Brecht's ballad, the soldier does not rest in peace after his burial at Bitburg. He is removed from his grave again, dressed in the uniform of today's Germany army (*Bundeswehr*) and sent off to war once again. The soldier in this controversial ballad travels his last stretch on the ship I was referring to and finds his ultimate resting place high above the Rhine in the old customs tower in Bonn, which was still the capital of West Germany at that time.

I consider this interpretation of Brecht's ballad as a remarkable artistic device to bring space and time together. An interesting side note to the performance is that the mayors of Bonn and Bitburg at the time openly tried to

stop the project. But why? Both mayors were taken to court and quickly lost. The producers' victory in court allowed me to sit on September 1, 1989—exactly 50 years after the beginning of World War II—together with my mother and godmother on the terrace of the Hotel Schulz and experience such a moving performance. It is hard to imagine two worlds more different along the Rhine than the one in September 1939 and the one in September 1989. The thought occurred to me once more that the true elapsed time in that intervening period was centuries and not merely 50 years.

Exactly 30 years later in 2019, I stood at the same place again, reflecting on my life. What luck I have had to live for over 70 years in peace! No other German generation before me was so fortunate.

Europe: Fate and *Patria Nostra*

The fates of my family reflect the turmoil of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My great-grandfather worked and died in Paris, where my grandfather was born. My family in the Saarland lived alternately under the rule of the French, the Germans, and for a time under the League of Nations.[16]

In World War I, my paternal grandfather caught malaria while deployed in Bessarabia, a region which now lies mostly within the country of Moldova in Eastern Europe.[17] In St. Gabriel near Vienna, my uncle Johannes Nilles studied theology and was ordained as a priest in 1935. He then spent the ensuing 53 years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea. My parents ended up in Poland during World War II and met in the military hospital where they both worked. Two of my uncles fought in Russia and one of them did not survive the war. My father was dispatched to St. Nazaire on the Atlantic Coast in 1944. One of my mother's brothers and an uncle by marriage served under Field Marshall Erwin Rommel in North Africa. They came across each other later in an American prisoner-of-war camp on a farm in Kentucky.

The fact that my family's history has been so closely intertwined with the continent's and the neighboring countries' fates has definitely played a role in my being a staunch European. I do not share the rather skeptical viewpoint of the French philosopher Bruno Latour, who said "Europe, that is what I

[16] Between 1920 and 1935, the Saar Region was under the League of Nations (Geneva) and governed by an international commission.

[17] Most of Bessarabia now lies in the Eastern European country Moldova. The name has nothing to do with Arabia. It is derived from the name of the House of Basarab, a royal family from Walachia (Romania) that ruled the region in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

hesitate to call the European fatherland" (Latour 2017). Either Europe is our *Patria Nostra*, or we do not have one.

The numerous strokes of fate experienced by my ancestors exemplify the difficult times in Europe. Four of the eight children of my paternal great-grandfather died either at birth or at a young age, as did my father's twin brother. One uncle died in a train crash in 1940. Four years later, his brother drowned in the Black Sea. My grandfather from the Eifel fell from a barn loft when he was 75 years old and did not survive. Fate also hit my mother's side of the family hard and often. Not only did my great-grandfather drown in the Seine, but three siblings of my mother did not live beyond early childhood. Such chains of catastrophes occurred in many families. Child mortality, war, and accidents claimed many lives. Is it coincidence or providence that the chain of ancestors that led to me never broke?

Eifel

After my father returned from Allied captivity in September 1945, my mother went to the Eifel Mountains for good. She moved into the farmhouse where three older people lived: my grandparents Johann and Margarete Simon and an unmarried great aunt. All three were around 70 years old at the time. My grandparents had seven children, five of whom were still alive after the war. All of them had left home and were therefore not available to keep the farm going.

Although the matter was never discussed in my presence, my grandparents must have been very concerned both about their advanced age and the future of their farm. That left my father—who had worked as a milk inspector prior to the war—with no choice but to return to his parents' house and become a farmer. In the 1930s, he had studied for two semesters at an agricultural school, but he was never passionate about farming. After the war, his generation had few options. Roots, family tradition, and economic realities conspired to prevent him, like many others, from striking out on his own path. The sense of duty to take care of his parents in their old age and not leave them alone precluded alternative plans for his life.

In nothing else, the fact that my father, who was already 32 years old, left the war as a married man must have offered my grandparents a glimmer of hope. But to the family and the village, his wife was a very unusual person. She came from far away, she spoke a different dialect, and thanks to her years in Warsaw and other places she had a certain worldliness. The women from the neighborhood, in contrast, only knew their own village. Some had worked

as maids in other towns or for wealthier families in nearby cities. But my mother never regretted moving to Hasborn. Although she could have easily done so, she did not speak High German with the villagers. She spoke in her Saarland dialect, and gradually learned the idiom of the Eifel. People from the Eifel, Luxembourg, and Saarland can communicate in their dialects, which belong to the so-called Mosel-Franconian language group. Mosel-Franconian was once the official idiom of the powerful archdiocese of Trier, which also existed as a city-state until 1789.

I bring this up because speaking these dialects can bring some important advantages, as the following story shows. Alois Mertes, who would later become an undersecretary in the German foreign ministry, came from a town in the Eifel and had perfect command of the Eifel dialect. At the height of the Cold War, he served as a diplomat in Moscow. Every diplomat knew that the KGB would listen in on conversations. So he and the ambassador from Luxembourg would use the Mosel-Franconian dialect. That apparently frustrated the KGB to no end because they did not have any agents fluent in this dialect. Sometimes it can be a big advantage to speak a strange or rare language.

The Bonds of Language

I essentially grew up bilingual. And I thought that a household with two languages was the most normal thing in the world. My mother spoke in her Saarland dialect. My father and his village spoke in the Eifel dialect. That was the language I actively used, even when talking with my mother. As a child, it did not dawn on me that my mother used a different dialect than my father. Growing up bilingual in that sense was perfectly natural for me. Perhaps children whose parents communicate with them in two truly distinct languages have a similar feeling.

I have retained my mastery of the Eifel dialect and use it regularly when I am in my hometown. It contributes significantly to the level of comfort I feel there. But the number of people fluent in the dialect continues to decline. Only a small number of young people still learn it from their parents, who prefer to speak to the kids in High German in order to prepare them better for the outside world. Because a dialect can only be passed along orally, the survival prospects for the language of my childhood do not look rosy. But I have not forgotten it and will use it for the rest of my life. It is part of me.

The dialect has many words that do not exist in High German or have disappeared over time. One example is the word for chaff. In High German, the word is “Spreu,” but in my home dialect the word is “Koff,” which is a distant

relative of the English word chaff. Such words apparently share a Germanic origin and spread into Low German as well as English.

A shared dialect forms an important part of the identity of a village or a regional community. If you speak the dialect, you belong. A closeness arises spontaneously when two people speak a common dialect. It makes people feel less distant. As the most famous German poet, Johann-Wolfgang von Goethe said: "Every province loves its own dialect: for it is, properly speaking, the element in which the soul draws its breath."[18] An essay on homesickness uses the phrase "Language is home" (Kals 2017).

Common languages engender feelings of trust and security. At international management seminars and similar events, participants from different countries or regions are intentionally mixed together. They work in multinational groups, discuss issues, and make presentations. The common working language is generally English, which is a foreign language for most participants. But I have observed a particular tendency hundreds of times at these events. People of the same language spontaneously form their own groups during the breaks and the meals. The French, the Japanese, and the Italians (and of course, many other nationalities with a common language) sit together. This retreat into the cocoon of one's own language hinders and sometimes even undermines one important goal of these events, which is to familiarize people across national and linguistic boundaries.

Several hundred colleagues from the firm I co-founded gathered one evening at a brewery in Cologne's Old City. I went from table to table to greet them. At one large table sat only colleagues from Paris. When I suggested that this arrangement was not in the spirit of our firm's World Meeting—designed to bring together colleagues from different countries and offices—they had an immediate on-point answer: "In Paris we never have to time to get together. We find it great to be able to finally sit together at one table." And even though all of our Paris colleagues speak English well, they apparently feel more comfortable using their native language. At the same time, they appreciate it when someone communicates with them *en français*.

Personally, I have frequently experienced that my language gives away my origins and also creates enduring bonds. That starts with the recognition of a common hometown or home region. Time and again, I meet people who come from the Eifel or the nearby Moselle Valley, famous for its wines. In the course of a speech, discussion, or consulting project, people often homed in on my accent and recognized my roots. I also do the same with others. Michael

[18] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Auto-biography of Goethe: Truth and Poetry: from My Own Life*. H.G. Bohn. Kindle Edition.

Naumann, a former federal minister of culture, said "dialects can have the same effect as personal ID documents that some people carry with them their entire lives, whether they want to or not"(Naumann 2017).[19]

In this sense, I am reminded of a visit to the firm Bosch Rexroth. The CEO invited me to join him and his team for lunch. In the midst of our conversation, one of the other executives suddenly interjected: "Mr. Simon, you talk exactly like our Dr. Hieronimus."

"Who is Dr. Hieronimus?" I asked, following quickly with the question "and where is he from?"

Dr. Albert Hieronimus was a board member at Rexroth who would later become CEO of Bosch in India and conclude his career as CEO of Bosch Rexroth AG, the global market leader in hydraulics. He answered for himself: "From a small village in the Eifel that you have definitely never heard of." But I insisted on knowing, and he said "Immerath, in the county Daun, in the 'volcanic' Eifel."

My great-grandfather came from Immerath. He was the one who brought the name Simon to my home village.

Over the years, I have had several similar encounters with children of the Eifel. Is it a coincidence that my paths crossed those of so many Eifelians? These encounters gave me the idea to bring the successes, careers, and experiences of these personalities back to their roots. Nearly all of them had left their home villages and towns at a young age. Back home, only a few people knew what became of them and what unusual and impressive paths their lives had taken. So I initiated a series in a regional newspaper under the title "Children of the Eifel—Successful in the World." Each week there was a new story about someone with Eifel roots, and eventually I compiled the series into a book under the same name (Simon 2008).[20] Both the series and the book were well received. The Eifelians were proud of their children who had carved noteworthy paths in the outside world.

There was another situation in my life in which language played both a unifying and also a segregating role. Starting in 1958, I attended the Cusanus High School (*Gymnasium*) in the nearby city Wittlich. Many of the students came from local villages and were fluent only in their own dialects. High German was effectively a foreign language for them. On the other hand, the

[19] See also: "In den Rollen seines Lebens," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 22, 2017, p. 12.

[20] This series continues from time to time in the newspaper *Eifelzeitung*. Through 2018, around 140 profiles had been published. A second series, "Children of the Eifel—from other times" included some 400 profiles through 2018 and was also published in book form. Gregor Brand (Autor), Hermann Simon (Editor), *Kinder der Eifel—aus anderer Zeit*, Daun: Verlag der Eifelzeitung 2013; Gregor Brand (Autor), Hermann Simon (Editor), *Kinder der Eifel—aus anderer Zeit*, Band 2, Books on Demand 2018.

students who grew up in the city generally spoke High German, even if it was tinged with a regional accent. These were the children of civil servants, doctors, lawyers, and businesspeople. This separation due to language endured beyond school and remains more or less unchanged even today. The village kids spoke among themselves in their dialects, while the communication with the city kids took place in High German. If I meet someone with whom I previously spoke in dialect. I automatically fall back into our common idiom. I find it difficult to speak with them in High German, and others seem to have the same difficulty. One time at Oktoberfest in Munich, I was having a good time with several friends. One of the people was Dr. Michael Thiel, who grew up in my home village and is the son of my elementary school teacher. It was clear to both of us that we could only speak in our dialect. Anything else would have felt strange to us.

References

Wlodzimierz Borodzie, *Der Warschauer Aufstand 1944 (Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus),* Frankfurt: Fischer 2004.

Ursula Kals, "Wehe, wenn das Heimweh kommt," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 15, 2017, p. C3.

Sebastian Kleinschmidt, "Zeuge der Dunkelheit, Bote des Lichts, Rezension eines Gedichtes von Ulrich Schacht," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 11, 2017, p. 18.

Bernd Kortlaender (ed.), *was die Zeit fühlt und denkt und bedarf*, Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag 2014, p. 36.

Bruno Latour, "Das grüne Leuchten," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 7, 2017, Frankreich Spezial, p. L7.

Michael Naumann, *Glück gehabt. Ein Leben*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe 2017

Hermann Simon, *Kinder der Eifel – erfolgreich in der Welt*, Daun: Verlag der Eifelzeitung 2008.

Robert Thurman, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between*, New York: Bantam Books 1993.

Michael Wolffsohn, *Deutschjüdische Glückskinder—Eine Weltgeschichte meiner Familie*, Munich: dtv 2017.

Palle Yourgau, *A World without Time: The Forgotten Legacy of Gödel and Einstein*, New York: Basic Books 2005, p. 115.

2

Leaving the Middle Ages

A slightly older contemporary of mine once wrote that his "childhood and youth would appear medieval by today's standards, but that was the reality barely half a century ago. And then seemingly overnight, a sudden change came that was more radical than anyone could have ever imagined." (Nosbüsch, 1993).

The person who wrote that passage, education professor Johannes Nosbüsch, came from my home region. His words also accurately describe my childhood. It is not an exaggeration to say that agriculture in my village after World War II was still medieval. Some progress had occurred since the nineteenth century, but handicraft, self-sufficiency, and traditional habits still predominated.

Hundreds of authors have written about what it was like to grow up on a farm, and the detailed descriptions in those biographies generally reflect my own childhood. So I will spare the reader yet another repeat of those typical experiences, and instead limit my stories and comments to a handful of situations that stand out to such an extent that I still recall them vividly today.

With a few exceptions such as the teacher, the postal clerk, and the policeman, all of the families in our village lived from subsistence farming. The largest farm covered 28 acres, and the average size was 20 acres. Almost all of the work was done by hand. In terms of farm equipment, the Eifel trailed more advanced, mechanized parts of Germany by a couple of decades. On our farm, the family had two devices that barely earned the name "machine": a mower and a seeder, both horse-drawn. My grandfather had purchased the mower on January 10, 1940 for 341.50 Reichsmark, which was about $136 at the time. Compared to mowing with a scythe, it represented an enormous

H. Simon, *Many Worlds, One Life*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60758-6_2