

Chapter 1

Childhood and studies

A child of the Cold War

I am a child of the Cold War. When the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out in 1962 and a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the USA was imminent, we regularly practiced "protective measures" at elementary school. We sat with hundreds of classmates in a row in the corridor of the school building, like little Indians sitting cross-legged. We pressed our hands over the back of our necks to protect our necks, which were not allowed to break.

My little hands as protection against an atomic bomb like the one in Hiroshima? Even at the age of eight, it seemed strange and unbelievable to me that this measure could save the lives of us children.

At that time, my father was building nuclear bomb shelters for his nursing homes and received a lot of financial support from the federal government in Washington. I wondered how the thirty residents of the



"And when you hear the boom from the bomb, you must crouch down very quickly and protect your neck firmly with both hands! That way you can stay alive."

homes, all between seventy-five and ninety years old, were supposed to survive a nuclear war in such a cellar.

We children found it difficult to understand what was happening. In the sandbox, we tried to act out the threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis without finding a peaceful solution. I wanted to understand the situation better. But at school, the subject of "war and peace" was not on the curriculum. The threat posed by the USSR, on the other hand, was highlighted on the



"Our nuclear bunker will be ready in three weeks. Then the Russians can fuck themselves!"

evening news. But America was the land of "the free and the brave". And we celebrated this every year on Independence Day with fireworks. The Cuban Missile Crisis was ended through diplomatic negotiations between the White House and the Kremlin. This diplomatic success left its mark on me.

My Pink Ghetto in Buffalo

I was born in 1955, exactly ten years after the end of the Second World War. My family lived in Kenmore, one of Buffalo's first bedroom communities in New York State. Every house here had a garden. As children, we played in the street right outside the front door, roller skated and explored the surrounding area on our bicycles.

I belonged to a clique of six girls from the neighborhood. Elaine was my best friend and we played with each other every day. We were like yin and yang: I was confident and full of ideas for games and projects at school, while Elaine was thoughtful and often unsure whether she should go on adventures with our clique. The other four girls were older than me, but we stuck together for almost ten years, laughing and crying together.

The Beatles were our favorite band and *Beatle Mania* was extremely popular in Kenmore in the sixties. There was even dishes with the Beatles' portraits on them. We bought packs of chewing gum every week to get our hands on the trading cards with pictures of John, Paul, George and Ringo. We swapped these among ourselves. Over the course of time, we ate a lot of pink chewing gum. We hung Beatles posters in our girls' bedrooms and kissed our stars on the wall. We were American teenagers and enjoyed our lives with Coca Cola, potato chips and pyjama parties.

My mother and father had met in 1942. Max Altman was a successful businessman in Buffalo and came from a well-known Jewish family. His mother, Mary Goldman, came from Berlin. The Goldman family had immigrated to America in 1886. Around the same time, his Jewish father came to America from Lithuania with five brothers, two sisters and his parents. They had run a tobacco business in Europe, the family was called Tabachnik. On arrival at Ellis Island, my great-grandfather, who didn't speak a word of English, stood in a long queue with his luggage for several hours. Waiting in front of him was a man from Germany who interpreted for my great-grandfather. He explained to the immigration officer: "This is an *old man* and he doesn't understand English." The official noted: "Mr. *Altman*, his wife and seven children arrived in New York by ship today." That's how my family got the family name Altman.

My maternal grandparents, both Protestant Christians, had independently come to Buffalo with their families at the end of the nineteenth century. Grandmother Beatrice came from St. Agnes in Cornwall, grandfather Raymond from Baden-Baden

From 1952, my parents were the owners of three nursing homes. They were very busy with their work and had to be available twenty-four hours a day. We were financially secure as a family, but only a third of our patients were able to pay the care and accommodation costs themselves, two thirds were dependent on social welfare. In some months, the homes' finances were so tight that my parents were unable to pay contributions into the pension fund for the nursing staff. These liquidity problems mainly affected the nurses. But my mother also worked for years in the nursing homes. She did the

bookkeeping without receiving a salary and did not pay into the pension fund regularly, as my father did not consider this necessary.

My parents hired both white and African-American employees. For them, skin color did not matter. Once a week, my mother had help at home from Jessie, a black woman who cleaned and ironed our laundry. Jessie lived in the ghetto in the *inner city* of Buffalo, from where she took the bus out to Kenmore to visit us. Her children went to ghetto schools in Buffalo with poor teachers. Jessie and my mom would often sit together and talk about life and their families. They became almost like friends. Tolerance and the belief in a better future in America were very important in my family. Liberal ideas shaped my childhood. But we children were not politically enlightened. And radical left-wing ideas were taboo.

The color of my childhood in Kenmore was pink—from the chewing gum to the clothes to the flowers on our bedroom wallpaper. We were the "*Pink Ghetto*" as seen in the movies with Doris Day and Gene Kelly.

We felt safe. We children came from Catholic, Protestant and Jewish families, all from the so-called middle class. All our neighbors had white faces. Until 1980, there were no black or Latino neighbors in our Buffalo suburb. The local banks would not approve mortgages for such families to buy a house. So Kenmore remained white.

But the years of my childhood were also marked by many political assassinations: John F. Kennedy, Malcom X, Martin Luther King Jr, Bobby Kennedy, George Jackson—all shot in cold blood. Across America, racism against black people and hatred against progressives was rampant. I also remember the Vietnam War as a constant companion that was on the news every evening. The war was on the screen, we children saw the destruction of villages and the murder of Vietnamese people. In my school, the suffering of American prisoners of war was the only topic of discussion.

The civil rights movement was also present in the evening news. My parents praised Martin Luther King Jr. for his courage in the 1950s and 1960s. My family had great respect for this man who had repeatedly organized non-violent mass protests in many southern states. And so my family discussed progressive ideas over dinner: Should black people be treated equally at work, at school, at univer-

sity and in business? Should they be allowed to take out bank mortgages, for example, just like whites?

From 1965 onwards, we were accompanied on television by images of mass protests in the streets. Gradually, teachers, students and some professors found the courage to speak their minds freely. Demonstrations against the Vietnam War took place at the University of California in Berkeley and in many major American cities. Although the police fought the demonstrators of the war protests and the civil rights movement with water cannons and tear gas, more and more people took to the streets.

For women in Kenmore at that time, happiness meant wearing a bikini, having a husband and children. Women didn't work for money, they cleaned at home, cooked, sewed and of course kept the garden tidy. My playmates and I were part of the first female generation of Kenmore women to discuss university studies and careers. We wanted to achieve more in our lives than our mothers, and five out of the six girls did indeed have careers. For me, "career" meant achieving financial independence and not being dependent on a husband.

I wanted to teach elementary school students and was impressed by the *Peace Corps*, a volunteer service program created by President John F. Kennedy in so-called Third World countries. *Peace Corps* employees established schools and environmental projects in developing countries. I was fascinated by the different cultures and life in Europe, Africa and Asia.

The sixties were influenced by music and Woodstock. In addition to the Beatles, we regularly heard Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie and Simon and Garfunkel on the radio. It was a great musical atmosphere. Songs like "*Blowing in the Wind*" and "*We shall overcome*" gave us teenagers hope that society would change for the better.

My first job

I got my first job in 1971 at the age of sixteen. From then on, I worked evenings and weekends in an ice cream parlor in Kenmore. Steve, a colleague twelve years older than me, spent hours discussing

alternatives to capitalism with me. As my father considered the capitalist system to be the best system, I had never had such discussions at home. It was new for me to think about how a social system could work in which the employer did not dictate all the conditions.

Steve came from a wealthy family of employers who, among other things, owned a racehorse farm in Kentucky. He had studied political science in Chicago and joined the labor movement during his studies. He eventually dropped out of the university to become a political activist. Like so many students, he questioned the Vietnam War and the American economic system. In the meantime, Steve was living in Buffalo with other left-wing students. In the evenings at the ice cream parlor, during the fifteen-minute break, he would read books by and about Marx, Lenin and Mao.

We worked together for two years and debated; these discussions were very exciting for me and I began to ponder. I wanted to know more. So I went to our local library and read the book *Today's Isms*, which explains communism, fascism, capitalism and socialism. I was afraid to borrow the book and take it home with me. After all, socialism and communism were not part of our school curriculum, nor did we discuss them in the family. Instead, the credos were: "Free economy", "Individual freedom", "From rags to riches". The motto was: under capitalism, a man can start with just one dollar, if he is creative, he produces something that he can sell and becomes rich!

Mr. Anderson, the owner of the ice cream parlor, had started out just like that. His wife and five children worked with him in the business. In the summer and on weekends, he hired young people from my high school to keep the store open until eleven in the evening. I earned two dollars fifty an hour. The work was fun, but it was also exhausting. In the evening we were all very tired together. After closing time, we had to clean the store and pick up dirty napkins and chewing gum in the parking lot. Due to my tiredness, I once cut my finger deeply with a knife. I should have been rushed to the hospital emergency room, but Mr. Anderson played down my injury and refused to take me to the hospital. There were weeds growing in the parking lot. He told me to pick a large leaf of dragonwort and wrap it around my finger. He was sure the wound would heal by the next day.

Why did Mr. Anderson react like that? He did not want to report an accident at work! Instead, he called my parents: They should come and pick me up. At home, we cleaned the wound and covered it with a large bandage. It would have been necessary to take me to the doctor, but my father refused, as did Mr. Anderson. He thought the employer had acted correctly. If he had reported an accident at work in the ice cream parlor, the authorities would have asked questions about workplace safety. This was my first contact with the considerations that guide a capitalist entrepreneur.

Uprising in Attica prison

In August 1971, the black prisoner George Jackson was murdered in San Quentin State Prison in California. Two weeks later, the Attica Prison Uprising began at the maximum-security Attica Prison in New York State, less than sixty kilometers from Buffalo. More than half of the approximately two thousand two hundred inmates rioted and took control of the prison, with forty-two employees being taken as hostages. The following four days were spent in the prison. The inmates made twenty-eight demands and reached an agreement with the authorities on most points.

Racial hatred and narcotics were as prevalent among the inmates at Attica as in any other prison in the United States. The correctional officers earned minimum wage and were stepchildren of the system. Some of them saw the inmates as beasts and the scum of society. One inmate, Elliot James "LD" Barkley, wrote to the *New York Times* from prison: "We are *human beings*! We are not animals, and we don't want to be beaten or herded like animals. The entire prison staff, meaning every one of us here, is determined to change the callous disregard for prisoners at Attica and in the United States forever."

The demands included better medical care and treatment, fair visitation rights and an end to the brutality against the Attica inmates. The prisoners also demanded better sanitary facilities as well as improved food quality in the canteen. They also wanted a team of observers to be involved in their negotiations with the prison

administrators. Two journalists, a U.S. senator and a civil rights lawyer then came to Attica. The situation became more complicated when Governor Rockefeller refused to meet with the inmates.

Four days later, seventeen thousand police, prison correctional officers and National Guardsmen were deployed in front of the prison, even using helicopters. They smothered the uprising in a hail of bullets. "We tried to get them all before they could do anything. And we wiped them all out," boasted one police officer. In the end, thirty-three prisoners were shot dead and ten correctional officers were killed, shot by their police colleagues. It was one of the bloodiest prison riots in American history. The Attica massacre showed how deep the hatred between black urban prisoners and small-town white guards that was bound to explode here.

The next morning in math class, my teacher explained: "Today we're not going to learn math, we're going to discuss the Attica massacre." I was speechless. Current affairs had never been discussed at my school before, especially not in math class. We debated intensively with Mrs. Smith. She spoke out strongly against the police and Governor Rockefeller's actions. I knew it was extremely brave of her to talk to us so openly.

