

Chapter 7

Salzburg Seminar

Summer 1973

This chapter covers only one-month of my life, apparently too short for a full chapter of a biography. But in terms of impact on my life, this story is epic. The major piece below tells a life-transforming story. And in terms of people and true friends, it is a personal treasure.

The Twitch of an Eye - A Memoir



Mihai Nadin

“Memory, in short, is engraved not merely from the life we have led but by the life of the mind, by all the lives we so nearly led but missed by an inch, and—if we

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grant enough leeway to the imagination—by the lives of others, which can cut into ours every bit as sharply as our own experience.”

—*A Guide for Writing a Memoir* by W. G. Sebald

“The world I live in, the objects I manipulate, are in a great part my constructions . . . The worlds the writer creates are only imaginatively possible ones; they need not be at all like any real one.”

—*Philosophy and the Form of Fiction* by William Gass

Looking up at the climax of my clever presentation on Robert Coover’s short story, “Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was,” etc., etc., *ad infinitum*, I spied a large young man leaning against a tree with his nose hanging over a dour puss of a down-turned mouth. Our seminar was being held outside its normal classroom in the garden by the lake that nestled at the foot of an Austrian Alp. Miffed by the sour reaction—or the lack of a suitably appreciative reaction—I carried on. I had written Coover’s story on a Mobius strip, cut the strip in half and, voila, produced not two strips, but one large strip with the story still one and united [ta da!]: sometimes things are not what they appear to be.

The fifty or so participants in the 1973 Salzburg Seminar 148 on Modern Experimental Fiction at the Schloss Leopoldskron—the house of the von Trapp family in the movie of “The Sound of Music”—were suitably impressed and the seminar continued with another speaker.

The young scholars represented nearly all the countries of Europe, including those countries still behind the Iron Curtain. The seminar was established after World War II by Harvard University to bring together potential leaders of post-war Europe and to heal the cultural and political wounds of the battered body politic of Europe.

Distinguished American scholars were the resource people for our seminar: Jarvis Thurston, editor of *Perspective*, a literary quarterly with his wife, Mona van Duyn, National Book Award poet and future Pulitzer Prize winner; Charles Davis, founder of the Black Studies program at Yale; Sergio Perosa of the University of Venice; and finally, William Gass, author with a philosopher’s training, professor of philosophy at Washington University, novelist, winner of a National Book Critics’ Circle award, and in our eyes, “Father of Meta-Fiction.”

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The Seminar with Gass was held, perversely appropriately, in the Schloss's Venetian room, which was mirrored on every surface—walls, doors, ceilings, mercifully excepting floors. Gass, a slight man with thick and heavy eyes and thick and heavy hair to his shoulders, was the professor we loved to hate. In those gestation days of deconstruction, it seemed he challenged our beliefs as teachers: that literature had important values to convey to our students; that we were torchbearers of civilization in an encroaching age of barbarism; that literature spoke some kind of “truth.”

When Gass shambled into the Venetian room, the electricity in the air was palpable. Whatever alpha waves we could exude from our cauliflower brains imprisoned in our skulls began bouncing off the mirrors. The seminar, truly exciting and obviously a rare experience for all of us, forced us to reexamine our inherited preconceptions about literature. What did we really know about what we read?

There was “fiction,” and then the “meta-fiction” of Gass: “The novelist will keep us kindly imprisoned in his language—there is nothing beyond,” and “The so-called life in novels is nothing like actual life at all,” and “The event [in the world of the novel] may be anything: a twitch of the eye or adultery.” We would retreat from the seminar to the *bierstube* and rant about the missing “soul” of “meta-fiction.”

How did a 35-year-old lecturer, born in the USA and teaching in Canada, get invited to a seminar for Europeans? I was on leave from St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, to acquire a doctoral degree from University College Dublin of the National University of Ireland, or else I would never get promoted to full professor. No doctorate, no promotion, no salary increases. The prospect of five children—ages twelve to less than one—clamoring for meals, inspired me to pack the whole family off to Ireland to study Anglo-Irish literature—the seven of us became Walsh's Flying Irish Circus.

The pressure was on: two years of assistance at half-salary, the third year no help. Facing a penniless third year, I had finished the PhD requirements in two years, in my spare time writing a novel “The Cave” about the burial tombs of the High Kings of Ireland [2,500 BCE] in New Grange on the River Boyne. Encouraged by a professor at UCD, an alumnus of the Salzburg Seminar, I applied for one of the two fellowships allocated for Ireland, offering the manuscript of my novel as evidence of my writing skills.

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Following the interview, I was awarded one of the Fellowships, and the committee asked me if I knew anyone else who might be interested in the other fellowship. [I feel obligated to mention the paucity of applications, despite the shine it rubs off my award.] Without hesitating I nominated the professor who had guided my dissertation, Gus Martin, lecturer in Anglo-Irish literature at University College Dublin of the National University of Ireland. Gus, who was my age, had become a dear friend, treating me more as a colleague than a student. I had been teaching for some fifteen years and he had me giving public lectures at UCD. Gus had played a major role in introducing Irish writers into the high school curriculum, through seminars at UCD for high school students and teachers from all over the country. He had recently won the award as the outstanding personality in Irish television for his literary presentations employing Abbey Theatre players. He would soon become *the* Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama at UCD [the Irish have only one Professor per department, all others are of lesser rank], a Director of the Abbey Theatre and an Irish Senator, following in footsteps of his beloved W. B. Yeats.

Gus was a shoo-in and we made plans to jet off to Salzburg, to be followed by a degree-culminating trip to Italy, to be joined by my wife in Milan. After all, having paid respects to my father's Irish forbears, I owed homage to my mother's Italian heritage.

On the plane to Salzburg, I noticed a fellow in the seat across the way, and turning to Gus, said, "That fellow's going to the seminar, too." Gus scoffed, but an offer of a stick of gum led to our becoming acquainted with Gordon Bennett, the American President of New England College. Gordon, an English professor, was in charge of students from the United States following studies in England through the University of New Hampshire. By the time we landed in Austria, we thought of ourselves as three musketeers—*instantly simpatico*—off on an intellectual holiday adventure.

The three of us moved among the participants like "bull-goose loonies," laughing and joking. The Europeans looked upon us as a three-headed English-speaking dancing dog. They laughed at everything we said, but laughed nervously and with a sideway tilt of the head. We were having a great time—first time in Austria for the three of us—and that the Europeans seemed so relatively reserved and dignified, mystified us.

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As we mingled we began to get stories from the Europeans, especially those from behind the Iron Curtain. I got a story from Ioanna from Czechoslovakia: she and her husband had been active in the student uprisings in Prague, and eventually they made a run for the West, and she escaped, but her husband was shot. She and a daughter were living in England where she worked as a translator for the BBC.

Gus was disturbed by a tale he got from Antoinette from Romania. She was a translator and her husband was a member of the Communist Party. He and the government were trying to force her to become a member of the Party, but she resisted and one night her husband tried to kill her with a pitchfork.

Gordon was getting similar stories, and the three of us began to suspect that there were dark shadows in the hallways of the Schloss. The surface air of holiday and bonhomie hid an underlying base of pain and suffering in our new Iron Curtain comrades. We came to realize that these people did not get our jokes, our badinage. Our irony and good-natured banter and attacks on one another—all three of us experienced athletic-trash-talking pseudo-jocks—were inaccessible to our new friends. Our freedom to attack others' personalities and faults was puzzling to them. Weaknesses and personal matters were not to be bandied about in public. We agreed to be more careful and to confer frequently so we could help one another to get a handle on what was really going on with these people.

On the first weekend we had a dance in the main hall of the Schloss. We were giddy with the knowledge that in this very room Mozart had played for the Archbishop; that Max Reinhardt, Europe's foremost theatrical producer, had entertained legendary guests; that Christopher Plummer and Julie Andrews had acted *The Sound of Music* in this palace.

Gus prevailed upon me to dance with Antoinette, the poor woman, to make sure she had a good time. Gordon did his bit, and I did mine, complimenting Antoinette on her sparkling diamond pendant earrings. A long table with nibbles and a dispensing carafe of red wine at one end and white wine at the other was keeping the party loose. After our dance, I asked Antoinette if she wanted a glass of wine, "White or red?"

"White," she replied, and with a classic draw of a finger across her throat, she snarled, "I've had 'red' up to here." I felt uncomfortable and turned Antoinette back to Gus.

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Looking around, I spied the big guy with the long, sad face sitting off to one side along the wall. Why wasn't he dancing? Still sad, still dour, still a killjoy at a time of camaraderie. I took a long look at him and decided that a month of having him haunt the seminar would be a month too long.

Sitting down next to him, I shook hands and introduced myself to the young man who said he was Mihai Nadin of Rumania. Possessed of some hitherto unrealized instinct, I said, "I hope you are not offended by what I'm going to say, but you look terribly sad. Is there anything wrong? Is there anything I could do to help you?"

Mihai's eyes immediately teared up. I was almost frightened. This man was going to cry. He told me his story: he was born and schooled in Brasov, Rumania, where he is Associate Professor of Mathematics. He has a master's degree in electrical engineering and a PhD [with honors, I found out later] in Esthetics. This unusual combination got him the job as Assistant Editor of the review *ASTRA*, in charge of the section for arts and philosophy. He was also involved as a dramaturge with several theaters.

Several years ago he had met an American woman visiting Rumania, a translator, and they had fallen in love. Unable to stay in Rumania, she had found work in Switzerland to be nearer to Rumania. The government would not let her into Rumania except on a tourist visa, and would not let Mihai out of Rumania unless on official activity—whatever that meant. They wanted to get married, but for this Mihai had to apply and go through a difficult bureaucratic procedure. Actually the communist government did not want their citizens to marry foreigners because the Rumanian eventually left the country.

So when Mihai won a fellowship to attend the Salzburg Seminar in the summer of 1973, he and his true love arranged to meet in Salzburg. She would be able to come from Switzerland to Salzburg and they would be together even if only for about a month. But, en route, Mihai's true love had an accident and was now in a hospital in St. Gallen and unable to join him. No wonder the poor guy was blue. Mihai's consoling companionship was Andrei, a fellow Rumanian and editor of *ELECTROS* literary magazine. If I felt powerless to help his situation, I could only imagine how miserable he must feel.

As Gus and Gordon and I conferred over the next few days, we began to realize the difficulties of life behind the Iron Curtain. Free travel was extremely restricted, and papers and visas and permissions were necessary between

neighboring *towns*. The government could deny people university degrees if they were thought to be homosexual. The government would declare ownership of all homes, allow people to make payments to buy them back, and then repeat the exercise.

The stories of the hard life behind the Curtain began to multiply. I met Dascha and Sonia and Ileana from Yugoslavia, Wanda from Czechoslovakia, Agnieska from Poland. I sought balancing information from Belma from Turkey, Inger from Norway, and Jessie from Scotland. My confusion grew. I began to feel quite intellectually inferior to the Eastern Europeans; they all spoke six or seven languages and had multiple degrees. I had earned my three basic degrees, BA, MA, and now PhD, and could speak English, read and understand enough French to order a meal. Comparing myself to the Europeans, I felt like a fish coming out of water to live on the land.

When I expressed my growing consternation to Mihai who was so knowledgeable in both electronic engineering and philosophy and drama and art, he laughed at me. “Oh, Patrick, if you only knew how much we envy *you*! You can worship as you like; you are on your town council, you can travel freely, you are working in a field you love, you can say and do anything you want, and you were free to marry Jacqueline! You are the one *we envy*! We are huddling so close together in Europe, border to border, we pick up languages like loaves of bread. We leave our chosen professions and go into esoteric studies because the government can’t follow us there; they don’t understand art and literature. Only in the realm of what they consider impractical ideas are we free.” Later, I found out from Andrei that all of Mihai’s books had been removed from circulation—only because he wanted to marry a foreigner. One exception was his first novel, which became a runaway success until the government was informed by the Soviet Union that it was an indirect attack on communist Rumania!

This glimpse into the nature of life behind the Curtain came as a shock to me. I thought I had been raised as a middle-class white New England American, with Roman Catholic parents: a father of Irish descent and a mother of Italian descent. During my years in St. Joseph’s High School, in North Adams, Massachusetts, I was a fervent supporter of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy against the Red Peril threatening the United States of America: “Better dead than red.” “Get the Commies out of the State Department.” “Exterminate the atheistic Pinkos!”

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I accumulated enough of the US Senate minutes of the McCarthy Hearings to build my own wall to keep out “un-American undesirables.”

Our Pastor at St. Francis Church, Monsignor John P. Donahue, also in charge of St. Joseph’s school, fulminated regularly in his sermons attacking the Communists and the “garbage pails” known as Ivy League Colleges. I was a gung-ho red-white-and-blue full-blooded American ready to be dead, not red. Then I graduated and went to university in Canada where my views were considerably modified by being in a foreign country.

My conversion to “liberalization” on the road to Antigonish was as instantaneous as Paul’s on the road to Damascus. I came under the influence of Fr. Rod MacSween, English professor and autodidact, who converted me from chemistry to English literature. Every Wednesday evening a group of his disciples met for discussion in his digs, a room lined with books and magazines on every wall, desk, table, chair, and radiator. We would begin by reading a page or so from *The Introduction to the Devout Life* of St. Francis de Sales. Then we would read from *The Commonweal*, a periodical published by lay Catholics, and of a decidedly anti-McCarthy bent. Then we devoured the entrée of the evening’s intellectual buffet: a free-for-all discussion of any item brought to the table.

I can never remember any subject raised upon which Fr. MacSween was not more knowledgeable than anyone I had ever met. On those rare occasions if his sources were challenged, he would reach over to a pile of papers or across to a stack of books and pull out the pertinent argument. He could also direct us to any bookcase or table to pull out, “that book with the blue dust-jacket—down there about three from the bottom of the stack” and then he would flip to a page and give us a salient quotation.

On the night in question, a *Commonweal* editorial had attacked Fr. Halton, the Catholic chaplain at Princeton University, who had publicly and somewhat viciously criticized a visiting distinguished professor Jacques Maritain, a Catholic, for being “soft on communism.” The discussion group condemned Fr. Halton, and like a trout to a well-tied fly, I rose to the absent chaplain’s defense.

“But, Fr. Halton is right,” I cried. “The communists are atheists, anti-American, they are out to exterminate us,” or passionate words to that effect. After a small scuffle in which I became even more impassioned and adamant, I stated emphatically, “Fr. Halton is speaking the TRUTH. That makes him right. It’s his duty to make the TRUTH known and to defend it.”

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Fr. MacSween, who always spoke quietly, said, “Okay, Pat, let us assume that Fr. Halton IS right—isn’t it his duty to make the truth known in a way to make it loved, not hated?” Whatever Rubicon exists between conservatism and liberalism, that was the moment I crossed it.

In the years following, I grew much more tolerant of the right of peoples under communist governments to do as they saw fit. I certainly didn’t agree with the communist system. The freedom of America—and Canada—was a superior, a much superior, political system, but foreign governments had to be free to pursue their destiny to the best of their ability. So by 1973, I didn’t worry too much about the “Communists” and the way they ran their internal affairs.

But since 1971, I had experienced Irish and English culture, thereby gaining two insights into my heritage. First, I had not received a middle-class white American upbringing; I had received an Irish Catholic upbringing. Second, the social class system based on blood lines was still alive and well and living in England and Ireland, and had influenced my childhood inherited values. My inherited views were being re-evaluated.

Now, here I was in Salzburg, living and breathing and eating and studying with live people from behind the Iron Curtain. Some must have been Communists, but how was I to know? Gus and Gordon and I were caught in a Grade B spy thriller comparing notes on the horror stories of our colleagues. Could life be as miserable as they were telling us? What was the truth of their situation? Of our situation? We were now encountering our life in the Schloss as confusing, evanescent and frustrating as William Gass’s world of “meta-fiction.” What was “real” and what was “fiction?”

One evening, many us from the Seminar walked into Salzburg to the convent where Sister Maria had lived. The attraction was a concert featuring Vivaldi’s *Stabat Mater*. I took a seat near the rear of the chapel, where I usually sat at home. Surveying the congregation, I spotted Aage from Norway and Bob and Tony from England—there was Antoinette standing in the side aisle—and in the front pew, Mihai and Andrei. I watched as Mihai bent over to talk to a little girl sitting next to him. Suddenly he turned away from her and in doing so turned towards me—was he going to cry again? *What now*, I thought.

After the glorious concert, some people headed down into town. We had grown less than enthusiastic about the primary diet of *Wiener schnitzel* at the Schloss. Some pub grub would be a relief. Gordon was organizing a group off to

one side. Gus and I went after Mihai and Andrei and invited them to go into town with us for a jar and a bite. They both protested, trying to sidle away from us. We suddenly realized that they had no money. I explained that I was a rich Yank from Canada, and they would please be my guests for the evening. Gus insisted. Still they resisted, looking over their shoulders as the crowd was dispersing. More complications—someone was watching them!

Gordon was headed down the stairs towards town, and motioning for us to follow. I gave Gordon a high sign—a finger across the throat and then to the lips. Gordon caught on, began singing—he was our finest singer—and led his troop off to town like Maria leading her charges to the park. We hustled Mihai and Andrei back into the chapel and then out another door, and being careful not to be seen, headed into town for some good cheer.

We had lost any contact with Gordon, which was probably wise. We ended up in a pub with windows opening right on to the River Salz. Beer and cold cuts and bread and singing along with the locals. We were all in a happy mood. Then the leader of the band, with his accordion hanging on his belly, started going around the room asking visitors to sing their national anthems. Gus bellowed out the Irish national anthem “The Soldier’s Song,” and I followed with both “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “O Canada.” Then we headed home.

As we chugged our way up and down the hills back to the Schloss in the warm summer evening, we kept on singing. The hills *were* alive with the sound of music. Mihai and Andrei were not singing. I called a halt to our march and confronted them. “Why didn’t you guys sing the Rumanian national anthem back there at the pub?” They both started to cry—or at least teared up. The explanation: the Rumanian national anthem had been commandeered by their Russian masters and Rumanians were now required to sing the new lyrics “in praise of Mother Russia,” which of course these two men could not do. I could just imagine Francis Scott Key’s anthem lauding the sickle and hammer. Unthinkable for an American—and I realized I would be an American to the grave. We were now so down we shuffled to a little dive around the corner from the Schloss and closed the evening with some local schnapps of kerosene grade.

That weekend, the seminar scheduled a slight break from Friday noon to Monday morning. Most of the people made plans to go to Vienna, but I wanted to go to Venice, which was not on my Italian itinerary after the seminar. Gus and Gordon were game once I demonstrated the feasibility of splitting three ways the

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rental of a Mercedes to drive to Venice: the price was steep but bearable—and we would have some small relief from the tales of woe of our study mates.

When I told my Schloss roommate, Harald from Munich, about our plan, he became wistful. He would very much like to go to Venice, having already been several times to Vienna. I suggested he might join us, but he demurred, finally admitting that he did not have enough money to make the trip. He was originally from East Germany but was now living in Munich, and he had driven to Salzburg in his vintage Mercedes that was parked behind the outbuilding.

Being an experienced planner—schemer, some would say—I immediately thought of and proposed that Harald should drive the three musketeers to Venice and we would pay for all the gas and his room and board—why rent a Mercedes if he already had one, albeit an older one? Harald was reticent at first, wanting me to vet the idea with my compatriots.

When I proposed the deal to Gus, he exploded. Gordon was hesitant. Gus had noticed Harald: a handsome young curly-haired Teuton prince, lacking only a dueling scar on his cheek to make maidens swoon, but too quiet and reserved and morose, in Gus's opinion. "He'll put a damper on our party," Gus claimed. "He's a sad sack."

I didn't know why Harald appeared so sad, but I had my suspicions and did not want to pursue the reasons. In our chats before going off to sleep, Harald was personable and thoughtful. I assured my mates that he would be fine and probably easier to live with than someone as pushy and obstreperous as we three. They agreed, harboring slight reservations.

I got a map of Austria, Germany, and Italy and began to go over the route with Harald. The shortest route via autobahn went from Salzburg, briefly through Germany, back into Austria to Innsbruck, where we would hang a left south to Italy. Innsbruck. Innsbruck!

Within minutes, I was huddling with Mihai in private and proposed dropping him off in Innsbruck en route and picking him up on our return Sunday evening. What could be simpler? Quite a bit, as it turned out. Because the highway passed into an arm of German territory dangling to the south, Mihai had to decline. He could not enter Germany on his visa. And, of course, it would not be wise to be seen leaving the Schloss . . . Damn. My scheme was blocked—temporarily.

Friday noon, after picking at our *Wiener schnitzel*, the three musketeers and their driver, Harald d'Artagnan, departed from the front door of the Schloss,

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with fond farewells from Ioanna, Ileana, and Wanda and Dascha, and Sonia and Inger, and Belma and Jessie. After this elaborate exit from the first stage of our little drama, Harald drove us out the front gate of the Schloss, around the corner and in the back gate to the servants' entrance of the Schloss. A furtive figure as big as a bear came sweeping out the door and down the stairs and folded himself into the trunk of our car. [He may have squeezed into the back seat, but my mind's movie script of this escapade has him completely out of sight in the trunk!]

Safely on the outskirts of Salzburg, our prisoner was allowed into the car with us. We were on our way to Innsbruck. I had found an acceptable route through the mountains, which would keep us in Austria and would skirt the dangling portion of Germany unacceptable to a Rumanian passport—through the Tirol mountains, Saalfelden and Zell am See—and avoid entering Germany. This road, however, was to the autobahn as a footpath to the Trans-Canada Highway. We would deliver Mihai to his Elvira, and he would be able to return to Salzburg on the train Sunday night, in bond, as long as he didn't set foot in Germany on the way through.

I paid a price for my subterfuge: Harald drove the Mercedes like a kamikaze pilot. In the front-passenger suicide seat, my cheeks clenched in terror, as I peered over the unguarded brink of the road at tiny monopoly houses in the valley below, for in true Formula I racing style, Harald *accelerated* into the curves. I murmured an uninterrupted "act of contrition" and resolved to take the train back to Salzburg no matter what the cost—if I lived that long.

In a slight drizzle [that's what the script says] [bit of a cliché] in a square in Innsbruck, we released our passenger. Gus hugged Mihai and slipped a little something into his jacket pocket, Gordon hugged Mihai and slipped a little something into his pocket, and I did likewise. He melted away down a side street and we all headed for our Venetian holiday.

When we hit the Italian border at the Brenner pass, Gus was chortling at me; "Look at Pat: he's darker now, his face is getting oily, and his hands, look at his hands, whirling and flapping like Toscanini—my God, he's becoming Italian before our very eyes." I was. I felt different. I was Italian, although the only words I knew from my grandmother Cicchetti were *spin-otch-a*, *cambell-a-beans*, *eye-se-boxa!*

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We passed through places that had existed only in my mind: the Dolomites; Trentino, of the Council of 1545; Verona, in a blinding rainstorm that would have put the dampers on Romeo and Juliet and probably saved their lives; Padua, of the St. Anthony of the church where I was baptized. We ended up in a dive of a hotel in the industrial grime of Mestre at one in the morning. Nonetheless, we rose at 6 a.m. to take the train to the Grand Canal and begin our assault on “the drawing room of Europe,” as Napoleon had christened St. Mark’s Square.

As we glided up the Grand Canal, the morning and everything we looked at was gray. Garbage floated in the gray water and the paint was peeling off the gray buildings. We were down emotionally. Then the first rays of the sun cut through our gloom and barges of multicolored fruits and flowers sidled up to accompany our passage. The red and orange and blue and green houses, lighted by the sun, began to veritably glow. People were smiling, activity blossomed all around us, and the infinite deep blue of the Adriatic sky welcomed us into the tent of glory that is Venice, alive and well and still afloat. We sauntered about the Square, paid our respects to the Doge’s Palace, lingered on the Bridge of Dreams, found hidden art treasures in byway chapels, boldly strode into first-class hotel lobbies to avail ourselves of the gentlemen’s facilities. We sat on benches to watch the craftsmen of Murano spin webs of glass dreams. Exhausted, we adjourned to stuff ourselves with pasta and wine as the evening turned to night.

When the bill arrived, Gus discovered that his wallet—and the passport it contained—were missing. His first instinct was to blame a light-fingered Italian, but when we mentally retraced our day, I thought he must have dropped it in the little store where he had tried on a pair of pants. The shop was closed of course, but a note was taped to the door advising Signor Martin to telephone the number. We got Harald to place the call, and the owner of the store told us to wait right there, he would come from home and return the wallet which he had found.

Gus had to wait. Gordon and I were absolutely peloothered, but loath to leave Gus in the lurch. Forward steps childe Harald, volunteering to wait with Gus while we abandoned ship. Chilling stare from Gus, obviously loathe to sit in the starlight of Venice with sad sack Harald. But Gordon and I, justifying our action for the good of our families, we convinced ourselves, abandoned the two of them and went home to Mestre to crash in the dive.

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To my surprise the next morning, Harald and Gus were fast friends. The transformation was so astonishing that I did not take the train back to Salzburg, chancing the return trip by auto to find out what had created this new friendship between the ebullient Irishman and the morose German.

Harald drove furiously to get back to Salzburg, and on this leg of the journey we took the autobahn. Late into suppertime we pulled off into Bad (pronounced *Bod*, as in ‘body’) Reichenhall to get something to eat. In a little winery, we had a light supper and enjoyed the music, stirring German songs accompanied by the mandated accordion. The atmosphere was quite exotic and it seemed we were in a movie.

After supper, we took a walk around the town center of Bad Reichenhall. The stylish goods in the shop windows were tastefully and artistically displayed. It struck me that the windows themselves were free of fingerprints and smudges. There were no gum or candy wrappers or leaves swirling about. The white lines in the street were gleaming, literally shining—they were as clean as highly polished tooth enamel! I had a weird vision of janitors kneeling in the road scrubbing with toothbrushes and checking for cavities. It drifted into my consciousness Bad Reichenhall was the cleanest spot I had ever been on this dirty old planet. Bad Reichenhall stood in stark contrast to the grimy, oily, dirty patch of crowded Italy I had just encountered. A sudden chill gave me goose bumps. Was it the night air, or the realization that this was Hitler country? The palpable obsession with cleanliness reflected in this town seemed extreme. I felt uncomfortable and wanted to leave immediately, which we did.

Later I got the story of Harald from Gus. While they waited for the proprietor of the clothing shop to arrive, Harald, prompted by Gus’s gentle questioning, told his story. Harald had married in East Germany and both he and his wife wanted to study in the west. The government would not let them leave the country together, so Harald went first and earned his degree, then returned to the East so his wife could go to the west and get her degree. This seemed a reasonable compromise under the circumstances, but when word arrived that his wife was ill, Harald could not go to her side. As her condition deteriorated, no amount of pleading would crack the resolve of the government. Finally, when word came that she might not survive, Harald made the fateful decision to jump the wall. He abandoned everyone and everything to go to his wife’s side, but she died before he arrived. And now he cannot go home to East Germany to rejoin

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the rest of his family. He is marooned in the west, alone, to pursue the rest of his life. Gus never again complained about Harald's attitude.

When we got back to the Schloss, another surprise greeted us. The watchdog for the Rumanian delegation to the Seminar had somehow got word of Mihai's jaunt, gone to Innsbruck and escorted him back to secured residence at the Schloss. We were chagrined. Who was the controller?

Antoinette! She who had given Gus the sob story of her dreadful marriage and had refused membership in the party. We three blind mice had not read the signs. I went to Ioanna and asked her, "How could we know it was Antoinette? She had seemed so put upon and so resolute in her resistance the night of the dance."

Ioanna laughed. "The first clue you missed was that she is a translator; only party members can be translators. Her age was a tip, the rest of the promising scholars are young people with their careers ahead of them; she is on the downward slope. Look at her clothes. They are so much more expensive than the others, and she is wearing jewelry, and not cheap baubles, either." We might profess to be masters of ambiguity and subtlety in our literature classrooms, but in "real" life we were sheep in sheep's clothing.

All of these events, both in the classroom and in the intrigue of relationships in the Schloss, cast me into a heightened emotional state. My beliefs in literature and my knowledge of the political realities of Europe were causing me to reconsider who I was and where I was going. My translucent past was prologue to a very murky future.

I had shared every experience of my life, psychological, physical, and spiritual, with my wife, Jacqueline. We met in Grade 9. From that point on our experiences were shared. In the course of the twenty-three years to the summer of 1973, I shared every childhood memory with her, making our lives shared from our earliest memories.

Jackie was the valedictorian of our high school class, earning a musical diploma on the side. Following a business diploma at a local college, for two years she was secretary to the administrator of a 500-bed hospital. She resigned that position to go Anna Maria College where she was *summa cum laude* in mathematics and again valedictorian of her class. We were married in 1960 after her junior year and she graduated six months pregnant, winning the award as the outstanding example of Christian womanhood. She gave up her career

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aspirations to create five beautiful children—and support me much more than I had realized, or fully appreciated, in my quest for the almighty PhD.

Now, I was undergoing a traumatic experience without her, bonding to new friends, stumbling about in a mystifying world. She just had to know what I was going through, because my life was going to be changed—deeply and irrevocably.

I telephoned our friends in Ireland, Billy and Eithne Gallagher, who were going to take care of our kids while Jackie joined me in Italy. They generously agreed to take the children a few days earlier. Then I called Jackie and arranged for her to come early to Salzburg before we left for Milan. I got her a room at a little pension near the Schloss and she arrived for the last weekend to see what had happened to her husband.

The final night in Salzburg the participants gathered for a farewell party. We toasted each other, but the highlight was the toasting and roasting of William Gass. He had eventually led us around a corner. We learned to reassess and think more critically about our presuppositions about literature. The lightning in the Venetian Hall of mirrors had cleared the air following our stormy debates.

Adding to our personal gaiety was the arrival of Elvira Palcsey from St. Gallen, Switzerland.

Elvira and Mihai and Jackie and I retreated from the party to the quiet of Max Reinhart's library. We huddled together in a corner surrounded by the rococo carvings on the wooden furniture. The room was dark with a mahogany glow, much as I remember the office of Don Corleone in *The Godfather*—an impression encouraged, no doubt, by the conspiratorial air of our conversation.

I cannot picture Elvira's face in my mind's eye, except that she was petite and lovely. Jackie and I were aware of the blessed ease with which we had courted and married free and unencumbered by the State, while Mihai and Elvira were struggling to establish a union against the shadowy and impenetrable forces of government and ideology. And these forces sought to suppress their desire to unite in the most basic human sharing as husband and wife. They would not be able to marry if they remained in their current situation. I thought of Harald.

Without consulting me or discussing the matter, Jacqueline, who would have to assume the major burden of what she was about to say, said simply to our new friends, "If you want to leave your present situation and come to Canada to find a new life, you will have a home with the Walsh family for as long as you need." She was holding my hand, and I was so filled with joy and admiration for

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this quiet woman of faith and hope that I could not speak. In that moment, a deeper bond was established not only between the Walshes and our new friends, but between Jackie and me. Some rich vein of faith and hope and love had been tapped—without our having to speak it, for in a sense, such matters lie too deep for words.

The rest of the evening has faded away. We made plans to write, to circulate Mihai's curriculum vitae, to write letters of recommendation. I cannot remember the rest of the party or the parting the next day.

Many years later, I came across a still unpublished manuscript detailing the life of Steffi Hohenlohe, a beautiful young courtesan who had lived in the Schloss during World War II when it was owned by the Nazis. She worked her way up from gypsy origins to be mistress of many powerful men, including some highly placed Americans during a visit to the USA, despite being in the ken of the FBI. One man she seduced was the man who was supposed to be tracking her. Eventually she had been awarded the Iron Cross from Hitler himself—despite the fact that she was Jewish!

I couldn't help thinking about Mozart and the Archbishop, about Max Reinhart and his social set, about the fictional von Trapps of movie reality, about the Nazis and Steffi Hohenlohe—all carrying on in a gray and ambiguous life full of conflicting forces. All of us, for a brief moment, occupied the same space in the Schloss Leopoldskron: matters of import for a few, of insignificance for most. Hadn't William Gass told us, that in a story, "In your story, an event can be anything: adultery . . . or the twitch of an eye."

Back in Canada with my PhD in hand, promotion and building a new house followed. Letters were sent, job hunting for Mihai became part of the routine—without much success. Just before Christmas, Mihai wrote, "After a really long time, I received your letter. Thank you very much! I will explain to you what it means, such a letter and in which way it represents more, much more than a simple answer . . . I don't know if you have received a letter from Europe concerning me. During a very difficult (unexpected!) period of time, I asked a girl that you met once to write you. Now, some things have changed. I am no more so desperate as I was, but am still trying to find an answer." I found this letter a bit confusing.

In January of 1974, we received a letter from Elvira, who had obtained work in Switzerland. "No doubt Mihai writes to you. However, in case one of his

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letters is ‘misplaced,’ M. asked me to write you a few lines. He is well, under the circumstances. Our question is again before the State Council, and we pray for the best . . . M. got some disappointing news about a position he applied for in Amsterdam. But we both keep looking. Now we have two applications in—one in Canada, one in Denmark. However, if you should hear of anything, M. would appreciate very much if you would let him know. Better yet, write to me with any and all particulars besides to him. I, at least, will get your letter and can apply in his name . . . When you write to Mihai, please mention only that you received some news from me. Nothing about the contents of this letter. M. knows it already.” The State still had them under the heel of its boot.

In her next letter in March 1974, Elvira informed us that she had passed the first phase for a grant to study comparative philology. “And in Rumania, ‘they’ seem to be leaving Mihai alone, beyond the usual petty pressures.

“It’s no surprise that Mihai’s letter confused you. He confuses even those who’ve known him for a while. Just remember, his letters must pass the censor’s inspections, and in confusing them, he doesn’t realize how he confuses others. It’s a peculiar system, but you develop a 6th sense for it. Just keep in mind the joke: An old rabbi in Rumania was on a train bound for main stop in town A. His acquaintances on the train asked him where his final destination was, to which he replied town B. A close acquaintance and travel companion asked him, ‘Why do you say you’re going there?’ To which the old rabbi replied, ‘I say I’m going to town B so they’ll think I’m really going to town A, when I’m actually going to town C.’ Actually, once you sense the system, it’s not so confusing.”

Clarity arrived when, nine months after our Innsbruck caper, Mihai and Elvira were blessed with the arrival of their first-born son, Ari Michael Nadin!

Following the Salzburg Seminar, a group of us wanted to keep our new relationship alive, so under the driving force of Gordon Bennet’s leadership we formed the International Society for Contemporary Literature and Theatre (ISCLT) and had our founding meeting at Arundel in Sussex, England, in July/August of 1974. The group still meets every year as a moveable feast throughout Europe and even once at Salt Lake City, Utah.

In October of 1974, Mihai wrote, “You’ll be surprised (I was no less), but after being refused to go to the follow-up seminar at Arundel, I am now in West Germany for more than 2 months (yes, months!). I am trying not only to use this extraordinary occasion, but also to look for something in order to change the

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course of my life . . . As you know, we—Elvira and I—have a son, but the situation concerning our civil status hasn't changed at all. Elvira is now in Rumania (believe me!), with a grant in philology. She told me that she wrote to you about my intentions to move wherever I'll find an opportunity, more or less in accordance with my competence . . . Please answer me at the following address [in West Germany]. You can say anything you like and don't have to worry about the consequences. Isn't that wonderful? Or have you never discovered what that means?"

Yes, I had discovered what it means to be able to write without censorship. My life was following my dream: teaching at St. Francis Xavier with my mentor Fr. Rod MacSween, surrounded by deep friendships, involved in community and church. And on the home front, an indefatigable wife and a thriving family made possible by a writing career as playwright leading to promotion to full professor and the salary that goes with it. That summer that we moved into our new home overlooking Briery Brook Valley we got a message from Rumania:

Ari Michael, son of

Elvira Tereza Palcsey and Mihai Nadin

is overjoyed to announce the marriage (finally)

of his parents on 23 July, 1975

Reception cocktail to be held at Blvd. Dimitrie Cantemir 45,

et. 8, apt. 52 from 17:30 to 19:30,

Casual dress, please.

We sent a telegram of congratulations. The government had finally allowed Elvira to enter Rumania permanently to live with her man, as far as we could guess, because of the commitment to the union in the person of Ari Michael, and perhaps that they would be gaining an American scholar. In Antigonish we would still be pursuing opportunities outside Rumania.

Then, one last postcard:

“Dear Pat and Jackie!

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(as usual) I hope my letter (postcard) will reach you on St. Patrick's Day, so that I will be present in your house, but only in order to wish you good luck and to see you for an instant.

Sometimes I miss you very much so that I look at your picture and enjoy Pat's smile. Let me know, sometimes, how you are.

Yours faithfully,
Mihai"

And that was the last we heard from the Nadin family. Our letters to Rumania came back undelivered or they "disappeared." One night I was thinking about our lost friends and I said to Jackie, "You know, one thing puzzles me." She didn't find that unusual, but decided to humor me.

"What puzzles you, dear?"

"Well, I have never really understood why the government was picking on Mihai and Elvira so much. They weren't committing any crimes against the State. They just wanted a normal life. Why were they persecuted so persistently?"

Jackie was truly surprised at my ignorance.

"You really don't know?"

I waited in silence rather than affirm my ignorance again.

In gentle exasperation, Jackie enlightened me.

"Patrick, they were persecuted because they were Jewish."

I thought I was back in the Venetian room as the lightning struck. Had I really perceived any significant degree of reality of the Salzburg situation? I had no inkling of the faith of our friends. They were just people like us, but not as fortunate, caught in a painful situation.

Down through the years, I often thought of Mihai and Elvira and Ari Michael, especially when Rumania was in the news, or *The Sound of Music* drifted into my consciousness, or an article appeared on the persecution of Jews. I had to wrestle with the question of the persecution of Jews in the name of my own faith. But not just these stimuli from the media and my reading and study of scripture brought my friends to mind. In the dark mahogany shadows of a room in a library, or the quiet corner of a chapel, even a color, a musty smell of furniture, a deep silence, could bring our last meeting to mind, and I would utter a prayer for my lost friends.

When the wall fell, I thought, *Maybe they will surface now*. I waited in vain.

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Twenty-eight years after Salzburg, Jackie and I were empty-nesters. Jackie retired after twenty-five years as editor of the newspaper in Antigonish. I took early retirement after 37 years of teaching at StFX. We moved from Nova Scotia to Calgary, Alberta, in the foothills of the Rockies, to be with our oldest and youngest daughters and their families, with two grandsons each. Also I was the first professor of English at a brand-new Catholic college, St. Mary's, now in 2003 in its 6th year of full-time operation. Following some heart complications, I am fully retired but remain writer-in-residence. The college gives me an office, a phone, computer and printer, and invites us to all the parties.

In December of 2002, I had to move all my files, some unopened since leaving Antigonish, to my new office at St. Mary's. I came across the last post-card above. It brought back the flood of memories, much of which I have shared with you.

I also began to think of how deeply my Salzburg adventure had affected me. The memories here have been writing themselves in my mind for a quarter of a century. For nearly twenty years, I gave public lectures to assorted Lions, Kinsmen, Rotarians, teachers, and religious congregations about my Salzburg experience and the indomitable Nadins. Often the last lecture of a course was devoted to my life lessons in freedom, faith, and commitment at Salzburg.

Sitting at my computer—a technicality not available in the 1970s and 80s, I decided to reactivate my search for Mihai. I went to the computer and Googled the name: “Mihai Nadin.” The result: 1,550 hits! Mihai was on that many sites! How could this be? I tracked his home site to Wuppertal University in Germany, and fighting my way through the faculty listing found an email address.

“Mihai, is it you?” And it was!

“To: “pat and jackie walsh” <walshpj@shaw.ca>

Subject: Re: friendship

Date: Sunday, December 29, 2002 3:47 AM

dear pat and dear Jackie,

once again: beautiful! This is an event I want to acknowledge. Finding you again, or better yet: you found us. and we are, my wife and I quite happy.

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well, after the marriage (4 1/2 years of waiting for approval is already a test) our lives unfolded in exciting though taxing ways. Details (if you really wish to hear them) once we meet again. The short of it: I was out of Romania, my wife was in Romania with our children . . . and it took again patience, love, luck, Gods blessings until we got back together . . . and here are our stations:

Germany, Humboldt grant; Rhode Island School of Design, Providence,

Professor for almost 5 years; THE Ohio State University (Columbus), endowed chair . . . etc., New York city, Wuppertal . . . And come February 28 I will be retired (mandatory in Germany) . . . and see how I continue my professional life.

Our home base is Rhode Island (USA), but we are not enough there . . . My wife is the better half of the entity we constitute, and the children are grownups . . . some more challenging than the others.

Let us know more about yourself. I am sure there is a lot to find out. And let us stay in touch . . . let us plan to see each other and eventually meet.

Life is wonderful and precious. It is up to us to make the best happen.

We wish you well.”

So, we are now planning to get together as soon as our situations permit. I have sent Mihai some poems and we have bought a couple books: *Jewish: Does It Make a Difference?* by Elvira and Mihai Nadin; and Mihai's nineteenth book, *The Civilization of Illiteracy* [888 pages], reviewed as follows by Amazon “a reader” (San Francisco) July 9, 2001:

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“Dr. Nadin’s cultural critique is a remarkably erudite and incisive tour-de-force. The author is at his best when examining contemporary culture through the lens of semiotics; his comments on Peirce are particularly insightful.

It’s difficult to critique a book that is obviously the product of decades of intense study. While the terms ‘masterpiece’ and ‘genius’ are tossed around all too frequently nowadays, this is one instance where their use might well be justified. An extraordinary work from a unique mind. Bravo, Nadin!”

We shall meet again, Nadins and Walshes. Thank God, thank HaShem!

Patrick Walsh

Calgary, Alberta 2003

*

We did meet again—at least I did. On a visit to my sister in the Boston area I drove to the Nadin’s home in Little Compton, Rhode Island, and stayed over for a few days so we could get caught up on our lives since Salzburg. It was a touching and satisfying reunion. I was stimulated now by Mihai’s brilliant work. We are now still connected electronically through emails and phone calls. His magnum opus, *The Civilization of Illiteracy*, was so powerful that I established a small study group at the University, and Jackie and I and the group spent an inspiring year studying the book chapter by chapter. The highlight of the Salzburg Seminar was the mind-expanding confrontation with a deeper understanding of the way the world really is. As the years slip by, my worldview continues to be enlightened by Mihai’s work. And my study of scripture with Michael Duggan and the relationship of my Christian faith with the First Testament of the Jewish faith, continues to draw us closer together. I have passed from my childhood world of an angry and punishing God (which I now believe was a distorted and false image) to understand through the historical/critical method of Scripture study that the Creator/God of the First Testament is the same Creator/God

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of the Second Testament. And that God is a loving, caring God, and the act of Creation, of calling into being, is an act of love.

*

In Salzburg, my encounter with the mind of Mihai Nadin would flower into an enrichment of my faith, and in Calgary, my encounter with the mind of Michael Duggan would pollinate through his great opus, *The Consuming Fire: A Christian Introduction to the Old Testament*, and bring me to a deeper understanding of the underlying unity of, not just the Abrahamic faiths, but of the Spirit working in all humanity. To reach this point in my personal faith, a journey my wife has made with me, I owe a great debt of gratitude to these two outstanding teachers. They advanced the liberalization of my mind begun by my mentor and friend, Fr. R. J. MacSween. How fortunate my wife and I have been to make this faith journey together. *Deo gratias.*



William Gass was one of the leading postmodernist writers of the second half of the 20th century. His work established what is often called ‘metafiction’: work that self-consciously refers to its own storytelling and the writing process, and whose form eclipses the importance of plot. His seminar was a challenge for all of us to reassess the limited methods of literature; really to understand the limits of language in conveying the reality of the world around us. He dragged us by the scruff of our necks into the coming postmodernist world.

Toast to Professor William Gass

Fellow Salzburg Leopoldskronschlossers,
Let us recognize our gains and losses—
We arrived as boys and babes “in the woods”
At Austria’s “Gingerbread House” of goods
Both literary and philosophical—
The hills were alive with the sound of worms

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Eating away our conventional terms:
The mountains were figments no longer there—
Mere fictional constructs made of hot air!
Monsters named “Meta” crawled out of the cracks
And clawed at our minds and jumped on our backs.
And some of us ran through the “forest of fear”—
And some of us tried to escape in our beer.
One Fellow who tried to escape to the moon
Was dragged back to earth by a “flying raccoon.”
Our nightmares were caused by ideas we ate,
That Prof William Gass had served up on our plate.
We balked at his menu, we shouted, “Nein, nein!”
Yet swallowed his diet of “worms” name-ed “Klein.”
A new Luther was loosed in our minds,
Hammering theses on our shuttered blinds.
He kicked open windows, he let in the sun;
None of us shriveled—it turned out to be fun.
Seminarilly digested without any squawks
Were Barth and Barthelme, Coover and Hawkes!
Natural gas is supplied with a smell
To warn us of danger if all is not well—
But when struck with a spark, it burns bright
Supplying us equally heat and light:
Transformed by chemistry into a friend.
Philosophical Gass who seemed to offend,
Burned with the heat and the brightness of stars
That led us to planets far beyond Mars:
He freed us equally from time and from space—
Our guide through the “Funhouse” of fictional faith—
And setting our goals in infinite thought
Drove us to strive for what cannot be caught!
If intellectual challenge and gall
Were wed in the Garden of Adam’s fall—
Then William Gass is Professor supreme
Who makes us dream the impossible dream:

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I ask you Fellows, to charge your glasses,
And drink to the health of the finest of Gasses:
“The End of Everything” was his claim;
But “Beginning” is a far better name:
Proof lies in the fact that we are all here,
So join me in drinking a glass of cheer—
To William Gass, Professor extraordinaire;
We drink to your health—IF you’re really there!
PS:
That writers create like God we’ve been told,
We witness Bill Gass’s mimesis bold:
His Mary is kindly and full of grace,
Beauty and charm which temper his pace.
But his Trinity shows his artistic sins:
Instead of a son, he creates female twins!

