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Andy Holzer

Balancing Act

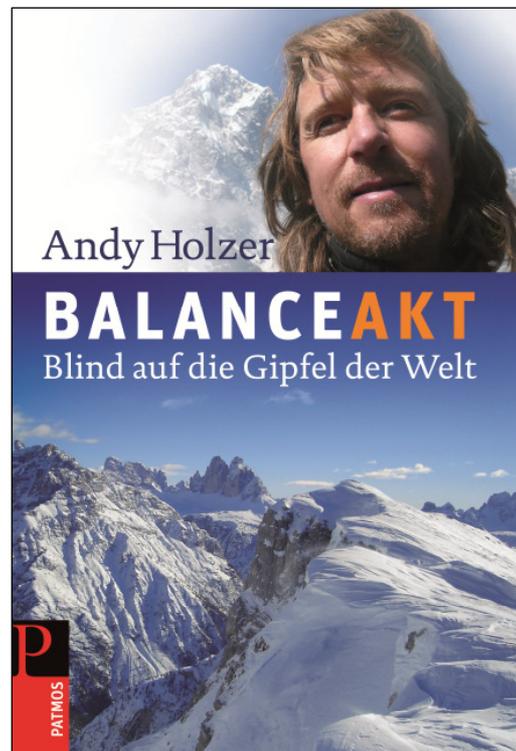
How a Blind Man Climbs the World's
Highest Mountains

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Sample translation by Julia Courmont



With my left hand I feel upwards to find the next secure grip. Thank goodness a grip appears under my fingers as I already feel the tiny rock ledge I am standing on with the ball of my right toe slowly crumbling under me. I am going through this already for the fourth time within the last ten minutes. Despite the merciless exposure or perhaps because of it I am enjoying this situation in a strange way – because I am once again further expanding the borders of my possibilities.

I very distinctly feel that I am located thirty meters above the precipice. Today my safety rope does not run upwards as tautly as usual when Hans is belaying me from above. Instead it hangs from my harness downwards in a slight slope. At the entry point on a steep rock decline stands my mother who is belaying me and blindly trusts in my climbing abilities. What else is she to do as this is her first real climbing tour. And she has no experience in handling a rope team. Just before we entered the wall I briefly showed her how to make the stopper knot that will block the rope in her carabiner in case I fall.

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de

Earlier this morning, Mother climbed with me for two hours across through trackless detritus to the foot of the wall of the Great Teplitzer peak, as I hadn't been able to find any other partner for my enterprise on this glorious September morning. For upright walking I depend on the noise of a partner, whose steps I analyze acoustically. This way I can differentiate if with the next step my foot will land on solid underground, slippery patches of grass, a sloped platform of gravel or on soft moss. So I followed my mother who was my leader in this difficult territory. "Now we have to go up to that patch of snow and then slightly to the right into the second gully on the right" I explained to her according to the virtual map I stored in my brain and that was good enough for her to bring us to the entry point. From here on I am the boss because now my fingers can feel the now vertical underground and I suddenly receive sufficient sensory input to orient myself. To keep up the morals of our rope team I told my mother then that higher up it would soon be less steep and easier for us to advance.

I soon realized that it would get serious this day. The sulphurous odour developing when the rocks become brittle through erosion and by the weather conditions and the slippery patches of water in deeper cavities are alarm signals for me. It feels like climbing across a glass shelf inside a souvenir shop holding on to the many coffee mugs and little flower pots that constantly threaten to plunge into the void with you. Still I push and shove myself higher and higher through the body wide gap. I am reminded of what Hans meant when he said to me that this north wall was not suitable for me because the stone was so brittle and already sighted climbers were taking a big risk here. Nevertheless I have followed my overwhelming urge to climb, made my own mother, a lady of over fifty years, my rope partner and now fight for progress. For a short moment I also consider to bail but in my precarious position it feels suicidal to me. If you are touching the limits of the possible when climbing up going back down is downright crazy. And somewhere deep inside myself I feel a certainty that there is no need to panic.

I suddenly bump with my climbing helmet against an overhanging rock. I realize that I have reached the upper end of the rift and my route will now have to lead me to the right into a less steep territory. I advance my hand over the right edge and try to vault myself over a rock projection that feels like the rim of an oversized bath tub. When I kick off with my foot a boulder breaks loose again and I feel like falling into emptiness. I know that falling from this

height is impossible to survive because I have not yet clipped in to any belay anchor. What's more I have not yet found an anchor for clipping myself in. Intuitively I twist my upper torso and very precisely grab the crack exactly as wide as a finger that I have memorized just seconds earlier when scanning the wall. At the same moment I hear the boulder somewhere far below hollowly hit ground. O God, my mother!

"Careful!" she calls out and because she has no visual of me any longer she doesn't know how much I am struggling here. I am reassured that she is not hurt by the boulder she was just able to escape. While I shout down some encouragement I move further upwards in the steep gully.

I have never been on this wall and I only climb by the image inside my head. When people describe something for me after several specific questions I am able to form a very precise mental image of it. I have generated the image of this route for myself from the descriptions of other climbers, and now I hope that I can rely on it. According to it my fifty meter climbing rope should slowly reach its end and somewhere around here should be the first fixed belay station with two anchors in the rock. My mother loudly confirms from below that I have only two meters rope left and I know now that I urgently need to find a belay station to tie myself in, to belay my mother on a taut rope and to tackle the next pitch. Until now I haven't felt the least clue that there actually exists a piton here mounted by human hand. So I cannot be completely certain that I am actually on the right track and slowly start getting nervous. It is still possible that my mind's map does not correspond to the actual topography and that my imagination has played a trick on me. Like a madman I grope the wall with both hands to finally find the damn metal anchors. If my mother starts climbing now it's suddenly not only my own fate but also my mother's fate that lies in my hands. My mouth is bone-dry and the roof of my mouth tastes bitter.

When my mother asks me from below again and again what is going on, because she can tell by the stagnating rope movement that something must be wrong, I try telling her in an easy voice that I just have to tie my shoe laces. I know exactly that it is up to me to bring our spinning rope team back into balance. So I once again concentrate on what I had heard months before from other rock climbers about the Teplizer north wall. Of course they had not remotely considered that their blind friend might climb this route as the leader of a rope team otherwise they probably would have kept quiet.

Hadn't one of them said that he almost couldn't reach the bolts with his hand and had to climb up a bit higher to clip in the safety carabiner? So I stretch myself with the carabiner in my hand as high up as I can and finally hear the metallic clink of the fixed belay anchors. As quickly as possible I clip it in and call in a confident voice: "Belay on!"

After a brief moment I can hear from below that my rope partner is starting to climb and that I can now belay her on the first rope pitch on a taut rope. Quickly my sense of basic trust returns and I am proud how my mother climbs up relatively fast and I am also proud to be the leader of this special rope team.

We don't exchange many words because we are now halfway through a three hundred fifty meter high wild rock wall. An escape is only possible by way of going up. My mother quickly realizes that she must influence our team positively only, not by destructive, panicky behaviour and only through confidence and mutual trust. After all we still have twelve rope lengths to go. A little shock for her is the sight of the second pitch ahead, which due to her ability to see she has to digest first. It leads horizontally across a slippery rock plateau that's slated like an opened window.

My mother can now see the entire climbing route to the next anchored belay station and the different in-between pitons. This for her unusual sight of a labyrinth of abysses in turn helps me to master this second pitch. Her short calls are enough for me to get a general orientation and I only have to concentrate on the fine tuning of my body, on my steps and grasps. Crossing this slated plateau is a big challenge for me because my feet can no longer follow my hands and I have no information what the ground under my feet looks like. But I manage this balancing act and am happy about a twenty meter long crack that is a hand-wide and shows me the way across this ledge all the way up to the next belay station. Then, once again the handling of bolts and carabiners, clipping in the rope, the command "belay on" and already my mother, belayed by me, may advance a few steps further towards the summit.

Hour after hour passes, one rope length follows the next. Our rope team has long adapted to its strengths and weaknesses and only forty meters difference in altitude are separating us from the highest point. Now I let my mother precede me. Incredulously she looks at me. Looks at me? I register this by her breathing, the warm emission of her skin and other signals that come to me almost unconsciously that tell me how her body is positioned.

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My mother has always been a self-confident woman and she really climbs these last few meters of the steep rock face after a few steps reaching the small plateau of the summit. A cry of joy coming from the depth of her heart from above confirms that for my mother this must also be one of the more beautiful days of her life.

Chapter 1 – A Completely Normal Childhood

Amlach, my native village, is a three hundred soul community, a small idyllic hamlet in East Tyrol¹. Between the craggy summits of the Dolomites in the south and the wild romantic ranges of the Upper Tauern in the north it lies gently embedded on the plane valley floor of Lienz framed by the protective “Ambacher Waldele”², the Ambach forest. My father grew up in this remote, sleepy place on his parent’s farm and together with my mother, who is from Lienz, and his brother Alois and his wife Christl built a house for two families. In 1961 my parents married and moved into the home they had taken many pains erecting. My father was a postman and my mother sold fabrics, so they were very busy to create this shared home. In May 1963 finally the first child was born, a girl. The mood in the Holzer household could not have been better when my mother returned home from the hospital after some days with my sister Elisabeth.

My parents could only enjoy this feeling of happiness for a few days before the terrible news arrived. My mother’s brother had not returned from his tour even though it was long dark and he had to go to work the next day. Uncle Franz was a passionate even possessed climber and had already at his young age of seventeen mastered many difficult routes. He had planed to take the long weekend of Whitsun to do several day tours after another and escape the daily grind for a while climbing the warm rocks of the Dolomites. He had left early on Saturday all by himself and now it was Monday night but there was no trace of Uncle Franz. My parents immediately knew that something had to be wrong since you could rely on him one hundred percent. On Tuesday afternoon they received the sad news that my uncle had been hit by a snow and stone avalanche and died on the Hochstadel north wall, an almost 1400 meter high rock face in the eastern part of the Lienz Dolomites.

¹ In Austria (translator’s note)

² Local diminutive for „Little Ambach Forest“(translator’s note)

My grandfather was a good climber himself and had helped with the mountain rescue of his son.

It must have been quite a rollercoaster ride for my then twenty-one year old mother to have her first baby and lose her own brother within a good week. My father, who was fourteen years her senior did the best he could to help her through this hard time.

The second difficult ordeal for the young couple came when after a few medical tests the doctors diagnosed their daughter Elisabeth with “retinitis pigmentosa”.

“RP” as this serious disease of the eyes is abbreviated in medical circles, is an irreparable disease of the retina often leading to complete blindness. With this defect of the retina the human eye partly or completely has no rods and uvulas. The sensitive photoreceptors convert the optic image that is projected through the pupil onto the retina at the back of the eye into electric signals and send it to the brain via the visual nerve.

Elisabeth would go blind; that was the bitter conclusion for my parents when they had not even noticed that there had been anything wrong with the eyes of the baby.

My sister has a form of “RP” that slowly contracted her field of vision from the periphery towards the centre because the photoreceptors slowly died off from the outer rim of the retina. Up until puberty she was able to see, enjoy the images of the world, even though it was with the so-called “tunnel vision”, a field of vision that was restricted in its diameter, as if looking through a tube.

Already as a baby Elisabeth started adapting to a life with four and a half senses so she could compensate the visual loss through information of the other senses.

She handled her toys just as any sighted child might and when she dropped something she reached for it with pretty accurately because she heard where it fell down. In her familiar surrounding she oriented herself very well. It was only when Elisabeth was more than two years old and the parents took her on her first excursions that in certain situations they noted her strange behaviour. For example my sister did not react when my father pointed out a grazing horse from the driving car.

But when they had parked the car and the noise of the motor had died down the animal suddenly became very interesting to her and there was no holding her back anymore. My parents wondered about these peculiar sensory malfunctions and started investigating. Even the doctors did not right away think of a disease of the eyes because Elisabeth’s

behaviour in this respect was inconspicuous. They even suspected a mental illness to be reason for her strange behaviour. Until an ophthalmologist discovered the true cause and told my mother that their daughter would become blind. My parents should know that all further children born to them would bear the same disease at an even advanced state. This bad news came too late for my mother because their second child was already on its way. And that was my luck. It was on September 3rd in 1966 at 22 minutes past midnight that my mother gave birth to me in the Lienz hospital.

As the will of God or a freak of nature, however my parents then understood the disease of their two children they never despaired over it. On the contrary, they developed a lion like strength to fight for their offspring. Intuitively without any experts pointing it out to them they realized that a completely normal treatment was the only right way to allow their children experience a fulfilled life. Thus I received no special warnings when my head was only five centimetres away from the edge of the kitchen table because if it really hurt I would only hit it there once.

My bed room, our living room, our kitchen, the bathroom, the hallway and the stairwell I automatically explored with my tiny hands, legs and the sensitive cells of my skin that would with every part of my body painfully tell me where obstacles blocked my way.

A systematic examination of my eyes showed that as the second born I was even more afflicted by this eye disease than my sister, just like the doctors had predicted before my birth. For me this was not necessarily a disadvantage because from the very beginning I could adapt to seeing with my ears, nose and remaining senses. Even as a small child I juggled myself through my “darkness” at ease. It was like growing up bilingually.

During his first few months a person learns so much in such a short period as it never will again in later years. Thus already as an infant my adaption to the world of sighted people had progressed so well that my blindness never was an issue for my playmates. It never particularly came up. My playmates then were the children of my father’s siblings, that is, my cousins who all lived in the direct neighbourhood of Amlach. “Andy can’t see very well” they had been informed by their parents. But this warning was as insignificant for them as it was for me because we experienced practically no shortcomings for our collective romps. For example if they wanted to play any kind of ball game that I due to the lack of sight could

always just lose, I was not up to it. Just like Franz was never up to it when we were about to have a sack race. Franz had been born prematurely after six months with a body weight of just 975 grams³ and compared to us others had a weak constitution. And like that every one of us tried hiding his weaknesses so we would not lose our social rank among the group.

For complicated ventures like jumping into the hay, where in the barn of my uncles we jumped from the upper storey precisely through the gaps of the inserted ceiling to land in the hay stacks on the lower storey, I could only rely on Karli or Hannes. Both my cousins had the necessary agility when jumping to bend and twist their bodies at the right moment so they would not hit the dusty wooden beams with any of their body parts. Apart from that the two had a special way to impart the exactly right amount of information to get me through without serious injuries.

The tone of their voices was the decisive factor for me. I could detect by it if rusty nails restricted my way sideways, thus posing a threat or if the way was clear for me. The tone of voice was decisive because they never directly warned me of these dangers but just relied on my perception. Why should they after all, they might have thought, Andy anyway always manages just fine. And by this confidence they actually did me a great favour. Hannes and Karli's laughter and screaming were enough for me to analyze the room and to adapt my jump accordingly. So I always landed by a hair's breadth next to them in the hay stack.

Another great challenge was driving the cattle from the pasture to the barn with my uncle and his children. Uncle Hans was my father's eldest brother who had taken over the farm from my grandfather. He was the father of five children: Hannes, Magdalena, Matthias, Gertraud and Seppi. The pasture was located close to the end of the village and it was not easy to drive the stubborn cattle home through the narrow streets of Amlach without an incidents. The animals wanted to graze in the farm wives' herb gardens at each entrance to a courtyard or satisfy their longing for the neighbour farmer's cow. So we children ran ahead of the little herd of twenty cows to position ourselves at neuralgic places to keep them on the right track with carved canes in our hands. Uncle Franz usually walked behind his cattle and gave instructions how we should position ourselves.

³ 975 grams = 34.39 oz (translator's note)

When my uncle instructed me to block the entrance of another farmstead I often got quite stressed out because I was now responsible for this problematic location and felt the responsibility. It was difficult for me to differentiate by hearing if a cow was behind me, practically in the prohibited area, or still passing by the spot on the village road in front of me. Acoustics often played a trick on me because the steps of the many bovinds echoed on the walls of the farms giving me a wrong sound impression. The fact that Uncle Franz would scold me when he could not rely on me spurred me on to pay extra attention.

Back then the adults treated me in the same uncomplicated manner as the children because my body language gave no indication of my handicap. Though they knew that Elisabeth and I were practically blind they did not pay much attention to it. It did happen though that I still stood there with my carved cane in hand although the group of cattle had long passed by and what I was hearing was a group of tourists who had followed the cattle drive.

Only when the cows were safely in the barn I relaxed and let go of my tension. I only felt completely at ease later on when I stood in physical contact with the Pinzgauer⁴ and German Simmental⁵ cleaning their hides with the curry comb. In the barn the cows stood chained closely together. I felt their body heat and even the smallest movement of these large creatures. This way I could guess if a cow was about to lay down or move another way. This reassured me. I also felt if the six hundred kilo heavy animal was content with my care or if it was unhappy.

The children from the city close by who sometimes came to the barns with us admired my courage to be so close to the cows even though I only went up to the hips of these giant animals. Smoothly I could sneak through under their “banzen”, their bellies, to the other side provoking even more admiration.

In the winter I had to improvise when Hannes and I built a ski jump so we could practise the long jump with our skies.

As long as the ski jump was still relatively small it was easy for me to calculate the in-run, jump-off platform with its edge and the landing area. But as we grew older the ski-jumps had to grow higher and our jumps wider. The velocity increased and for me the jumps

⁴ Types of cattle (translator's note)

⁵ Types of cattle (translator's note)

slowly turned into uncalculated hell rides into the unknown as we aimed for jumps of twenty meters and more.

Sometimes I already tripped on the in-run and the platform I often hit with only one ski. It was impossible then to avoid the terrible fall. The spectators, well the other children from the village, were very interested in what we were doing. They were thrilled when Andy, the “mad dog” really got going. I was not telling them that I could not actually see the ski jump but just pretended that I was fooling around when I tripped. It would have been terrible for me to lose my status as the smart-aleck with genius ideas – of course without any shortcomings.

I soon had to realize that I would not be able to keep up with them and would lose my standing within our little gang if I would not come up with something to minimize my mishaps. I used our new colour TV that lately stood in our living room. Back then the live coverage of the Olympic winter games in Innsbruck was on and I sat in front of the TV on a daily basis to follow as many title matches as possible live. It annoyed me no end if the commentator was boring because I got all my information exclusively from his commentary and the loud speakers on site in the background. The noise of the audience and the scrapping noise of the skies on the jump was enough for me to estimate the flight length. The time span between the jump-off from the platform and the landing was clearly audible and so it was easy for me to know if I could be pleased about the great length of my favourite or if I should be annoyed about his screwed up jump.

The cheers of the audience confirmed my respective auditory image. The failed jump of a Korean should be the lucky chance for my own career as a ski jumper. “Good lord! Just barely scraping by the fir branches” commented the commentator the Korean’s mishap and I asked my father how the ski jumping was related to fir branches. So he explained to me by the by that the organizers had stuck fir branches into the snow along the edge of the run-in and the landing area so that the athlete had a better view and a better chance to calculate his jump. Right away I put this new finding to use in our project ski-jumping and told Hannes that we needed to get fir branches and at the distance of one meter stick them into the snow on both sides of the run-in track. His question as to why we should do this I answered with another question if he hadn’t seen this on TV the day before that the real ski-jumpers used fir branches too to improve the contrasts. Of course for me it was not the

improvement of the contrast that was exciting about this idea but a better chance to hit the run-in and platform at all. If I lost the track I would feel the fir branches touching my legs. With this trick I immediately was able to correct my course.

Our ski-jumping construction also looked much more professional now with the green fir branches on the white snow. "One more brilliant idea of Andy's" my friends said. No one really noticed that I suddenly was once again able to race straight forward across the platform. But after each accomplished jump I quietly and covertly enjoyed this brilliant idea.

A special event for the Holzlers was the new roofing of our house. The large masses of snow and the extreme changes of temperature over the year made it necessary to change the badly affected roof tiles from time to time. Neighbourly help was a big thing in Amlach and so it was understood that for the next few days life would take place on top of the steep roof of my parent's home. It was impossible for my parents to ban little Andy from these activities and so I sat in the open roof truss equipped with a hammer and some nails, just like my father, uncle Lois, Karli, Hannes and the other helping hands.

With my hands I felt for the thin tiling battens on the square meter where I was sitting so I would not fall into the depth in between. Contrary to the others I had almost no tolerance in this situation because even the tiniest wrong move on the thin battens could lead to falling. The further our work progressed and the roof membrane slowly closed the bigger my radius of mobility and finally I could help quite well distributing the new tiles on the roof. We placed the tiles in little stacks on the roof so that the roofers who had been engaged from the neighbouring village could reach the material on the shortest way possible.

Of course, people in the village often pointed out to my parents that Andy was not able to see very well and still crawling around the roof up there. Aunt Leni, my father's sister, who lived across the street always lit candles when she had to watch such dangerous activities so that the Lord would hold his hands protectively over me.

Our Lord played a big role in my childhood as the Christian faith and church going were a tradition in our house. I regard it as a nice stroke of fate that the church of Amlach is consecrated to Saint Ottilie. She actually is the patron of those with eye disease and the blind. The service on Sundays was part of our weekly routine and so as a young boy I sat

between the soft sports coats of my father's and other adults on the right hand side in the back in the men's pews of the church.

Meanwhile my sister patiently waited for the end of the parson's sermon next to my mother in the women's pews. Only when we children did no longer want to sit with the adults but in the front youth's pews with the other children of Amlach going to church started to become difficult for me. From now on I needed my outmost concentration so I could feel my way through the holy silence as inconspicuously as possible to the right church pew and take a seat there observed by the gathered community. It was difficult for me to know in which pew my cousins sat on that particular Sunday and so it happened every once in a while that I ended up in the wrong pew. That always was an embarrassing moment when I did not find Karli, Franzi or Hannes next to me but discovered a stranger's body odour next to me.

It got even worse when I had to recover my seat after the Holy Communion where we had to get up from the pews and reverently step into the sanctuary. I made use of the crowded people because I could imperceptible feel my way from one person to the next.

The celebration of the First Communion at which young Christians at the age of eight years may for the very first time receive the holy Eucharist caused me great discomfort. Back then there were five of us for the First Communion in Amlach and we had taken our seats in the front of the Ottilien church similar to a bridal couple during the marriage ceremony. I felt as if with each of my hesitant movements I were on show for the entire festive community. We had practised the course of the solemn ceremony step by step with our parson and it all had to go well. The five First Communicants had to get up at the right moment, kneel down or read a text part together.

After the service I proudly left the church together with my four friends and immediately was led to a photographer who was supposed to make this unique day of my life visually memorable.

My gaze could not have been very relaxed because the photographer again and again asked me to smile and look into the camera. "This way! There! Can't you look straight ahead? Look that way!" those were the commands that tortured me. For a while I could keep up with the demeaning remarks of the photographer about my uncoordinated gaze until my patience had run out and my sadness took over in a crying fit.

The annual procession for Corpus Christi celebration was a mental tour de force for me. For this people moved in a long chain starting with the cross bearers, the church choir, the high clergy followed by the bearers of statues, the music band and then the crowds through the meadows and across the streets of Amlach. Praying and moving in the rhythm of solemn music the men moved separately from the women and the youths. The procession stopped at certain places in the village where tables decked out in white with opulent flower arrangements had been erected, here the parson read the holy gospel under the open sky. For me the challenge was not to accidentally step from the rows of believers. As long as it was quiet I was pretty much able to foresee my way by the sound of steps of the people in front and behind me. But when the music band started to accompany the celebration with drums and trumpets my sense of position threatened to completely fail me. I had to activate all my resources to endure this celebration without causing a scene and keeping my place in the long chain of believers marching in step with them.

My parent always tried to make a normal life with all its facets accessible to us blind children. They tried to teach us skiing, ice skating, swimming just as riding the bike and sledding, all the things any child in Eastern Tyrol would do. My equilibrium organ had developed perfectly and so it was not a big problem for me to get onto skies, skates and ice skates. The stabilisers on my bike soon came off too.

The only difficulty simply was the question where I was supposed to go because on these vehicles I lost all contact to the floor and therefore quickly all orientation.

My soles no longer provided me with information on the underground and soon I realized that I would have to find out with other senses where I was.

After all I still had four more and already the scraping noise of my father's skies was good enough for me to curve down the slope after a fashion. After the second or third time going downhill I had myself already familiarized with the particular bumps of the slope and I calculated where I had to make a turn in order not to end up aside the slope. It was fun for me to retrace the image of the route I had created beforehand in my head with full physical exertion. A ski racer going over and over the track in his head before his start was really doing much the same.

I had great difficulties getting on the ski lift because I did not know when the hoop was coming and into what direction the thing was going. If I miscalculated the traction just by a few degrees the torque quickly became so strong that my body was pulled to the side of the lift line and I had problems holding on to the hoop. More than once I was hurtled out of the lane during these manoeuvres with my father, usually this was instantly answered by derisive snickers of the other skiers. Over time I memorized every little detail of the different stations on the ski slopes in the area. No matter if it were a slanted crossover, an icy patch or the crossing of the lift line, I always knew exactly where I was. Sunday after Sunday my family could enjoy the wonderful winter days with me and my blindness was never made an issue.

During the summer months our playground was for us children apart from the barn, the hayrick and our garden also the Amlach forest. Together with Hannes I crawled across the soft forest floor searching for as many evenly grown twigs as possible. We built little farmsteads with these in the block house style. I stuck two short twigs into the earth at a distance that let me insert a third twig and laid it in between. At an arm's length apart I repeated this again and at the right angle until the ground plan of my house had been laid out. Now I needed longer twigs for the walls. For the window and door openings we had to be especially creative. We made the roof from tree bark that we peeled off old already toppled trees. We also built fences, and little pine cones played the role of our cattle. Each one of us was very proud to have built the more beautiful farm than the other. Of course I only knew what my work looked like because I had held each part in my hands.

I could not really determine what my Cousin Hannes had built because I could not go and feel it with my hands. I would have been very embarrassed if I had destroyed his fragile building with a clumsy move. All I was left with was my fantasy and his description to imagine his creation.

The routine visits to the ophthalmologist really annoyed me. I just did not understand what the doctor was trying to find. After all I had heard often enough from my parents and the people in the village that I was not able to see very well. It was a tiresome procedure for me to cope with the pressure of the hard lens from the examination equipment on my corneas.

For this eye examination - a minute examination of the eye background where the rods and uvulas are located -the ophthalmologist pressed his instrument on the eye ball to examine the retina's tissue. It was extremely unpleasant for me and sometimes I passed out from it. It was an oppressive sensation as if someone was putting a cork screw into my eye and tried twisting the eye ball. I had always been very sensitive about touching and feelings in my eyes and therefore probably these small interventions felt much worse to me than they might have to other children. The atmosphere in the doctor's room became gloomy when after the examinations the doctor got up from his arm chair and told my parents that nothing had changed since the last control visit. My parents just did not want to give up hope that my retinas might regenerate – which was complete humbug from a medical standpoint. I personally had no grasp what scope this fact might have as I had led a wonderful life so far without any constraints.

But when the discussion now turned to schools for the blind and a home for blind people I quickly pricked my ears. These special institutions for the blind offered the proper education for people with handicaps and were the only chance for the young boy to learn something sensible. "If you don't want Andreas to become a retard you will have to send him there" was the urgent message of the doctor to my parents. The sudden tears in my eyes were not about the type of school or the status of such an institution, no, they were caused by the fear that I might have to leave my world in Amlach. That night at home I flung myself into my mother's arms demanding on the spot a binding promise from her that they would not send me away. She conceded immediately. "We are not going to give you away, even if you become a retard that way" my mother said. My parents' decision of not sending me to a school for the blind was one of the determining turning points for my future life.

The wonderful years of my childhood passed much too fast and an unpredictable threat was closing in on me. My peer playmates could hardly wait for the day they would finally leave home with their schoolbags for the very first time while I secretly dreaded this mystery.

School seemed threatening to me because it meant that I would have to adapt all of my formerly used techniques should I want to lead a normal life together with my new schoolmates and teachers. In the village I was able to recognize each inhabitant by his or

her gait, voice or at a closer distance by the body odour, which made all situations predictable for me. As a six-year-old when I eventually was waiting for the moment of school registration⁶ in the hall of the Lienz elementary school with my parents and I was smothered by the background noise of almost one hundred first graders I knew that my fear of school had been justified. Because Amlach had no elementary school all the children in the village had to accept a school route of more than three kilometres⁷ to Lienz, the only small town in the area.

The reverberating echo of the assembly hall completely muddled up my orientation system. Suddenly I was absolutely helpless and dependent on my mother's hand and for the first time in my life I could no longer move freely about. From the tangle of voices of the innumerable students and adults I heard around me, in front of me, next and behind me and even above me I knew that the school had to be a very spacious building with many stairs and levels. I did not want to take a single step alone so there was no risk to collide with someone or stumble over a step. If only my friends from Amlach would not see me in this awkward position.

When someone of the teaching staff called up my name my little heart started racing much faster and harder than it ever had with the most daring jumps across the ski jump or in the hay stacks. Not because I was afraid of the teacher, no because I could not imagine how I would find my way through this throng of people behind my mother without a mishap.

I only relaxed when we had finally arrived at a table with many notes and document folders, where my parents had a talk with the headmistress and another teacher. At first I paid no attention to the adults' conversation because I was still trying to avoid the subject of school by simply ignoring it.

Only when I heard my mother getting pretty mad I started paying attention to the discussion my parents had with the head of school. I was so familiar with the tone of voice of my parents that I could detect by it – just like a seeing person by mimics – that my mother was hopping mad. Once again the discussion centred around a school for the blind which would entail that I would have to leave my parents, my sister, my cousins and friends in the village behind to spend the next few years far away.

⁶ Here the day of registration in school is not the same day as the first day of school but precedes it. (translator's note)

⁷ 3 kilometers = 1,86 miles (translator's note)

But I was sure that my mother and my father would never send me to a distant special school. I trusted them and their promise.

In my Tyrol of the early seventies school was still a far cry from integrative models teaching both handicapped and normal children together so they would learn from each other.

The prospects as a blind child to be admitted to this school in Lienz were slim at best. For me this gave rise to the slight hope that I might be able to completely forgo school and enjoy life unhindered: “so other children can see and I in return don’t have to go to school”. This was how I imagined that justice in this world worked. And I was happy and content with it.

I anyway was already longing for my small world in Amlach where I was in control of things. The pandemonium here was too much for my frazzled nerves. But as now the teacher Mrs Gutwenger agreed with the headmistress that she would try to integrate little Andy into her class it took a load off my parents’ mind and abruptly ended my colourful fantasies of the great freedom. Relentlessly, the first day of school, that is the day when the seriousness of life was to begin for me approached and very quickly my last summer in the security of my home village came to an end.

The first day of school caused the bitter taste in the back of my mouth for the first time which I still feel today in extreme situations touching on the borders of my perceptive senses. Our teacher organized the seating order in the classroom in such a way that the difficult and quieter pupils held their peace and she still had the necessary overview of her charges. She placed me in the middle front row, a place usually reserved for the eager beaver, the goody-goody and not at all suiting my temper. Next to me sat Klaus, a boy from my home village who knew my habits because we had come across each other several times during our games. The teacher’s manner of integrating me into the class community annoyed me and made me uncomfortable. She was not gentle with me at all, on the contrary: Mrs Gutwenger was pretty harsh with me. Only years later I realized that this kind of treatment had been the only right method not to weaken my status among the other students. Had the teacher constantly tried to make me feel good, defended my shortcomings or had ignored my poor performance I surely would have been known as the teacher’s pet and excluded from the class community. This way Mrs. Gutwenger for example used a situation where I had a quick exchange of words with my neighbour Klaus

to drag me up front to the blackboard by my arm as a punishment. This way she avoided any awkward stumbling and I knew that I had the other students' sympathy on my side. I then had to draw a certain form on the board with the chalk in my fingers guided by the teacher.

"Andy has now written the A onto our board" she addressed the class and then she kept drawing a whole row of A's with me on the board and my class mates had to copy them into their exercise books.

This way Mrs. Gutwenger taught me all of the letters and numbers in a manner that has provided me until this day with an image of our alphabet and numbers in my head.

Writing in exact lines was a problem because I could neither smell nor feel the lines in my exercise book. To remedy this, the teacher had the great idea to let me write with the help of my ruler. It was simple to push the ruler down two centimetres after each completed line, starting a new line. Suddenly I was filling pages with my essays. My fantasy was unrestrained. My teacher was quite happy with them apart from the many spelling errors. Because I could never see the written words my spelling errors did not quite register with me as with seeing people.

It was impossible for me to read my texts myself. Still every now and then I was forced to present short passages of my essays. Our teacher always warned me shortly ahead of time so I could learn the sentences by heart. But as my stammering only contained parts of a coherent sentence they often made no sense to my fellow students and my teacher. The most important part was though that Andy had read. And so I was taken by surprise when Mrs. Gutwenger started reading my essays out to the class as good examples. She gracefully skipped over the really capital spelling errors – audible just for me – to save me from any embarrassment in front of the entire class. But she did not relent and again and again whispering quietly into my ear brought mistakes to my attention when she discovered a gross spelling error in my exercise book.

Today after 36 years I am still incredibly grateful to Mrs Gutwenger for her untiring manner to give me an understanding of the written language. By now I am working at the computer. A special software translates the respective page content to spoken language and is audible through loudspeakers. I can scan the printed text of books and newspapers and have it read to me. For writing texts I use the normal computer keyboard where it is

standard to have the keys J, F and 5 marked with a small bump. This way I immediately find the base row of the touch typing system that is used by any secretary for blindly typing at high speed. Without the technological development it would have been impossible for me to fill these pages with the universe of my thoughts.

The calculus lessons were really easy for me because it was much easier for me to remember the short numbers rather than long sentences. Arithmetic, which for me in principle is mental arithmetic in the literal sense of the word, never was a problem for me probably because I as a blind person had developed great imaginative abilities. More complicated problems that asked for written extensions were a real challenge for me. But even algebra and elaborate arithmetic problems I managed passably well. Soon I had managed that my fellow class mates treated me like everybody else except when playing dogdeball during gym lessons. As the ball flew through the air soundlessly before hitting the opponent player I of course did not stand a chance to react. I was always picked last when the teams were chosen because with Andy on your team you could only lose. It was different with those exercises that required climbing a rope or a pole to the roof of the gymnastics hall, here Andy was a wild card acing the task.

When the four years of elementary school had passed the question arose whether I would go to the Hauptschule, a secondary general school, or the Gymnasium, a secondary grammar school⁸. Mrs. Gutwenger was of the opinion that I was able to continue at the Gymnasium and finish school with the Matura. I was less enthusiastic about it and thus, was very relieved when my parents left that decision to me.

At the age of ten I was not yet aware how limited my possibilities were when it came to the choice of a profession. "I am going to become electrician, mechanic or an engine driver" was my belief and for this I did not need the Abitur⁹. "As a top athlete like ski jumper or cross-country skier I only need ambition and persistence and boring school is only going to hold me back." In truth it was all about escaping the constraints and embarrassments of

⁸ In Austria and Germany only the attendance of Gymnasium with the successful degree of Matura/Abitur qualifies for studies at university afterwards (translator's note)

⁹ Degree needed for studying at university (translator's note)

every-day school life as quickly as possible so I could spend time on the things I could enjoy without my sight.

Therefore, after four years of elementary school my choice of my further school education fell on the Hauptschule, the secondary general school, which would take only four more years to finish. The first lessons in this school building quickly made me realize that I had a new much bigger challenge to conquer here. The boys in my class came from many different villages in the wider area and were speaking in various dialects which greatly unsettled me. Also there was not just one teacher responsible for our class but the teaching staff changed with almost every lesson. For example, Mr. Steinlechner, a subject teacher and our class teacher, taught mathematics and biology, while Mrs. Hofer taught history and geography. Physics and chemistry was supervised by a different person than German or handcrafts and so it became almost impossible for me to adapt to each new voice and its respective peculiarities. It seemed equally hard for our teachers who had difficulties to grasp my special kind of perceptive ability.

With our class teacher Mr. Steinlechner I was as lucky as I was with my elementary school teacher Mrs. Gutwenger. It was he who showed an interest in me and my abilities and actively tried to get the best possible results from me. This was by no means an easy task for him because we kids now were hitting puberty hard and were interested in everything but our own personal weakness. My trying to hide my blindness at all costs did not make his job any easier, because hardly anyone understood what was going on with me. For a blind guy I was much too agile and too offensive, a fact that often caused confusion. When I once again hit my head on a half opened door it only caused mild laughter because the next moment I would elegantly save my face by doing a brief comical skit.

I still very well remember the first math assignment where our substitute teacher who did not know much about me really gave me a hard time. His new-fashioned method of posing the problems quickly brought me to the limit of my possibilities: he handed out copies with text problems and we now had the lesson to solve the problems. The math problems only were a secondary issue here for me, first of all I needed to find out what our subject teacher wanted to know from me. To simply show up and publicly ask what was written on the paper probably would have resulted in a few laughs but also a slap in the face by the teacher. Instead I sat bent over my desk on which I had spread out the exercise book, my

pencil case with several pens and the questionnaire with the math problems I could not read. I now felt it was my obligation to pretend I was concentrating on doing maths so no one would notice that I had not written down squat in my book all lesson long. My pulse accelerated each time the teacher walked towards the row I sat in to see if everything went well. I nervously leafed through my papers bridging those dangerous seconds till he had passed my desk. By the end of the lesson I handed in my exercise book like all the others knowing quite well that the day would come when I was going to get this assignment back from the teacher. I did not even tell my father or mother about my hardship because I wanted to spare them the pain and shame.

At the next parent-teacher meeting the whole issue was uncovered. My father came back home astounded reporting to me that the head master had said that Andy was very lazy. "With the last math assignment he did not write a single figure in his exercise book." Now I had to come clean but it only lead to the fact that the teaching staff did not believe me. How can Andy go home on his bike after school when he can't read math problems off a work sheet? Mr. Steinlechner admitted that this might be true and suggested that for the next assignment they would read me the problems. From now on I only had to worry about the math problems and so managed to achieve a mediocre grade in this subject.

Already as a child I had been using my bike to get around the village just like my sighted friends. I had a very well developed sense of equilibrium that is necessary for riding a bike. Normally the visual sense helps the equilibrium organ located in the cochlea of the inner ear. Sighted people generally try to keep their balance by focussing on a fix point. Just try standing on one foot for some time. After a few seconds you start wildly waving your arms about so you won't lose your balance. And after only two or three minutes an unpractised person will need to put the second foot to the floor again or he is going to fall. If you try the same exercise with your eyes closed it gets even more difficult because you are missing the visual static. Naturally a blind person cannot rely on this help and therefore ideally has a better developed sense of equilibrium. For this reason I probably never had any problems at ice skating, skiing or riding a bike.

For me the difficulty riding a bike was to find the road and avoid hitting possible obstacles on my way. Back then there was basically no car traffic in Amlach and so I could ride freely

and sightless on the few roads and streets that I of course knew all by heart. For the most parts they had wooden fences along the roads delineating the borders of gardens and properties and these worked like acoustic guard rails for me. I skilfully located the few cars and tractors coming through Amlach and promptly reacted to them. If necessary I steered my bike along the fence, grazing it with my hand to make sure I was by the side of the road and stopped there until the danger had passed.

I had to make out other people on bikes or my friends by the noise of their tires. It was very difficult to detect racing cycles with their smooth tires. What I liked best were those old bikes with rough and very audible profile rubber tires possibly making even other squeaky noises. Fortunately I never ran out of ideas how to master even these challenges. I made use of a fashionable spleen the kids had back then to fasten a piece of cardboard on the bicycle frame so that the tip would barely touch the running spokes emitting a loud rattling sound like a motorbike. I only had to be careful that my own rattling machine would not drown out the other traffic and that way ruin my locating mechanism. Therefore I insisted that my playmates use thicker cardboard strips than I so I would be able to hear them better.

Another problem was crossing pedestrians. The locals already knew that they had to look out when Andy came by on his bike. But during the summer months things got dangerous when tourists were walking through our beautiful resort village unsuspecting of a blind child on a bike doing its rounds.

I developed my biking technique to such an extent that I was able to make the three kilometre ride from Amlach to Lienz to school together with my schoolmates. The well-regulated traffic of the small town with everybody reliably driving on the right side of the road helped greatly to get around.

Riding a bike in the village was a much bigger challenge because you constantly had to watch out for reckless young boys barrelling across the streets from any possible angle on their bikes. Half an hour before school began we gathered on our bikes and together rode in a convoy of five to ten girls and boys the daily route of twenty minutes into Lienz. This usually worked just fine because I oriented myself by the mates riding in front of me. From time to time it happened that we boys had to show off our skills to the girls and tried to impress them with daring little feats on the road. For this my mates started swooshing in

between two closely side by side riding girls which usually was acknowledged by the hysteric cries of the frightened girls.

So I was forced to likewise try this risky manoeuvre and I really succeeded. Until today I do not know how close I actually came with my handle bar gliding past my companions but of course I noted that the girls' screams became louder and more piercing than with my friends which spurred me on even more.

Until, one day, it happened:

My right pedal got caught under my neighbour's and together we fell to the left. The girl riding on my left hand side did not stand a chance to escape the site and being followed closely by the others a capital mass fall could not be avoided. We slid across the asphalt with our handles and pedals but also on knees and elbows at an uncomfortable speed until we finally came to a stand still. I knew that I would not come from this predicament the winner. I patiently bore the girls' complaints and wails and the laughter of my friends because I knew that no one was to blame but me. After this collision my pedal's crank was heavily twisted so I could just barely ride my bike the rest of the way. The bigger problem was explaining the mishap to my father after school. Carefully I tried without actually telling him how it had happened.

Amlach is a small village and so the talk of my daring ride soon made it to my parents. But this did not keep me from further manoeuvres. We boys made a sport of carefully advancing our bikes parallel to the back tire of the person riding in front of us slowing him down that way. By the touching tires this exercise also produced a funny singing noise. Not so funny for me was it if the boy in front tricked me by suddenly accelerating when I was about to touch his back tire.

My estimate that I would now feel the subtle resistance of my friend's back tire backfired and the centrifugal forces catapulted me across the street onto the opposite side of the road. Once, this ended in a frontal collision with a racing biker causing a terrible fall for both of us. I was incredibly lucky that the opponent was barely hurt and only my bike mangled. I rather avoided the obvious explanation that I was blind and had not been able to see him so I would not provoke him further. I licked my abrasions and carried my bike wreck back home by foot. This continued for several years until by the age of eighteen I stopped riding bikes.

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One of my last risky actions in this field actually happened right outside of the Lienz hospital where I was working as a massage therapist. I grazed the bike of a nurse who was more than surprised about my driving technique. Even though she had not hurt herself she made a big fuss about it. She did not understand what a in her opinion “half blind person” was doing on a bike on the road. Had she known I was a “fully blind person” she probably would have thanked God to have gotten off so easily.