



Youth on the Wing

HELENA ŠMAHELOVÁ

Gliding becomes the “fashionable” pursuit among the pupils at Masa’s school. Sixteen-year-old Masa has a great need to “spread her wings”. (She is an orphan, and the elderly aunt with whom she lives is old-fashioned and rigid in her ideas.) Gliding seems the perfect outlet for her, and, unlike the other girls, she throws herself heart and soul into the sport as the boys do, thus winning their admiration and developing her own character and self-confidence.

YOUTH ON THE WING paints a vivid picture of life in present-day Czechoslovakia, describes in fascinating detail an increasingly popular sport, and traces with sympathetic insight the emotional ups and downs that beset adolescents. Skilfully and sensitively translated from the Czech by Marie Burg, the book is assured of a wide and enthusiastic readership. *For information about the author, see back flap.*

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Helena Šmahelová

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Translated from the Czech
by Marie Burg

Illustrated by
Kamil Lhoták



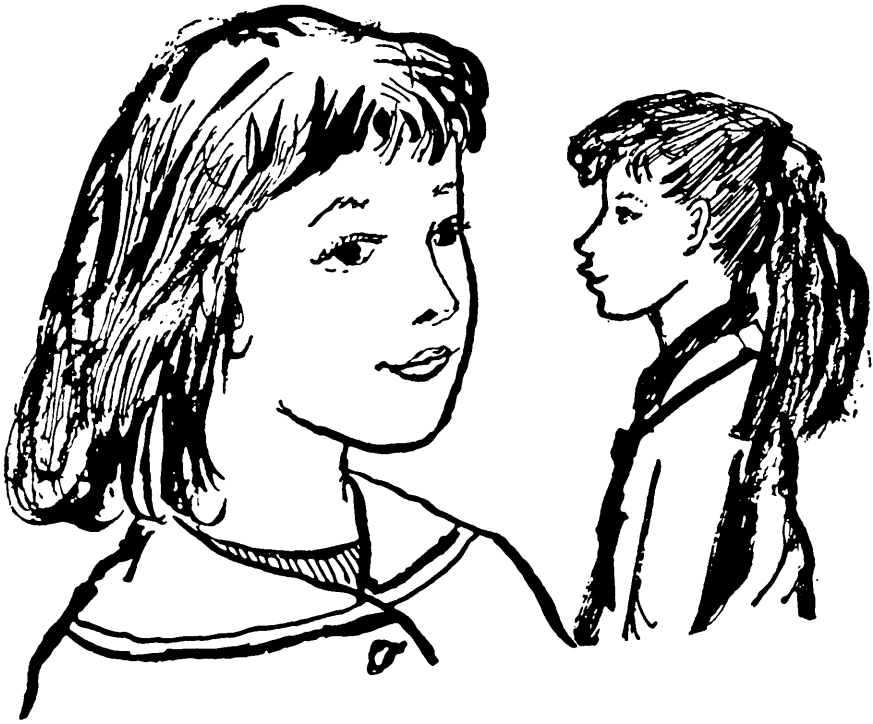
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It was Tuesday, October 20th – an unlucky day. We were taking our first maths test.

The whole school building was wrapped in silence. By contrast the noise from the street sounded all the louder through the open windows.

I couldn't help thinking how lucky those people were outside. They were not being tormented by geometrical problems, and for them there was nothing particularly fateful about the hour from eleven to noon.

Finally I gave up, I definitely couldn't manage the last problem. I resigned myself, yet again, to a "four" or a "five" at best.

And then I was saved. Eliška, my friend, once again committed a crime for my sake, a crime which, if she had been found out, would have spoiled her clean record. First she nodded to me. Then, quite unconcerned, she looked towards the window. I noticed that she was pushing something under her seat with her feet. At last the tiny ball of paper was so close to me that I could reach it easily.

Quickly I copied the last problem and corrected the preceding

one. The school bell rang out loudly and all of a sudden the whole school came to life.

Only our form continued to sit still without moving. Then it was time for the monitors to collect our test books.

Over the hubbub and the hastily exchanged whispers as to how we had managed the questions, the school's loud speaker could be heard. But nobody could think of anything except those horrible problems.

The announcer was inviting us to join *Svazarm* and to choose whichever group interested us. Swimming and ski-ing we had at school. But what about riding and photography? Or driving a car or a motorcycle? Or possibly a course on shooting or on gliding? That was a different matter!

The whole of our form was carried away by enthusiasm. The maths lesson and the test were forgotten. Without giving the matter any further thought, several of us hurried to the ground floor to see the sports organizer in charge of applications for membership of *Svazarm*.

Eliška and I decided to learn to drive. Šuška, who was always clinging to us, declared that she too thought this a marvellous idea. Eliška and I looked at each other, and changed our minds. We said we would switch from the driving group, and join the gliding class instead. Then Šuška looked unhappy, as she always did when we tried to escape from her, and quickly she said that she too thought gliding would be marvellous.

There was nothing we could do about it. We would have her with us again.

Two boys from our form also chose the gliding course. They were Pavel Chvostek and Otakar Petru, our fair-haired little Otakárek.

To become members of *Svazarm* we had to fill in application forms. First Eliška Sušilová filled in her form, then Jaroslava Malá or Šuška as we called her because she was forever whispering and sh-shing. Then it was my turn.

I always feel awful when I have to write that horrid name of

mine which is Matylđa. When I say “Matylđa” I never think of myself; ever since I was a little child it has somehow reminded me of an old-fashioned spinster from the last century or some old person from Třebíč – that is where I usually spend my holidays.

At school and everywhere else – except at home – I am called Máša and that is *me* as I really am from top to toe.

However, official papers have no pity. So I quickly put down Matylđa, and felt better, the way one does when something unpleasant is over.

There were to be five budding glider pilots in our form, the tenth form.

To begin with, during the winter we were told we must take a course on gliding theory, studying a model glider in order to become thoroughly acquainted with the mechanism of the aircraft.

When I heard this I realized there would be trouble at home. The course was to be held on Saturday afternoons, and on Saturday afternoons I always have to do housework. I live with my great-aunt and she has always insisted that this work must be done on Saturday afternoons, and not at any other time.

Thinking about home, I started to worry about the parental permission I would need when I really started flying the following spring. But what was the point in worrying about something that lay so far ahead?

The immediate problem was to find the money for the entrance fee to join *Svazarm*, and to decide what to do about the Saturday cleaning. . . .

But in the end it turned out that our group was not to meet before six o’clock in the evening. Thank goodness! By that time I could have scrubbed down all the passages in a skyscraper, not just our small kitchen and that bit of passage. And if my aunt were to ask: “Where are you off to again?” I could invent some excuse.

* * *

Next Wednesday morning we learned our group would meet at

the training department of the steel works in Komenský Street.

Long before six, we were sitting on broad clean benches in the brightly lit classroom, waiting impatiently. We were starting, at last!

First of all a tall fair-haired party member spoke to us about the task of *Svazarm* and about the importance of our gliding class. He also reminded us to respect the work we were to do and always to give of our best.

The instructor then took over to give us a talk on flying; he spoke of man's first attempts at flying, of balloons filled with hot air, of airships that proved unsuccessful, and he also told us how afterwards flying developed in other directions.

We opened our new exercise books and began to copy from the blackboard how much air such a balloon displaces. Oh dear, it seemed that I had let myself in for something! Working at maths after school hours!

I don't like mathematics. Probably because I never understood them in the upper classes at school. Geometrical problems will remain a mystery to me for ever. On the other hand I can write about Vrchlický's ballads like no one else in our form, and I can get just as excited about them as Eliška does about her equations.

Šuška too toiled away at the pressure of the balloons. But we all knew her; we knew she wouldn't worry about it for long. She whispered that she was going to try on the new frock she was having made for her dancing lesson. And so the balloon filled with hydrogen soon disappeared into misty heights!

Of all the boys and girls in our form, only Ivan Pazderka and I didn't go to dancing lessons. He couldn't go because he had had typhus and ever since had suffered from a weak heart. And I didn't go because my aunt had decided that there would be plenty of time for me to go dancing when I was older and able to stand on my own two feet.

When she first decided not to let me learn dancing, she added softly, as if speaking to herself: "What good would it do you,

Matylda, if you went dancing? They would only laugh at you, it's obvious you'll never learn to dance."

It's true, no dancing master could teach my feet to move gracefully to music.

All the same, Eliška and Šuška came to put in a word for me, but my aunt kept talking about the orphan who must learn to think of more important things than frivolous activities.

From the bottom of my heart I hate my aunt's idea of an orphan child. It belongs to bygone days when deserted children roamed the streets at night or lived in gloomy institutions where they were beaten and hungry, and had forever to pretend they were humble and grateful.

On the Friday after our gliding club had had its first meeting, Eliška and I remembered we had decided to go to the old cemetery to pick some autumn flowers. In the spring, narcissi grow there wild, and iris and hedge roses too. We sometimes go there to pick them, and afterwards we sit down in the avenue bordered by lime trees.

Šuška, of course, came with us and we could not get rid of her. So we settled down on the edge of what used to be a tombstone and looked down at the town from there.

We are fond of our town, such as it is. We have all been born here, and we know every inch of every street and every house, every nook.

"There's the school!" Šuška cried.

Eliška and I followed Šuška's finger. We could only see the roof, but in our mind's eye we could imagine the whole building, the yard squeezed in between tenement houses, and the park where we spend our break.

Not far from the school is the new cemetery with a high brick wall facing south-west. As long as I can remember I've been going there with Eliška to pick violets every year as soon as the snow melts. The brick wall heats up with the sun and warms us like a stove. We often sit in the dry grass leaning against it and just talk.

We never have enough time to tell each other everything, not at school nor on our way home. We would like to stay together always.

People laughed at us because we behaved like twins. But we *were* twins, differing only in features, figure and temperament. Eliška was half a head taller than I, and she had dignified manners. I was angular like a boy. But what was I really like? I didn't know myself.

It has always seemed to me that I know nothing at all about myself. But I knew that my heart was full to overflowing, more so than Eliška's, because she had a family, whereas apart from her, I had not a soul to whom I could show my love. And I could never bring myself to tell anybody about myself. Only to Eliška could I talk about my mother. With Eliška I sometimes used to go to the house where I had lived with my parents, and once I showed her the hospital window behind which my father died.

* * *

School ended early on Wednesdays, and I was always at the Sušils' by half past two. When paní Sušilová came home early from the steel works after her morning shift, she fetched Eliška's brothers from the kindergarten on her way home. When she worked till ten o'clock at night, Eliška had to go and fetch the boys herself. When that happened I used to keep her company, and we stayed together as long as possible.

We sat in the recess divided from the big room by a cretonne curtain, and we felt happy there by the round table in our secluded corner. We felt that we were friends for life, and life was so long it would never come to an end.

I felt perfectly at home with Eliška's family, particularly when her mother returned home with the two small boys, and still more on Saturday evenings and on Sundays when Mr Sušil was at home too; he was a fitter, and worked away from home during the week. But I was sad to see Eliška dividing herself in two, so to speak,

between her family and myself. I felt all the more alone as I had no family of my own.

* * *

To begin with there were twenty-four of us in our work group, but soon there were only fifteen meeting regularly. We continued to study theory and make models.

Our first production was a balloon made of white tissue paper which we filled with hot air over our oil stove. At once the white ball expanded almost to bursting point. Then it slid from our hands, quietly floating through the room and up towards the ceiling from which it bounced like a rubber ball.

But the air in the balloon cooled down and the surface of the ball soon began to shrink until in the end our dazzling white ball, shrivelled and limp, lay on the floor at our feet.

What fun it was to learn about all the things needed to construct a glider, and then to build one on a small scale! We were thrilled when we constructed our first model of a glider, just like the one in which we were going to fly.

Before Christmas we also managed to complete a plane with an engine – a rubber band set the propeller in motion, and then our plane flew for quite a long time under the arc lights, in the end to land headlong on the table.

That evening I came home later than usual because Eliška and I kept “seeing each other home”. My aunt gave me a reproachful look, then she sighed deeply and meaningfully.

I noticed that she was watching me, for she knew all I was doing and all that happened at school. Every day she asked me if I was “called in class” and if I had “done my homework”. Although I told her the truth, my answers had nothing to do with my real life.

“Where have you been so long?”

At last! I replied that we had had a meeting.

“A meeting! A meeting!” she exclaimed, mocking me. “Such a tiny tot going to a meeting!”

She noticed that I was hiding the exercise book with my notes on gliding. Suspicious, she tore it from my hand, thinking that she had caught me out.

Anxiously she turned the pages filled with closely-written notes about the theory of flying and with drawings of models of aircraft. But shrewd though she is in most ways, she could not understand what it was all about. She put the exercise book down, believing it was a school book. A miracle happened: she did not grumble.

A few days before Christmas, my great-aunt arrived from Třebíč, as she did every year, filling our quiet little flat with much bustle and talk.

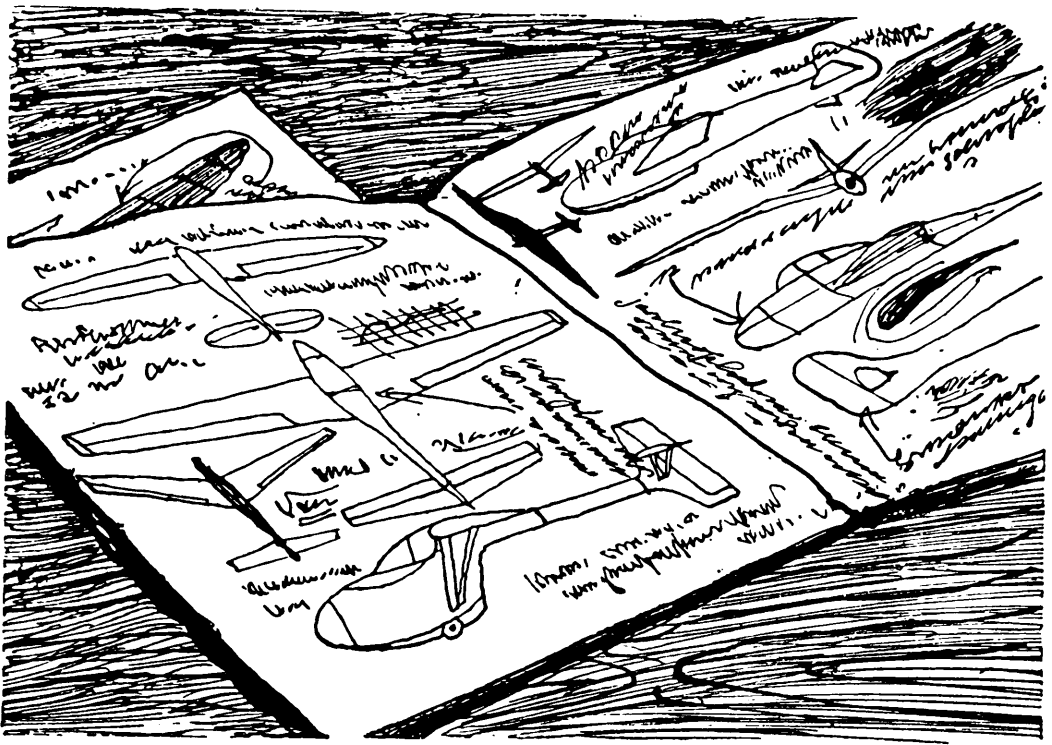
The aunt from Třebíč is the very opposite of her sister. She is moody and temperamental, hasn't a high opinion of herself and, I am glad to say, does not worry about me. But she is selfish and wants all that is best for herself, whilst my aunt always puts me first.

When we sit down for our Christmas dinner, it's a safe bet that my aunt from Třebíč will grab the best piece of meat and the best of everything else that is going. She will reach across the table and stick her fork into the slice of the breast of the goose intended for me. When that happens my aunt and I look at each other, smiling.

But when my aunt pronounces one of her infallible sentences of wisdom, I laugh behind her back with the aunt from Třebíč. In this way, I stand between the two of them like a go-between, but they on their part are united against me, against my young world of which both of them thoroughly disapprove.

That Christmas Eliška went to the mountains with her parents. Šuška too was somewhere in the country with her mother, staying with relations. Yawning, I shifted from one chair to another; I had eaten too much Christmas dinner; I was sleepy and cross at the unending chatter of my aunts about things, people and events. I had heard it all before.

I longed to go skating at the stadium. But my aunts were of the



opinion that, being out most of the time, I ought to stay at home during the festive season. I would get plenty of exercise in the afternoon when I went to the cemetery with them to lay a wreath of pine branches on my mother's grave.

I could think of nothing more boring than a walk with my aunts who walked slowly and talked about the same things as at home. I always went a few steps ahead, and then waited for them. In the end I'd had enough of that and I walked by their side. Then my head and my whole body would get heavy with sleep, and I could no longer keep my eyes open.

But on that occasion, I got out of the walk to the cemetery so that I could go to the stadium after all. The sun was shining. It had snowed a little. Impatiently I ran all the way, and soon I could see the lovely transparent ice.

There were plenty of children at the stadium as well as people over twenty and even older than that. How happy I was when I suddenly noticed Otokárek and Jožek Palivec, the cultural organizer for our form.

When we had had enough of skating, the boys suggested we

should go to the cinema. I hesitated, wondering what would happen if I went home after eight o'clock at night. Then I decided to join the boys. With our last pennies we bought a bar of chocolate which we shared between us.

We made our way to the cinema through the crowds. I was much looking forward to the film. It was suddenly marvellous to be alive, marvellous!

* * *

The Christmas holidays were over. The aunt from Třebíč was packing her trunk. She was leaving the next day.

Both the aunts, excited about the departure, would go on repeating the same things over and over again: I hope I find a seat! Write and let me know how you got home! I hope to hear from you the day after tomorrow. For certain, you can expect a card the day after tomorrow. But what about my trunk? Ask somebody to give you a hand with it.

It seems that old people get all flustered and excited before a journey because they still remember the days when people travelled by slow train; when each journey took a long time and was full of dangers and unforeseen incidents. My Třebíč aunt would be travelling quite comfortably for a mere three hours. All the same my aunt would be thinking about her all the time, and would be worrying about all the things that might go wrong. She would wait anxiously for news from Třebíč telling her that all was well, but the card from Třebíč would arrive rather late, so late that my aunt had nearly forgotten about it. Instead she would recall all the little quarrels they had had during the Christmas holidays.

But when spring came round, my aunt's thoughts would turn to Třebíč again. At the beginning of June I would fetch the large wicker trunk from the attic. My aunt would begin to pack her summer clothes, spending a great deal of thought on the matter, as if she were preparing for a long journey somewhere to the other end of the world.

At last, the long awaited day would arrive. My aunt would travel to Třebíč, be met by her sister at the station and, without delay, they would both begin at the same moment to give each other their news. They would keep talking on the way home, and at home they would repeat everything.

But this time, I was spared from seeing the aunt from Třebíč off at the station. For I was lying in bed, covered with a big eider-down, and sweating because I had a temperature.

When I closed my eyes I fell asleep. At once my bed began to move through the wall as if it was mist whilst the ceiling descended towards me as if to bury me beneath it.

I woke up, shrieking with fright. My aunt was sitting on my bed, holding my hand in hers. I pretended I was asleep. Her affection always makes me feel uncomfortable. It is worse for me than all her reproaches and grumbling.

At last she removed her hand and began to smooth down the eiderdown around me, thinking that I was fast asleep. She bent down over my face; I stiffened with fear lest she should kiss me. But she only drew my hair back from my damp forehead. Then she left the room. How relieved I felt!

I am not often ill. I cannot remember when I last stayed in bed. How long a day seems when one is ill! I did not know what to do with myself.

School seemed like a lost paradise.

And it was Wednesday, the day when our model course was to begin at six o'clock.

All of a sudden I fell asleep. I must have slept for a long time, for when I was suddenly roused I could not remember what day it was nor why I was in bed nor what was happening.

A whiff of fresh air woke me up. I opened my eyes and noticed children from school gathered round my bed: Eliška, Šuška, and also Alena and fair-haired Otakárek.

They had brought me a whole bag of oranges, which smelt so strong and fresh that, all of a sudden, I felt well again; that awful taste I had in my mouth had gone.

They were all talking at the same time; my aunt looked crossly at the floor where melted snow was forming big puddles. All of them were carrying skates!

They left before I could recover from the pleasant surprise. I felt so sorry for myself when I heard their skates clinking in the frozen air.

But at last my prison sentence came to an end. I wrapped myself up obediently in large and small scarves, but as soon as I was out of the flat, I hid them in a small cupboard in the passage. I put everything there I am supposed to put on but don't want to wear. I pretend to put it on, but once outside our flat – off it comes! The cupboard is crammed with left-off scarves and stockings.

I found everyone in my form at school terribly excited. There were to be history examinations for our half-term grades, and our gliding class was to be held in the evening. And later during the term we were all to go to the mountains for a week.

They welcomed me back as if I had risen from the dead. I couldn't help feeling that for a long time I had been outside the flow of life.

Professor Rybniček came in. We called him “Ryba” (*fish*) for short. He was the youngest member on our staff, and had been a university student only the year before. He was short, with fair hair and pale cheeks, and he would look at us with cold, rather protruding fish eyes. We did not like him because he was so deadly serious about everything. When he started his lessons, it always seemed as if he was about to announce some very sad news.

Only Alena had a passion for Ryba. Every time he called her to answer a question she was confused and did not know where to look; the whole form enjoyed the fun of watching her. And from Ryba's expression we could tell that he too realized that the girl admired him.

There was silence in the form. Ryba studied the notebook where he entered our grades. He was going to examine ten of us orally, and I was afraid I was going to be one of them. I knew it

wouldn't help me that I had been away; we were to be examined on chapters we had studied earlier.

I was on tenterhooks until the tenth pupil had finished his account of the Treaty of Versailles. Then I wrote a note to Eliška and she replied in her neat handwriting by our reliable "postal service".

Eliška and Šuška always went for lunch to the students' canteen, and I went with them part of the way every day. How I wished I could join them! I wanted to be like them and carry my knife, fork and spoon, wrapped up in a napkin – to my mind the sign of being grown up and independent. I hated having to go home to lunch to my aunt's same old stew while Eliška and Šuška had theirs with boys and girls of their own age.

After lunch they would always rush to the main railway station where cartoons and news-reels were shown at cheap prices. And while they had fun I had to wash up the pots and pans.

* * *

Even though there were only twelve of us, we gliding students had been moved to a large lecture room in the training department. They certainly didn't grudge us space or lights.

Quickly I copied from Otakárek's exercise book what I had missed: all about the different axes around which the aircraft revolves, and also the fact that the glider is controllable in three planes whereas cars and ships can be controlled only in two. I was just beginning to copy the sketch for steering an aircraft when Otakárek asked to have his notebook back.

The lecture began. The instructor started to talk about the early history of gliding. My thoughts began to wander. I saw the sea with its wide horizon and flocks of birds wheeling in the air. Eliška passed me a note saying she was expecting to see me at her home on Saturday before her dancing lesson. I really did not care for dancing, I told myself, but one day I would be a glider pilot and glide in the air as gracefully as an albatross or a seagull.

Now the instructor turned to gravitation and the free fall of bodies. It was ages since we had studied this in class and I had forgotten all about it. We copied from the blackboard:

$$V = \sqrt{2gH} \quad \text{or} \quad V = g.t.$$

Soon the blackboard was full of examples. I noticed that Eliška's cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining; she was absorbed in the problems and solved them with ease and enthusiasm.

I have every respect for mathematics, but I can't get worked up about it, I wouldn't even if one day I understood it, which I don't expect will ever happen. I can get absorbed only in books; when I read I generally forget all about my surroundings and even about myself, so much so that, according to my aunt, I would not notice if somebody carried me off, together with my chair.

We took notes about the different ways birds fly: soaring, slipping, gliding. During his talk the lecturer drew on the blackboard a diagram of birds' wings. We copied this diagram into our exercise books. At that moment a boy in a blue uniform turned round; it was one of the boys from the training department of the steel works. He looked at us closely, the budding glider-pilots, until in the end his gaze settled on me, as if I reminded him of someone.

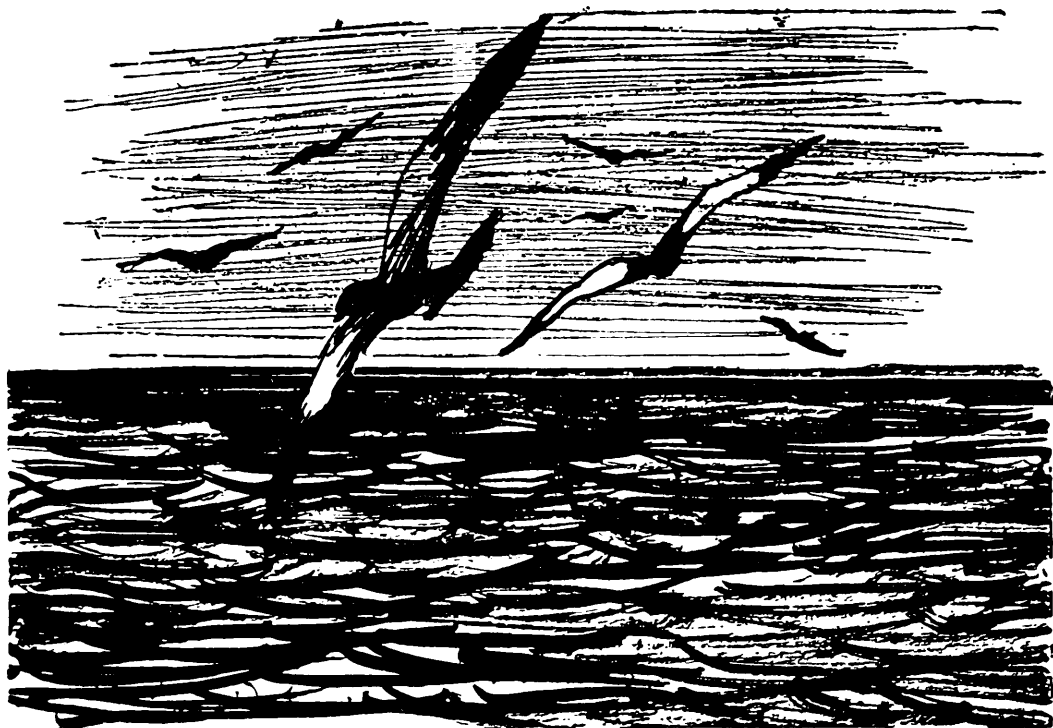
The instructor now talked about vegetable seeds from the mountains of Malaja. These seeds apparently travel a hundred or even two hundred kilometres, and reach heights of two thousand metres, using all sorts of flying techniques.

Think of it! Nature knew all about gliding thousands of years before man did.

* * *

Soon the time came to get ready for the mountains. I waxed my skis, ironed my trousers, washed my pullover. It was very exciting.

"Matylda, you've got your washing water far too hot," called my aunt, then lapsed again into a tight-lipped silence.



She did not approve of our going to the mountains with the boys from our form. The fact that we are educated just like the boys at school seems to her a symptom of the decadence of our generation, and the general decline in morals. The only reason why she approved of my going away for a week in the fresh air was that it was good for my health.

We were leaving the next day. If only the sun would shine the whole week! If only there were several metres of snow! If only there weren't any snowstorms and fog – they could wait till we were back at school again.

We were all looking forward to the holidays so much, we felt drawn towards the mountains. Throughout the journey we sang until our throats were sore. One of our girls had a voice like an angel. Yet she was the least attractive of us; she might even be called ugly.

I was not singing, I was listening and thinking: what did it matter if I had two left feet and couldn't dance as long as the whole form acknowledged me to be an excellent skier? There were only three in our form—Zdeněk, Petr and myself—who

could manage the most advanced slaloms and downhill runs, and we were also among the first at races. Well then, what did it matter if I never learned to dance? I was proud that in ski-ing I could beat all of them.

I hoped I would also become a good glider pilot. I do not lack courage or will-power or perseverance – which my aunt calls obstinacy. Whenever she talks of my characteristics, she adds: “And stubborn as a mule.”

Before us the dark high range of the mountains rose in the darkness. We saluted them, all twenty-eight of us shouting loudly in our enthusiasm:

“Hurrah! Long live the mountains!”

I slept next to Šuška, not Eliška. We were no longer inseparable friends. Things had changed since she went to her dancing class and danced with the nice boy in the blue uniform whom we had met at the gliding class. I knew that it was not Eliška’s fault, but she seemed to think that I was cross with her, and we never talked about the difference in our feelings for each other.

Anyway I saw little of her because she spent most of the time on the practice slopes while I was ski-ing on steep slopes, on the racing track or elsewhere far from her.

Home, school and gliding course – I had left them all far behind. But all of a sudden our week was at an end and we were getting ready to leave. At the last moment I ran to a spot not far from the chalet to look at the slopes of the Devil’s Rack where, only the day before, Zdeněk and I had been ski-ing until dusk.

The snow was glittering in the pale sunshine; a deep silence reigned. I recognized the track I had made in the snow with my skis, and I felt strangely sad.

* * *

Once more we took up our usual life, and the mountains, fading from our mind, seemed like a memory of long ago.

In the gliding course we began to study aerodynamics; we



learned about streamlines, speed and pressure, and about the air-flow over bodies.

One day, as we were trying to calculate the resistance to the air and the pressure against the wing of the plane, I could bear it no longer; I simply had to talk to Šuška about the film we had seen the previous evening. Unfortunately, Šuška's whispers were very penetrating. The instructor, who was about to draw the effect of the uplift on the aircraft along its depth, turned round and crossly put down the chalk, remarking that, although gliding was a sport, it was to be taken seriously. For gliding involved responsibility and demanded discipline. Those who could not control themselves during lectures certainly were not fit for flying; he recommended this type of student to leave rather than disturb the others.

Everybody turned to look at the two of us. Šuška, of course, does not take anything seriously. But I worry a lot if I feel I have done wrong. I decided to sit somewhere else next time and never again to talk during a lecture.

I had already filled two-thirds of my exercise book. At home I

went over all my notes, from the first tidy pages to the scribbling on the last ones.

I copied down what I had left out: all about stability and types of wings, about the effect their shape has on pressure and the resistance to air – then suddenly I was quite overcome by tiredness and by the fear that I would never manage to understand it all.

At that moment I heard the sound of a plane. I opened the window quietly so that my aunt would not hear me. For when the stove is lit, the window must not be opened, not even a little way. My aunt always calls out that she cannot afford to waste heat.

It was a fine day in January, and the sun was shining. High up against the grey-blue clouds behind the houses a plane was flying, with a glider attached to it. The plane disappeared and the glider remained stable in the pale beam of the sun. Then it turned gently and glided out of sight.

Carried away by happiness, I longed impatiently for the day when I could sit in a glider, flying at a great height like some proud fairy-tale bird.

* * *

There were still twelve of us going regularly to the gliding class. We were really persevering. There were some boys from the industrial college, two from our form, and the others were from the training department attached to the steel works, and from the railway training school; the latter wore navy blue uniforms with the metal letters ŽU. We called these boys Žužu.

At the start there had been two more girls in our group, but they soon dropped out, and only we three girls from school remained.

Half-term was approaching. We began wondering what marks we would get. I knew I would be one of those with a “three” in physics and mathematics.

Eliška couldn't help me, nor did the fact that I really tried hard

make any difference. In my report I had the two “threes” I had been dreading. Eliška, of course, had a distinction, and she was first in our form. Šuška had four “threes”, but she did not care about anything, and her high spirits were quite genuine.

I was afraid about what my aunt would say. As usual I put the folded report on top of my satchel and behaved as if I had a great deal of homework to do.

My aunt spent quite a while looking for her glasses. Then she read the report, and put her hands on her hips, as she usually does when she is preparing to make one of her indignant speeches.

But this time she merely remarked that this was a nice mess and that nothing remained for her but to write to my guardian.

“You might as well know it: as from today there will be no more friends, no more novels and no more meetings or other nonsense! Not to mention skating and the cinema,” she added, raising her voice.

But I managed to arrange to go skating with Eliška, pleading that it was for the sake of my health – for my aunt was always very concerned about my health.

On the morning our half-term holiday began, I woke up early when it was still quite dark. Suddenly I heard the sound of the gutter near our kitchen window. The evening before it had still been frozen white everywhere.

I sat up. The window panes were wet. Outside torrential rain was pouring down.

What a holiday! It rained the whole afternoon as well. How bored I was, sitting in the kitchen. For a while I read a book I had already read several times. Then I tried to learn something, but my mind was just not on my work.

At long last, salvation! There was a noise in the passage – it must be Eliška.

No, it wasn't. It was Šuška standing at the door of our flat, wearing a raincoat which had stiffened with cold; she looked as if she were wrapped in a cellophane bag.

She had brought three tickets for the cinema. My aunt was fast

asleep in her chair in the kitchen, so I left without her knowing.

We ran to Stalin Street to fetch Eliška. We rang and rang the doorbell of her home but no one answered. It was strange. It was four o'clock, the time when her mother was usually at home. Perhaps she was doing overtime, and Eliška had gone to fetch the boys from kindergarten. It couldn't be helped, we would have to go without her or we would miss the news-reel and the film on winter sports.

The following morning I went to the Sušils' again, and again there was no answer to the bell. I stood outside the deserted flat, feeling as if I had been driven out of paradise. For me – even though I was sometimes jealous of her family – Eliška's home was the symbol of a family's warmth, love, and contentment.

When our three days' holiday was over, Eliška still did not come to school. How strange it was not to see her fair head, not to walk home with her, never to meet her and never to wait for her. Šuška, of course, was pleased to have me to herself. She chattered away, but I hardly listened to her.

* * *

On the day we were to vote for a new chairman to the working group in our form I was sure Eliška would turn up because she was one of those nominated. But she still did not come.

The meeting in the afternoon was as exciting as an adventure film. As the form council could not agree on a candidate for the post of chairman, we finally hit upon a special kind of voting. We wrote down as many names for candidates as there were boys and girls in our form, then we voted in secret, by making a cross against the name we favoured. For a ballot-box we used the drawer from the teacher's desk.

As well as Eliška, Ivan Prostik and Otakárek were elected as candidates.

When the votes had been counted Ivan Prostik turned out to have won, Eliška was second and Otakárek third, but there was

hardly any difference in the number of votes each of them gained.

Although there was nobody at home at Eliška's when I called again, I still had a faint hope that I would see her that evening at the gliding class.

In our lecture-room – rather large for twelve people – we could change our places as we liked. I decided to sit somewhere by myself so that my attention would not be diverted from my work. But Šuška managed to sit by me again.

In her exercise book she inscribed the rather obvious remark that “flying in the air has always been man's desire”. Then she copied from my book what she would have to learn: what forces react on the aircraft during a gliding flight; that G stands for weight, F_x for pressure and F_z for resistance.

In spite of my resolution I couldn't help smiling at Šuška and it did not need much to make her laugh. She laughed such a lot that she had to hide her head under her desk.

As we were walking along the corridor together later, I glanced at the staircase.

And there I saw Jan, the nice boy in the blue uniform.

He hurried to join us. Somebody called to him: “Where are you going, Jan?” He turned, waving his hand.

The three of us walked slowly towards my home. Jan talked about our examinations. Only Šuška replied. I envied and admired her for being able to talk to him without shyness, in the same matter-of-fact way as one would talk to boys from our form; I felt terribly embarrassed.

Suddenly he stopped, and so did we. “I say,” he said, “where is your friend? The pretty one with the fair hair?”

I felt as if someone had hit me over the head. Šuška replied that Eliška was away from school.

“Away from school?” he repeated, astonished. “Why is that?”

“Well,” Šuška told him, “Eliška has not been at school for several days, yet none of the teachers has asked where she is. That means she must be excused from school, but we – her friends – know nothing at all about it.”

“I see,” Jan said and did not say any more.

When we came to our house he nodded, and with a cheerful: “Cheerio!” he disappeared into the darkness.

Šuška gazed after Jan with a wicked smile. She whispered to me that he obviously had Eliška on his mind and that at the last dancing lesson he had danced with no one else.

* * *

It was eight days before I saw Eliška again. When she came back to school, she was wearing black stockings, a black beret and a mourning band on her coat. She walked quickly into school looking down on the ground.

Everybody in our form already knew that her father had been somewhere in Slovakia, suffering from a heart disease. We knew that the whole family had gone to join him there; now he had died, and they had brought him back to bury him in his native parish.

We kept away from Eliška as if she were a stranger. Nobody said a word to her, and she took no notice of any of us.

On my way home from school I joined Eliška as usual, yet I could not overcome my embarrassment and talk to her as if nothing had happened. It was as if the mystery of death had touched her.

Silently we walked through the streets, braving the strong wind. Eliška, of course, did not think of having her meal at the canteen as usual, and for her sake I went without lunch as well.

“It’s going to rain,” was all she said. “It’s going to rain,” I echoed.

At that moment her tears, held back so long, started to flow. She had lost her father – just as I had lost my parents. But her sorrow seemed different from the longing for my mother that sometimes overtakes me; I was only sorry for myself but Eliška was suffering because someone whom she had loved was no longer on earth.

Later that night as I lay in bed I kept thinking about Eliška and her mother.

I could hear my aunt breathing next door. She was rubbing cream on to her feet; its penetrating smell filled the flat every evening. In my mind's eye I could see her bandaging her feet with the long linen bandages she always kept in her side table drawer during the day, rolled up like sleeping snakes. After massaging her feet, she always squeezed drops into her eyes and put her false teeth into a glass of water.

Her preparations for the night were complicated. Before falling asleep she spent a long time praying for all those who had died in our home town and at Třebíč, also for my father who rests in a communal grave at Buchenwald, one of the infamous German concentration camps.

* * *

We were in the middle of February, but the weather was more like summer, and the sun was so hot that the pavements were all dry.

The children were playing marbles, a sure sign that spring was in the air. People also said that snakes and lizards had crept out of their hiding places, which meant that the spring weather was definitely going to last.

The sudden heat made us so tired that our school work suffered. I felt as if I had not slept for weeks, and as tired as if I had run a 1,000-metre race.

This year, Eliška and I did not go to look for violets by the wall of the cemetery as soon as spring arrived. A great deal had changed between us.

I no longer called on the Sušil family regularly. Since Eliška's father had died, his mother was living with them, a tiresome old woman who did not like visitors. And a student had moved in as a lodger and she occupied the alcove where we had always sat and talked.

Šuška no longer had to worry that we would leave her out, for the three of us were always together now, on the way home from school as well as on our gliding course.

Outside the air was crisp and refreshing, but in our classroom it was dull like a rainy day, and the dirty windows seemed to absorb all the brightness of spring.

After the maths lesson someone hit on a bright idea. We would wash those horrible windows! If we waited for the window cleaner to come and do the job, we would have to wait for a long time. What did we need for the job? Hardly anything. We would bring some old rags and buy a little methylated spirit. Jiřina began to collect money. Each of us contributed twenty *halěrů*. There were ten girls with eight windows to do between them. So two of us cleaned the fastenings whilst the boys dealt with the desks and the floor. We were all happy as we worked.

* * *

Suddenly it froze again and the signs of spring disappeared like a dream. There was skating at the stadium, but we would-be glider pilots had had enough of the pleasures of winter.

The short spell of spring had filled us with anticipation, for we had already learned all about the layout of the airfield and its physical features, and in our imagination we already saw ourselves there.

The Wednesday came when we were to have our last lecture, followed by a fortnight during which we were to prepare ourselves for a stiff examination.

When the twelve of us met for the last time before the examination we were taught nothing new. We just revised, as we do at school before the end of the school year.

As we left the building, I became separated from Eliška. I waited for her outside, but I could not see her anywhere, so I went home by myself. On the way, I saw two figures standing at a corner of the street, a tall broad-shouldered boy and a slim girl

dressed in black. By the time I reached the place where they had been standing I had lost them again.

I turned homeward. It seemed to me that the pain I suffered was worse than anything I ever experienced. Then the idea struck me to go and check up by calling at Eliška's house. So I ran to Stalin Street as fast as I could, dashed up the stairs and rang the bell of the Sušils' flat.

The steps I heard approaching were Eliška's.

"You?" she said, without showing any surprise. "Where have you been?" she asked, as she turned back to the kitchen where she was washing up.

I looked at the pile of washed plates, and pondered the matter. How could she have managed so much washing-up as well as being out with Jan? But perhaps someone helped her with her work at home.

As Eliška talked, I studied her: I had always thought she was frank and open, but now I did not trust her completely as I had before.

I sat in silence while she dried the crockery and put it away. I had always been curious to know exactly when childhood ended, and being adult began. Was it happening to me that very night? Was I actually crossing the gulf at that moment?

* * *

We decided to meet at Šuška's to revise for our examination together; she lived in the middle of the town with her mother. We met in her large attic room, and compared our notebooks. Some of us had missed a sentence here and there, another had not heard so well, and even Eliška, considered the most reliable of all of us, had been absent several times.

Then someone made a suggestion. Could we not ask an experienced glider pilot to go over with us the passages we found difficult to understand?

"Do you know anybody who would do it?" asked Pavel.

“I know somebody, I think. He’s retired now because he was ill. But he used to be a glider pilot.”

“Oh, no! Not an old man!” said everyone. Eliška said she knew a young man called Jan. She did not know his surname. But we could leave a letter for him at the training department, addressed simply to Jan, the glider pilot.

So that was settled. Pavel was to write a letter that evening. Jan would be asked to send his reply to Šuška, because we were meeting at her place. I could not help noticing that Eliška looked disappointed.

Three days later Šuška waved a letter as she came to school. Jan had replied that he would help us, as he was free on Wednesday evenings from six to eight o’clock.

So we arranged to meet Jan the following Wednesday. Meanwhile we all studied our notes.

When the day came it was clear again and icy cold. Looking out of the window from the warm room one might be mistaken and think it was warm outside too.

When my aunt saw that I was wearing my checked Sunday skirt and my yellow light-weight pullover, she started to make a scene because I might catch cold. There was a time when I did not dare stand up to my aunt. But I have learned not to take much notice of what she says about the way I dress.

I was late for the meeting. As I went in, Jan just nodded without interrupting what he was saying. I blushed.

Jan picked up Pavel’s book to read from his notes. He explained them and added practical experiences to the material we had learned so far. All of a sudden everything became clear to me: ideas such as pressure, drag and resistance to wings, changed into objects and actions I could understand. Things in my book I had only glanced at came to my mind easily. I stood out from the others and Jan put almost all his questions to me.

My cheeks were burning. Yet it is rather cold in Šuška’s room. The others had put on their coats, but I would have frozen to

death rather than be seen in my shabby winter coat; so I sat there in my light pullover.

When we had finished, we went with Jan to Konemsky Street. He talked to us about his adventures between heaven and earth. Flanked by the boys, he walked in front of us, and we girls followed closely to hear everything he said.

He promised to work with us again the following Wednesday.

Once more I was counting the days, but unfortunately my thin pullover and the cold in Šuška's room left me with a sore throat and with such a bad cold that I could not go to school.

Sadly I thought of Jan and the boys and girls who were meeting at Šuška's. I was wrapped up in an old shawl and all you could see of me were two weeping eyes. I hardly listened to my aunt who kept talking to me; she was quite right in saying that she was wasting her breath.

"The very first day you came to me," she kept saying, "something told me that you were deceitful. As far as that goes, you take after someone else . . ."

Whenever my aunt makes unkind allusions to my mother, my indifference changes into violent anger. Ever since I was a child I have always felt hatred for my aunt when she begins to talk about my mother the way she does. "What would have become of her," she says, "if your father had not married her? She was only a factory girl, and she was ill with T.B. on top of that."

* * *

At school we glider pilots talked of nothing else but the approaching examination in the theory of gliding.

We helped each other, asking the sort of questions we expected to get during the examination. Only Pavel did not bother to revise. He behaved as if he knew everything.

"Look here," Otakárek told him, "because you once sat in a plane you imagine that you are at home on the airfield. Let me

tell you: a glider is as much like a plane as a canoe is like a horse-drawn carriage.”

Otakárek was slow, but to make up for it he was thorough and exact. When he was called to answer a question, he always looked as if he knew less than he actually did. Pavel on the other hand knew only half of what he was supposed to know, but he presented his knowledge in such a way that he seemed to have a thorough command of his subject.

He would never admit that he exaggerated a lot. Brdečko told him, quite rightly, “Everybody makes some sort of an impression. Some make a good one, others a poor one. Possibly I also make a poor impression, but you most certainly do.”

We were counting the days to the examination, managing our work as well as possible. The teachers must have noticed that we glider pilots were the quietest and most exemplary pupils who ever sat at those desks.

Never did I prepare myself so thoroughly for an examination nor was I ever so afraid of one.

And then – horrors! The evening before the examination I had forgotten everything. I couldn’t even remember the things I thought I knew for certain.

Then came the day of the examination. It was to be held at five o’clock. We all gathered at the training department outside the door behind which our fate was to be decided.

At last it was my turn. I went into the examination room with Šuška. My legs were trembling, I could hardly remember my name.

But, as at school, the first sentence opened up some secret door. Suddenly I could think clearly and everything I had learned came back to me. My self-confidence grew, and I wanted to talk all the time; but the instructor touched my shoulder lightly because he wished to hear what Šuška had to say.

There certainly were many things I did not know or could have muddled up, but I was lucky: the instructor decided I was well prepared, which is why he turned his attention to Šuška.

To my utter surprise she too managed quite well on the whole.

Finally the instructor turned to me again and wanted to know which forces affect the aircraft while it is gliding. Almost stammering with eagerness, I told him that the forces acting on the aircraft were the pull of gravity, resistance to the air-flow and, of course, the lift provided by the wings. Smiling, the instructor asked me if I could draw it to prove to him that all this was clear to me.

Heavens, I was sure I couldn't manage that! Just the same I said "Yes," and, luckily, he left it at that and did not ask me to draw anything. He issued both of us with a gliding pupil's certificate.

As he handed us our certificates he asked if we understood our responsibilities as members of *Svazarm*. We both replied at the same time: "We do, comrade!" and he shook hands with both of us.

He also remarked that we girls would always have to wear slacks during our training, and again we agreed, saying, "Yes, comrade!"

We walked out feeling like heroines.

* * *

Now we were really gliding pupils.

We looked out for every little sign of spring. The icy cold wind had delayed the lilac and chestnut buds; only the forsythia, not afraid of the cold, was turning yellow in a corner of the garden by the wall.

As a rule I never talked about my affairs at home. But now I had to broach the matter of the slacks. I had a well-tried plan when I needed something. I always talked to my aunt in the evening when she was sleepy and concentrating on her complicated preparations for bed.

"Auntie," I said humbly, standing in front of her in my night-

dress. "We need trousers because we shall now be going to the airfield."

"Trousers?" she repeated, taken aback. "You want to buy trousers?"

Hurrah! she hadn't heard the bit about the airfield. I had gained a little time, though I knew that soon she would have to give me her written consent to my gliding since she took the place of parents.

"But you know very well that you need some summer dresses. You've grown out of all your old ones, and besides, they're faded. Where shall I get the money for trousers?"

She carried on for quite a time. I stood motionless.

"I would like the trousers instead of summer frocks," I said and, in the end, she agreed sulkily.

Happy, I hopped into bed. It had been easier than I had dared hope.

For a while I waited in the dark till I heard my aunt get into bed, then I jumped up and hurried to the door to cover the keyhole. I put the light on again and read until I fell asleep.

My aunt says I sleep like a log, but that is not always so. That night, even in my sleep, I heard torrential rain falling, enough water to burst a dam.

On my way to school next morning I noticed a miracle brought about by the rain: everything had turned green, as if by magic. Spring had come at last, real spring!

In the afternoon Eliška and I went out with her mother to buy our trousers.

It was the first time Eliška and paní Sušilová had left off their mourning clothes; they wore light spring coats, and paní Sušilová's face had its usual cheerful expression.

I chose trousers made of pale grey wool. Eliška's mother advised me to take some made of checked brown material. But when she realized I had set my heart on the grey ones she agreed to my choice: she even paid ten crowns for me out of her own pocket, which was the amount I was short of.

“Now then,” she joked as she walked between Eliška and myself, “I hope that you will be good glider pilots before these slacks have worn out.”

Then it started raining again, and the temperature dropped. But neither frost nor storms were going to prevent us glider pilots from turning up at the airfield.

There was an unexpected fall of snow. It only remained on the ground for about an hour, but it was enough to provoke great alarm among the gliding pupils.

The weather had never been of any interest to me before. Whatever it was like, there had always been something to do. But this year we glider pilots were rather impatient. We listened to the forecast on the radio and we looked for a bit of blue in the sky. From time to time some showed itself between the heavy clouds, but soon the roofs of the houses were wet with rain again.

We had already passed our medical, and I managed to get the parental consent forms signed by my aunt.

At last, the sun was shining! Above the roofs of the houses the blue sky stretched into the distance.

“It is very cold,” my aunt cried. “Put on your sweater, Matylda!”

As usual I left the flat dressed in my thick winter sweater, only to take it off and hide it in my secret hiding place, the small cupboard in the passage outside our flat. I ran to school, wearing only my new grey slacks and my blue *Svažarm* jacket.

At two o'clock we were due at the airfield.

The morning at school passed incredibly slowly. Eliška and Šuška kept passing notes to me, and I was scribbling replies all the time so, one way and another, we were pretty busy.

Šuška was going to bicycle to the airfield with Pavel. The rest of us were going by bus. We met in the square and boarded the bus for the airfield.

We left the town by the high road. Soon we found ourselves running along by a stretch of watery meadowland with little islands of elder trees and cultivated patches. This had been

marsh through which flowed the river's tributaries that no longer existed.

The airfield was close by.

We got out of the bus at the beginning of a runway leading to the airfield. Shielding our eyes against the sun, we looked into the distance and saw buildings belonging to the airfield.

It seemed to be near, but in fact we were still a good way off.

On the road we met Šuška and Pavel.

"Your passes," he called to us, "get your passes ready!"

They had parked their bicycles in the hangar and had already seen a real glider. Šuška described how huge it was, and assured us that it really was wonderful. We were all excited. As we passed through the gate of the airfield, we felt we were taking a step that was leading us towards a new life.

On the wide tarmac that shone brilliantly in the sunshine, two large passenger planes were resting. They seemed to me like two gigantic silver sea-birds from fairyland.

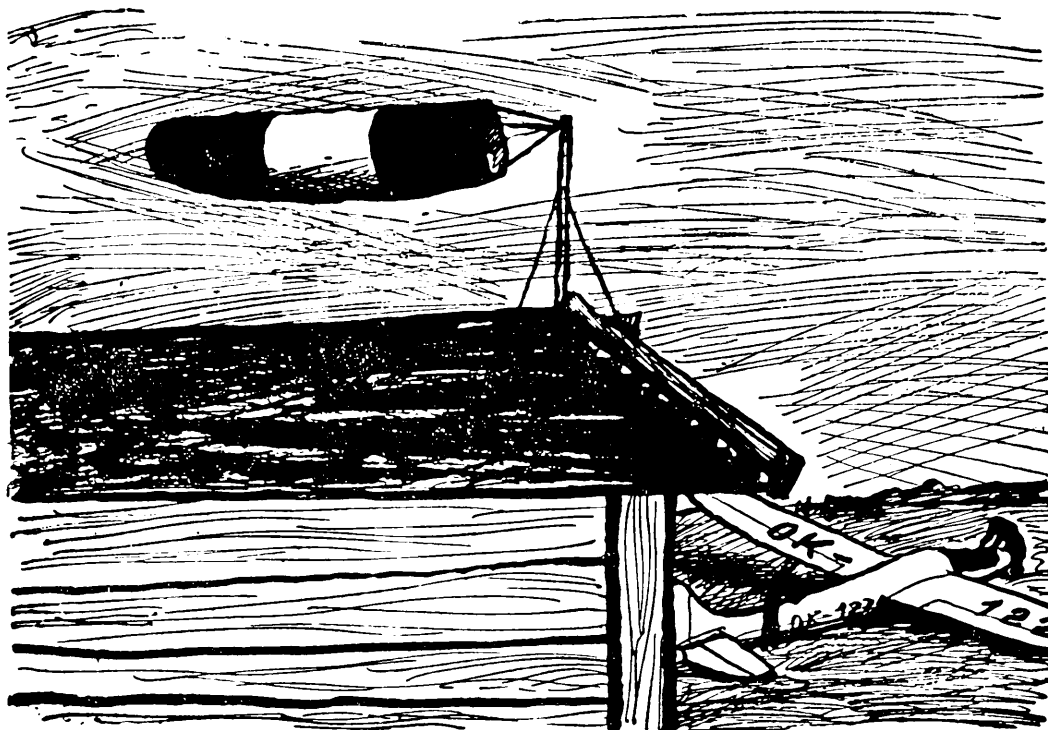
First we went to the cloakrooms, and then to the office to collect our flying books. As I filled in the first page, I put down Máša instead of Matylda for I could not possibly admit that there could be a girl with such an old-fashioned name as Matylda among the gliding pupils.

The group to which we were assigned was already on the airfield with the instructor.

Around us extended the concrete surface of the runway, beyond it lay the unending green sea of the fields. I remembered from our lectures how large this area was, and I could recite by heart all the equipment of the airfield. Yet how different it was from what I had imagined!

A control motor bicycle went ahead of us. We walked in its tracks in the thick new grass until we had left the buildings of the airfield far behind us. But the green sea in front of us did not end, yet there was still no sign of the gliders.

At that moment a glider took off. Like a lark, it rose into the air. For a moment we looked at it, then we ran behind the motor



bicycle which turned left, and suddenly in the distance in front of us we noticed several figures moving.

“Out of the way, keep out of the way!” they shouted at us, and we jumped out of the way, scared.

Another glider started along the green. It seemed to be aiming straight for us, but no, it was not actually moving our way. The distance between us and the gliders was still considerable. We stopped and silently observed how the glider was lifted from the ground and pulled along by the tow-rope.

“Why are you standing there?” those at the launch point called to us.

As we ran nearer to introduce ourselves we were told off in no uncertain manner. It was obvious, they said, that we did not know the airfield regulations, we were moving about the airfield like frightened chickens.

After this unfriendly reception nobody took any further notice of us. We stood stupefied, not daring to move. The winch engine roared frantically. We watched all the bustle, the instructor who had told us off, the starter and the finisher waving their flags, and

the gliding pupils moving around their gliders which stood resting on one wing tip, looking like huge yellow birds.

Once the rope had been wound up, the noise of the winch stopped. The glider was ready to start. There was a moment of blissful silence.

In preparation for the take-off the tow-rope was pulled taut. Then, when the starter at the launch point had given a signal to the man in charge of the invisible winch, the glider started running across the grass and the winch-engine again made a terrific noise.

And we, our faces turned up towards it, watched how the glider rose high, and hung right above us, almost motionless. Then it slowly swayed, and we watched how the tow-rope dropped and how the glider sailed away into the clear air.

The gliders were being launched in rapid succession. One of them landed at a nearby white "T", which was formed on the grass by white flags. Another one circled unconcernedly, then landed a long way away on the green expanse. The instructor exclaimed in annoyance, and the pupils started running to pull the glider back to launch point. Those who stayed behind discussed the mistakes the pilot had made, while we listened eagerly.

As we stood there, observing one start after another, I noticed suddenly that the winch no longer seemed to make a noise. It also occurred to me that to climb into a glider, sail round the airfield and return to the ground, seemed just as easy as rowing a light boat on calm water.

Some student pilots were flying solo, while others, accompanied by their instructor, were taking their turn in flying a two-seater.

As the instructor returned to the ground with one of the pupils and disentangled himself from his parachute, he looked at us as if he had only just remembered that we were there.

"Now then," he asked in a friendly way, "did you watch closely?"

Of course we had watched. "Well then," he said, "we'll soon see what you've learned. And now let me look at

your log books so that I make sure to remember your names.”

I handed him mine, wondering what to do about Matylda, that awful name of mine. The book was an official document in which nothing was supposed to be hidden or misrepresented. I was silent as he repeated twice: “Máša Martinová”. Then he fixed his eyes on me – eyes full of kindness and laughter in spite of the fact that they seemed to be serious. Although he was old – certainly about forty – his eyes were merry and young.

We were standing by the winch when the instructor asked us casually which of us would like to explain to him how the winch was constructed and how it worked.

We all talked at the same time, and though the instructor pretended not to take much notice, nevertheless he took in every bit of nonsense we were saying.

“Do you imagine your glider would start,” he said to Eliška, “if it was as you say? You are mistaken, my girl. It would remain on the ground as if it were glued to it.”

Then the instructor turned his attention to his pupils’ take-off performances, whilst we took it in turns to put on a parachute, to adjust the slings and to fasten the big clasp in front. When, at last, my parachute hung on my back, I felt weighed down as if I had a huge mountain rucksack on.

Our glider was turned into the wind, as it always is to start, the light wings were held down for us as, with our parachutes on our backs, we settled ourselves inside the cockpit. The instructor took the rear seat and the others gathered round the glider to listen to what was happening.

Because of the heavy weight of the “rucksack” on my back I was bundled into the glider like a sack of potatoes. The instructor helped to fasten me to my seat, and my heart jumped for joy as I felt that this, at last, was the real thing.

In a faltering voice I named all the instruments on the switch-board: air speed indicator, altimeter, turn and bank indicator and compass; and then I learned how to place my feet on the rudder bar, and how to work the control column.

It all seemed so easy that I emerged from the glider with a feeling of elation. Pavel too behaved as if he had already won his laurels for gliding.

The instructor entered a remark about our first practice in our log books, giving us a grade as well. We all got a “5”, which stood for five “ones”.

We had come to the end of our first gliding day. The motor bicycle pulled the winch away and we pushed the glider to the hangar.

* * *

After each gliding day we had a meeting where the day's flights were discussed, the successful ones as well as those that did not come off. We also had sessions about politics lasting a quarter of an hour, and sometimes some entertainment to finish.

First Eliška drew on the blackboard to show how the rope winds and unwinds. Then it was my turn.

I began with the layout of the airfield. I have not got a good memory, nor do I know how to draw, but all the same I succeeded in indicating the course of the river correctly, the town at one side, and a slope east of the town.

“You've forgotten something important,” the instructor reminded me. “It's near the airfield. To the south.”

As he realized that I could not remember it, he took the chalk from me and drew a small oblong south of the town, filling it with lots of little lines; then I realized that it represented an isolated patch of newly-planted saplings.

By the time we left for home it was pitch dark. I would have liked to chat with Eliška. But she was silent all the time, staring into the darkness. Then it dawned on me that she was disappointed with her first flying day because there had been no trace of Jan.

In spite of all the trouble I had taken to cover up things my aunt sensed that something unusual was happening. “Staying out late at night, aren't you?” she grumbled, half asleep, when I returned home.

I replied as calmly as I could: "I have been at the airfield. We are learning to fly."

"Learning to fly! Whoever heard of such a thing! I shall write to your guardian tomorrow."

That was an old threat, a very old one. But my aunt does not like writing letters, least of all to my guardian, the lawyer, whom she holds in great respect. When difficulties arise – usually it is a question of money or something I need – she puts on her Sunday best and goes to take her place outside his office among those summoned before him. There she waits until it is her turn.

Twice a year, at the beginning of the long holidays and the new school year, I also take my place in the long, depressing passage. My guardian summons me by sending me an official notice with all the printed text crossed out, indicating in his own handwriting the day and the time at which he expects to see me.

When at last his door opens to admit me, he appears, an expression of cold, official politeness on his face, the way he receives his clients. Then remembering who I am, his expression changes to false amiability. I sit down on the chair by the table, whilst he studies my school report, inquiring at the same time if I have any wishes or complaints. While he's doing this he is also signing documents, making telephone calls, or he gets up to leave the office for a while, forgetting all about me. When he returns, he asks again if there is anything I wish to complain of or anything I would like to have. But I have neither wishes nor complaints.

And we take leave of each other. He wishes me a pleasant summer or a successful school year, as the case may be.

As I leave the courts I take a deep breath, saying to myself every time: If only I was grown up already! If only I could get away from all old people!

* * *

We went to the airfield every afternoon, except when a school society met or when we had too much homework to do.

We had already learned a lot. I could put on my parachute as quickly as if I were getting into my clothes. We had completed the groundwork preparing us for the launch, for gliding, for turning and for flying in a circle.

All we were waiting for now was for the glider to carry us off into the clouds instead of staying on the ground. Soon we were to take our first orientation flight. We were mad with joy. Even Šuška declared it would be “terrific”, but I had the feeling she was afraid and in no hurry for the glider to carry her off into the heights.

In our gliding group pupils kept coming and going, but we always had the same instructor. We usually called him Pop. If he was late because he was kept back at work, his assistant took over at the airfield. But we were always disappointed when this happened.

We had not yet seen Jan at the airfield. Apparently he went there just those days we could not go. Every now and then his name was mentioned, and I noticed how Eliška looked upset, and I felt a sudden pang.

* * *

The last days of April were as rainy and cold as autumn.

At school we were preparing for the First of May. We were making all sorts of coloured paper flags to wave.

Our form room didn't look like school at all. It was gaily decorated and had lost its usual solemn appearance.

Mirek Zapletal, standing on the teacher's platform, entertained the whole form. He could take off most of the teachers and although we had seen him performing many times, we still laughed at him.

Outside it was still pouring.

Zapletal disappeared for a while (we all knew that he smoked in secret) and when he came back he shouted from the door:

“Cibulková, someone wants to speak to you downstairs. He

asked me: 'Will you please be so good and fetch Cibulková, my cousin? It's urgent.' "

Cibulková jumped up, blushing all over her face. She blurted out: "It's not true!"

"Well, I don't care! Do as you like. Sit down then and don't go downstairs."

We noticed that Cibulková did her hair quickly and unobtrusively. And she glanced at her legs to make sure her stockings were straight.

"You must go to the headmaster's study!" Mirek called after her.

"Is it true, Mirek?" we asked when she had left the room.

"Oh no! The carpenter is working there, repairing the door."

What a story – our friend Cibulková and her cousin! Who would have thought it of her? And that innocent look she put on!

When Cibulková had gone, Mirek Zapletal did another impersonation; he stood in front of the blackboard, pretending to be Cibulková solving an equation.

* * *

Next morning the sun was not shining, but the rain had stopped. The streets had lost their everyday appearance. No wonder, for it was the First of May. Flags were fluttering gaily from most of the buildings.

I stopped at the Sušils' flat to call for Eliška. They were only just having breakfast, so I had to wait for Eliška. I was impatient to get away.

"Don't worry, Máša. We won't be late. Sit down and relax. Here's a cup of coffee for you!"

Paní Sušilová was running round the flat in her white working overall, a red scarf on her head, and Eliška was not even dressed.

At last we went out into the streets filled with pedestrians and

music. When we got to our stand, we saw Otakárek who waved to us, pointing towards the sky. The sun was already peeping through the clouds, lighting up the roofs of the houses.

We lined up. This year we were to salute the procession as it passed by. It was more fun than marching in the procession. For part of the way we followed the band marching towards its appointed place.

For quite a long time we waited at our stand, and still the procession was nowhere to be seen. We passed the time shouting and getting ourselves worked up.

Suddenly came a cry: "They're coming!" and immediately the laughter and talking stopped. We lined up, and as soon as we saw the head of the procession we burst into song.

As the procession drew nearer, the music of the band drowned our song. We shouted the slogan, and the boys made up rhymes that we called out as the procession moved past. Then came another band followed by another crowd of people, which we greeted with the same enthusiasm.

We left our stand, and as we moved on we soon came to the steel works. At first we could only see a group of men dressed in dark overalls and another of women wearing red scarves on their heads. In front of them tall white flags were flying, looking like the sails of gay boats.

And now the technicians from the steelworks were close to us. My heart was beating wildly. Soon I caught sight of Jan in the first row in front of the students' representatives.

* * *

I could see Jan at some distance in the midst of a group of boys who came walking in our direction across the airfield. As he reached the launch point, Jan quickly surveyed our group and nodded cheerfully. I watched Eliška blushing, and at that moment I felt I hated her.

It was the first hot spring day. A motor bicycle bringing fuel

for the winch also brought lemonade, so we took a break. We ate and drank. Food tasted wonderful on the airfield.

This time there was a big crowd of pupils, and it would take a long time before it was our turn.

We watched Jan soaring higher and higher, as if he were drawn upward by an invisible rope. Delighted, the gliding pupils cried out: "Look! He's levelling up quickly!" He got himself into a thermal that carried him to a great height in no time. Calmly and confidently, he sailed along in the blue air. Then Jan's glider dipped its nose, and dropped steeply towards the earth. I nearly stopped breathing. From this headlong descent the glider again changed to a steep upward flight, just as it had done at the start, and after a moment's rest it flew from one imaginary peak to another.

"Now he's looping!" the gliding pupils cried.

And then Jan returned to the ground. Circling, he returned to the launch point, and landed neatly on the grass.

We all ran towards his single-seater glider, except for Eliška. She hesitated at first, but then she followed us.

Before the two of us got there, Jan and the boys had already turned the glider round, so Eliška and I took our place at one of the wing tips.

It was thrilling! Then Jan walked over to where we stood. He asked me kindly, as if he did not wish the others to hear it: "Are you looking forward to your first flight?" And, without waiting for me to answer, he added: "There's something to look forward to! You'll love it, I'm sure of it."

* * *

They tilted the glider for me as if it were a light boat, and I eased myself into the seat. The glider swayed again as the instructor took his place behind me. He shut the transparent top of the cabin, the tow-rope was attached for us and the Pionýr's tilted wings were raised. "Are you comfortable?" the instructor

inquired. "Can you see well? Hold on to those rests at your sides and don't touch anything! During the flight I'll explain to you everything I do."

We were to be towed by a light aeroplane in front of us to which we were linked by a rope.

Suddenly, a jerk. We began to move along the ground, shaken about as we bumped over the uneven grass. It was a relief to get off the ground.

The aeroplane in front of us was swaying and it lifted us higher and higher as we swayed in its wake. The instructor pointed out that he must keep the glider at the same level as the aircraft, for otherwise our glider would raise the aeroplane's tail or press it down towards the ground.

"You'd be amazed to see what would happen if I put just a bit of pressure on the control column. We'd float upwards like a balloon."

It is a great art to take off with a glider being towed by an aircraft and to keep pace with it as it flies.

Now we were circling at a steadily increasing height. At each turn the glider dipped as if it wanted to break loose. I realized, without being the least afraid, what a fragile little craft I was in.

"What height are we? Look!"

We had reached an altitude of 350 metres and still we were climbing in ever-widening circles.

"Look around. You must get acquainted with the surroundings of the airfield that you drew for us on the blackboard."

Our instructor had a marvellous memory. I tried to find the well-known landmarks that I had drawn so clumsily in my lessons – the town below us with its maze of streets, the winding course of the river, the railway bridge, the hangars and other buildings of the airfield looking like little cardboard boxes.

"And there is the plantation you forgot. Can you see it?" Yes, I certainly could.

Now we began to sway. Anxiously, the instructor asked me: "Do you feel all right, Máša?" Yes, I felt fine.



“Then look how high we are.”

We had reached an altitude of exactly 600 metres. We had disconnected our tow-rope. In no time the tow-plane had disappeared from our sight and we were alone in limitless space.

“You are pale,” said the instructor. I replied firmly that there was nothing wrong with me.

“Good girl! I hope you don’t suffer from giddiness!”

Giddiness! Not on your life! I like great heights. In my opinion, attacks of dizziness belong to the past, along with many other things.

As we started to turn, I leaned over with the glider, and I didn’t feel a bit afraid that our light craft might turn upside down. Then we floated calmly, with a gentle whirr like the sound of a bird’s wings.

I wanted time to stand still so that the flight would last for ever! But we were already circling above the airfield. Our height dropped to a mere 200 metres. As we glided towards the ground, our speed increased noticeably.

Our glider touched the ground, then it bounced once, raised itself a little, and then flew straight as an arrow above the ground.

After several hundred metres it settled down, not far from the appointed stopping place.

It seemed to me that I had been in the air for ages, yet it had only been twenty minutes.

In our meeting following the flight we listened to a short talk. I was so excited that I could not concentrate. But the conclusion of the talk held my attention. The speaker called on the boys to take as their model the glider pilot Jefimenek who won a world record by completing 637 kilometres in a glider. And we girls were to take as our model the girl glider Anna Samosadova, who had established a world record for women.

At that point our instructor interrupted himself to say that he did not intend to make a distinction between boy and girl glider pilots, that we all had to aim at the highest records.

These were the words that stuck in my mind. My head was buzzing. On the journey home in the bus the words I had heard that evening kept coming back to me. It was then I made a resolution: I would become the best girl glider pilot in the world!

* * *

To my great surprise Eliška did not come to school next day. I heard that one of her brothers was ill, and that her mother had had to go to work as usual. There was nobody to look after the boys except Eliška.

Of all the lessons, only mathematics kept my mind alert. Brdečko was examining.

Cibulková was at the blackboard. She had no idea what to do. The whole form was pleased because she was wasting time for them.

“Now then, come on,” Brdečko encouraged her. “Think, Cibulková, think! Why, it’s easy!”

Poor Cibulková was near to tears. And Brdečko, who was afraid of women’s tears, joked: “What is the matter with you,

Cibulková? I bet the whole form has already solved this simple equation.”

Some half-hearted laughter followed his remark. The problem really was difficult. I think that none of us knew how to tackle it.

Then Brdečko began to look round the form, obviously in order to call another victim to the blackboard. I nearly disappeared underneath my desk. Thank goodness – he called the boy sitting next to Cibulková and from the self-assured way he walked I guessed he knew how to solve the problem. As the lesson was about to end, I was out of danger.

An argument arose concerning our brigade work on Saturdays. Some of us wanted to do it on Sunday afternoons rather than on Saturday.

In the end we took a vote. The result was fifty-fifty. So the matter had to be referred to the chairman of the central committee.

Together with Pavel and our form leader I dashed to the ground floor of the school building.

The decision was to our liking. We, the glider pilots, and the members of *Svazarm* who had opted for it, were to go on brigade on Sunday afternoons.

When I got home that afternoon, I opened the kitchen door, and my glance fell on an open suitcase on the table. As a rule its place was under the bed and for long the sight of it had been connected in my mind with far-off visits.

“Matylda,” my aunt explained when she saw me, “your aunt in Třebíč has had a fall from one of her giddy spells and she has hurt herself. I must go to her at once. Who will be looking after her chickens?”

I hid my joy. Life with my aunt had taught me to hide my feelings, so I was able to put on a gloomy expression.

“What will you do here on your own?” she asked in her wailing voice.

Calmly I reassured her. She did not have to worry about my midday meals. I would go to the students’ canteen with my school friends.

Dutifully I accompanied her to the station, hiding my impatience, for I was afraid I might be late at the airfield. I listened to a good many words of advice. Apparently there really were lots of things that could threaten my life, that might happen to me because of my carelessness: the flat might be broken into, burned down or flooded; indeed, it might be wiped off the face of the earth.

At long last my aunt was sitting in the train. We were still talking through the window of her compartment. I promised to beat the carpet and to scrub the floor on Saturday – as prescribed by the unchangeable world order.

I told myself I would go to school with my knife and fork wrapped in a napkin, like all the others who went to the students' canteen: it was a sign of being grown-up. And in the evening, when I came home from the airfield, I would make as much noise as I liked, to make up for all the tip-toeing I had to do when my aunt was at home. And I would keep the light on and read until well into the morning. In short, I would do exactly as I wished.

* * *

I arrived rather late at the airfield. I ran along the grass track used by gliding pupils towing the glider and the motor bicycle bringing the winch.

This time the flights were arranged in two groups. By the winch a group of solo flyers were gathered. Jan was among them. Our group and Pop, our instructor, had gathered at the western side of the airfield, with the dual-controlled gliders parked in front of us.

Otakárek and Pavel burst out with the news that they had already been up and practised straight and level flying. They made me feel I had missed something important.

I reported to the instructor; he was glancing at me with his merry eyes under his bushy eyebrows. "Come along and concentrate," he said to me. "It'll soon be your turn."

I was happy because Jan was there. But how upsetting such

thoughts were! And I was glad that Eliška had not come. How I wished I could concentrate on straight and level flying!

The sun was burning hot. The sky was full of large cumulus clouds, resembling big pads of cotton-wool. The advanced solo pilots were gliding at a great height, delighted with the flying conditions. Pop, our instructor, was in the air too, disappearing from time to time beyond the white cloud formations. Sitting on the ground, we drank lemonade and followed his flight until he was no more than a black spot in the sky.

After a while we noticed him on the opposite side of the airfield, his glider looking like a large bird. But no, that could not possibly be Pop! The glider dropped, describing beautiful large circles above the airfield, according to regulations. And that was when the boys standing by the winch cried out, delighted:

“The glider from Vrchlábí!”

When it landed on the appointed spot, we all gathered round it.

The pilot looked tired as if he had not slept and had met with many hazards in the sky.

He gave us a triumphant smile. After eight hours in the air, he was surrounded by the atmosphere of a long-distance flight. In his presence we had a sensation of awe.

Curious, we peeped into his cabin, and at the maps spread out there while the boys studied the entries in the log book showing the altitude he had reached.

Jan bent down to me and whispered: “He’s already got his Gold C, and he’s aiming still higher!”

As the weary pilot walked over to the hangars, some of our group accompanied him. He left his glider where he had landed it, so that we could examine it to our hearts’ content.

Then it was time to return to our work, especially as Pop was circling above our heads, ready to land.

* * *

At our meeting the glider pilot from Vrchlábí also took part.

This time we went through our programme at top speed so that he could talk about his experiences. I did not like the holder of the Gold C because he was vain and thought himself superior. He talked about his last flight under an overcast sky. He could go no farther and had to land on a strange airfield.

“I asked them: ‘Will you give me a tow, please?’ But they replied: ‘Comrade, you’ll have to wait till tomorrow!’ To which I replied: ‘I shan’t stop here, not likely!’ But they would not change their minds; insisted I should wait. Not me!”

I noticed that two girl glider pilots were whispering to each other, and I couldn’t concentrate on the lecture. I thought of Pop, our instructor’s, words: that he did not admit there was any difference between girl and boy pilots, that for him there were only good or bad glider pilots.

But how could a girl become a good glider pilot when she did not even show half the professional interest the boys showed? When she was preoccupied with trivialities instead of wanting to find out what a stratus cloud is, what to do when the glider loses height in an overcast sky, can’t go on and must make a forced landing? What it means to keep the glider at a great height during long flights? To fight turbulence clouds?

The meeting lasted so long that we missed the last bus. We had to walk home in complete darkness.

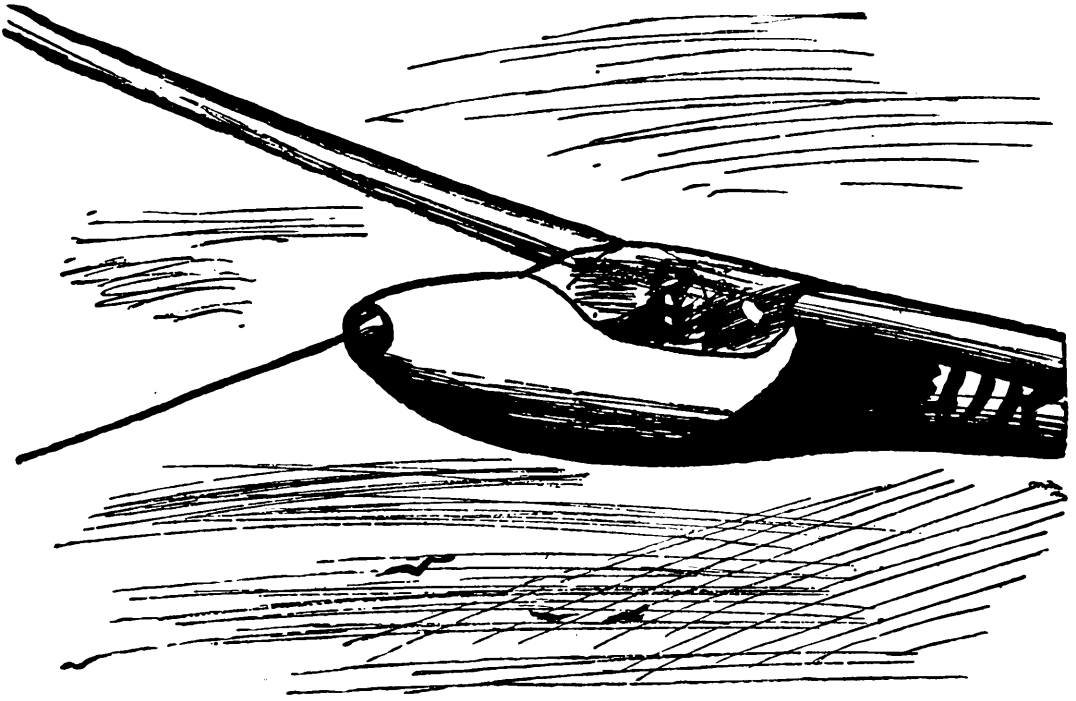
I was walking with Šuška, Otakárek and the Žužu boys. Then Jan joined us.

“I’m scared!” cried someone who was walking in front of us, and then suggested we should hold hands.

When we came to the training department Jan and several other boys left us. And I suddenly felt an appalling emptiness as if by Jan’s disappearance all my being had been undermined.

* * *

On Sunday morning the sun was covered with veils of mist, and in the west a huge, dark-grey cloud was to be seen. Jan was right:



it was going to rain and there would be nothing doing at the airfield.

Together with the Eleventh Form from our school we were doing brigade work. Kneeling in a field of turnips, it was hard to imagine that we would have to stick it until twelve o'clock and that we would have to move on our knees to a point somewhere on the far horizon.

"If only it would rain this morning too," Otakárek sighed.

As we ate huge chunks of bread and cheese during our break, one of the boys supervising the work in the field looked into the distance where Šuška could be seen. Then he turned to us and said: "That girl! She's a disgrace to our form!"

Šuška was far behind with her work; we really were ashamed of her. Unanimously we agreed to help her pull her turnips so that the younger pupils from Form Eleven wouldn't talk about us.

So we bent down over the rows of turnips with renewed effort.

"Why isn't Eliška here?" Otakárek asked me after a while, and I replied: "I don't know and I don't care."

Otakárek opened his mouth wide, but he did not say anything.

Before our bus left the village where we had worked, it began to pour with rain. It had obviously set in for the day. Whatever was I going to do with my Sunday afternoon?

If I couldn't be with Eliška, there was only Šuška left.

So I went to the cinema with Šuška and afterwards we bought some ice cream. We stopped and gazed in the shop windows. The time passed slowly.

"Let's go home to my place," Šuška suggested. Feeling better, we ran towards her home.

I couldn't help thinking of Jan, and I had but a single wish: to see him or to talk about him. But Šuška was not one of those in whom one can confide. It would have been different with Eliška.

Šuška too was thinking about Eliška. She told me that recently Eliška had become proud and conceited.

"And I know why!" she cried triumphantly, blinking her pretty eyes.

"Why?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"Because," Šuška replied, "she thinks such a lot about Jan."

"And he?"

"He? Don't you know?" she answered, laughing. "He thinks only of her, his little sweetheart."

* * *

The following Monday, Eliška was at school again, but I avoided looking at her. During break I pretended that I was learning my history, but I watched her silently.

She looked in my direction and made as if to join me. Then she changed her mind and left the classroom.

I felt defeated. With her unfailing sensitivity Eliška always knew when she would disturb me, and when I did not want to talk to her.

I almost ran after her. But the bell rang and the history master came in.

When he talked to us Professor Pavliček always ranged far back into history and into prehistoric times. He told us about art and religion of all periods and, besides teaching the prescribed syllabus, he always tried to make us see things for ourselves.

Today he began with the Inca civilization and he mentioned fetishes, objects that people honoured as sacred, believing that they were the seat of some heavenly being which protected them from all evil.

He suggested we should name different fetishes that were still in existence in our time, though in a different form.

Several of us held up our hands, including Cibulková. Jumping up eagerly, so that nobody should answer before her, she said: "The lightning conductor is a fetish."

The whole form burst out laughing. Professor Pavliček suppressed a smile, but we could see that he did not find it easy.

"Cibulková," he said, "why did you not tell us that the layout of the Tatra Mountains is a fetish too?"

Another burst of laughter. But then the entertainment was over. The form settled down again and named various little dolls seen in cars, charms for luck, elephants and amulets.

After the history lesson I dawdled in my place. Usually I threw my books into my satchel any old way, but today I put them in order more than once.

How surprised I was when I noticed Eliška waiting at the school gate!

I joined her without a smile, and for a while we walked along in silence.

She began to talk about her brother's illness. I felt that she was avoiding a conversation about things that might hurt me. Eliška had much more tact than I have. If I had been in her place I could never have behaved as well as she had done.

* * *

As we were walking along the high road to the airfield, we noticed

a tiny red glider above the roofs of the buildings, looking like one of those we had played with when we were children.

“There’s another one!” I exclaimed.

Above us an aeroplane was circling, and we were delighted to see a parachutist jumping from it right above the airfield.

At first there was nothing to be seen but a dark bundle that turned upside down three times. Only then did the tremendous “umbrella” open up above our heads. It sparkled brightly in the sun and the wind carried it along towards the west.

For the rest of the way we ran without stopping.

The parachutists were assembled near the main hangar. We watched them from a distance. They were standing in a group, looking like tourists dressed for a big trek in winter, wearing high boots and folded rucksacks: their parachutes.

Two planes took it in turns to carry them skywards for their jumps.

Directly above our heads a whitish “umbrella” with a human being strapped to it was just about to descend.

How calmly it floated down. What bliss to sail in the air under one’s own safe canopy. Now we knew what the small red parachutes were which the parachutists picked up all over the airfield. They were the thin ropes by which the parachute was tied to the plane. When the parachutist jumped, the rope stretched until it released the fasteners in the cover of the parachute so that it opened. Then the rope descended to the ground with its own little parachute.

“And what happens when the thin rope does not release the fasteners?” Šuška asked.

“In that case the parachutist would fly upward instead of down,” Otakárek snapped at her. He was in a bad temper.

But Šuška paid no attention to him. Her interest was concentrated on one thing only, and so were we. A parachutist was descending close to us. We had to jump out of his way to avoid his parachute falling on our heads.

“That’s terrific!” Šuška exclaimed. “It really is. I would like to be a parachutist too!”

“Of course!” Otakárek snapped at her again, “mainly because the parachute flies down to the ground and nowhere else!”

He had hardly finished speaking when all of us started to run quickly, as if we had been shot forward. We were driven by the pressure of air caused by the parachute as it touched the ground.

We watched closely what happened next. The parachute dragged the parachutist along, and he had to use force and to act quickly to avoid being held in tow and dragged on the ground by it.

I think we were all disappointed. I for one had imagined that the parachutist would stand upright, his dazzling white canopy obediently coming to rest at his feet.

“He must have hurt himself badly,” Šuška said.

We then watched him stuffing a lot of the dazzling white silk into his bag – just as washerwomen do when they squeeze the dirty linen into the linen bag.

“Such a lot of silk,” remarked Šuška. “That would be enough for heaps of dresses.”

“You really are impossible,” Pavel sneered at her.

I was glad that the boys took me seriously and treated me as an equal or as one of them; Otakárek was never as rude to me as he was to Šuška and some of the other girls.

I agreed with the boys: a glider pilot is much more than a parachutist, for the latter does nothing except drift towards the ground, whilst the glider pilot negotiates distances and heights.

If only I was already so advanced that I could venture as far afield as Pop, our instructor, who had returned from a fly-past the day before.

Still I felt that I was advanced compared with the time when we had sat in the classroom and knew a glider only from the drawing-board. Now I touched the real thing without fear of damaging it and without any exaggerated respect!

Years ago when I had learned to ride a bicycle, it behaved like

an obstinate, unmanageable animal; all the same I had conquered the bicycle, I had forced it to obey me. Maybe that was how it would be with the glider, only it would take longer.

On the ground I could recite without the slightest hesitation everything we had learned about controlling a glider, but somehow it was all so different at a height of 600 metres when I dropped the tow-rope that linked us with the power-driven plane, and when Pop handed the controls over to me. I took my courage in both hands and tried to outwit the glider. I summoned all my self-reliance, all my confidence, and I gripped the control column with a steady hand whilst my feet were firmly on the rudder bar, and my eyes fixed on the horizon.

“Careful, Máša!” the instructor warned me. “That was ham-handed! You must get used to keeping your hand at the ready, but your touch must be as light as a feather. Gliders are extremely sensitive.”

Far, far below us I could see the bright yellow colour of a turnip field. Above us clouds were sailing along, throwing their shadows over the earth, looking like ships at sea.

Yet there was no time to watch the clouds. The instructor showed me how to turn at fifteen degrees, and I had to repeat this exercise.

“You dropped too much. Once more, keep calm! Handle the control column more carefully!”

“That was better. And now to the right!”

The turn succeeded so well that the instructor whistled approvingly and allowed me to try a turn at thirty degrees. He took charge of the steering only when we were down to a height of 200 metres. As I relaxed I watched the earth coming up to us.

I climbed out, feeling like a hero.

Otakárek too practised turns for the first time. On our way home the two of us stood out among the others as the two most successful.

He saw me home, talking more than usual. We were both amazed that Pavel was still practising straight flying – the object

of our very first lesson. It was the same with Eliška, but that was not surprising because she had been away.

“Don’t you believe that everybody is suited to be a glider pilot,” Otakárek said. “I won’t say anything about Eliška, not just now. But look at Šuška!”

That day, when it had been her turn, she had disappeared with an official on his motor bicycle to fetch some things that were needed.

“Don’t think that the instructor didn’t notice it,” said Otakárek with emphasis. “He’ll soon know who’s worth something and who isn’t, and he’ll send the useless ones packing.”

When we took leave of each other I went home, but now that my aunt wasn’t there I didn’t like returning to the dark empty flat. I had been looking forward to all the noise I could make when I was alone, but I always came home quietly and trod softly so as not to hear the floor creaking! Quickly I drank my cold milk and washed. Often I did not even put on the light, but went to bed right away, even though I could have read into the morning.

As I locked the entrance door, a letter fell down at my feet.

“My dear Matylda, First of all my kindest regards and my greetings to you! Are you watering the flowers regularly? Are you buying milk every day? Your aunt is better, but she is not yet fit enough to see to her chickens, so I shall have to stay on for a while. Be sure and go to bed in good time every evening! And don’t use too much light! Don’t forget about your health either. As ever, your aunt.”

The last page of the letter was reserved for the aunt from Třebíč. In contrast to her sister she wrote in a very artificial style, the result of reading too many badly-written novels.

“My dear child, My dear sister, your loving aunt, does not state the exact truth. I am quite well enough already to go into the yard to see to my little chickens. Yet she desires me to have more rest, therefore she sacrifices herself to relieve me of all my work.”

I had the feeling that the aunt from Třebíč would have been

glad to see her sister leave, but she wrote, as usual, the opposite of what she felt, saying that “my dear sister has been kind enough to extend her stay for several more days.”

“The trees in the garden are in bloom,” the letter went on, “and I sincerely hope there will be enough apples when you come for your holidays. Every evening we sit in front of the house – as is our custom – and then we go to bed. Keep well, and be careful crossing the road. And work hard at your school work. Your loving aunt Luisa.”

If they had seen me in the glider that day at a height of 600 metres!

The only thing I was benefiting from was fresh air. Now I was alone the kitchen window was always wide open day and night, and I didn’t care whether there was sun, wind, rain or fog. Nor did I care about thieves who – according to my aunt – could get into the ground floor of houses even through holes in the wall.

Before falling asleep every night I would look at the sky beyond the roofs of the houses. Half asleep I would begin to dream, seeing myself in a glider below the stars.

* * *

St Swithin’s Day came – and it was raining. Now we would have forty days of rain.

We dressed up for the airfield as if we were going on a ski tour, yet all the same we were shivering with cold. But I was worried less about the cold than about how to avoid feeling sick. When we were towed by the light aeroplane, our glider swayed as if on high seas, and my poor stomach swayed with it.

As we reached the end of an up-current, and then dropped steeply, my head felt empty and I went hot all over. I followed the advice of the instructor: I opened my eyes and took a deep breath.

“We’re over the worst, Máša,” he laughed. “You’ll be all right now.”

“You’re quite pale,” Otakárek told me as I descended, but I thought that Eliška looked even worse than I. Her face was whiter than her ski cap.

The cold spell passed, but then we had rain again. And the radio forecast nothing but rain.

My aunt came back. She returned at the same time as the rain.

I knew she was back the moment I entered the passage, for the flat smelled once more the way it usually does. At first I was pleased. The stove in the kitchen was burning and on the table stood an apricot tart.

“Matylda!” she cried as soon as I opened the door. “Let me look at you! Good gracious, you’re thin!”

Then followed reproach upon reproach because I had opened the window “in spite of the fact that it was raining cats and dogs”; also, two leaves of a pot plant had dried up and, altogether, everything was different from the way she had ordered me to do things.

Then I was sorry she had come back. Life resumed its old pattern, and I found myself wishing that I could live among young people.

* * *

During the rainy spell we could not go to the airfield. When it was over we found the whole ground suddenly covered with thousands of dandelions, all of them shining like gold.

It was very cold. Because of the piercing wind we were wearing our ski clothes and when there was nothing for us to do, we huddled together behind the gliders.

Today the beginners were to be launched by winch for the first time. We were terribly pleased. “It makes no difference, really,” said one of the Žužu boys whose name was Honza, “you’ve got to get up somehow.”

Eventually the boys from the training department came. But Jan was not among them. “Where’s Jan?” the instructor called. The boys crowded round Pop to explain something to him.

Soon we learned the news: at work, Jan had been injured by a machine and had been taken to hospital.

Apart from this incident things proceeded as usual. It was the solo pilots' turn to fly. Because their gliders stay up in the air for a long while, we had plenty of time to wait.

I sat down by the winch and watched the work of the finisher and starter. I understood quite a bit of that kind of language now; how to send a glider up towards the sky and how to contact the pilot to tell him he should start landing.

It is more difficult for the finisher. He must judge the exact moment at which the conditions are favourable for landing.

At length the last of the solo pilots got off the ground.

Pop, our instructor, called the beginners together around the Pionýr, so that we could tell him once more what we had repeated several times already during the preparation for our flights: when and at what height the rope is released and what speed the glider must attain before the pilot disconnects the rope, at what height and wind we must begin the preparations for landing, and how best to level up the craft so that it should land safely.

Our schedule for that day only included a thorough preparation on the ground. "I can see you're disappointed. You were looking forward to flying high, weren't you?" Pop's eyes were twinkling. "Supposing those who knew the lesson best might, by way of reward, fly high under the clouds?"

It was agreed. The flight was to be called a "reconnaissance".

"I don't want to disappoint anyone," the instructor continued. "I leave it to you to decide who knew the lesson best."

In fairness we recognized that little Honza was best. The second place went to Otakárek; then the choice was between me and a boy from the training college.

"If I'm allowed a word too," the instructor said, "I should give Máša second place. She knows better than anyone how to take off."

Dazzling white clouds formed snow-covered mountains in the sky. By the time I was seated in the glider, these mountains

had changed into extraordinary high peaks, edged by the golden rays of the sun.

“The weather’s going to be fine,” said the instructor, who was sitting behind me. “Are you comfortable?” he inquired.

Not only was I comfortable, I felt like a goddess of the sky.

Now we were running along the ground. Then the rope lifted us up. I could immediately feel the difference. There can be nothing more blissful than a winch-launch, for the rise is not gradual, but vertical towards the sky.

At a height of 150 metres we had reached the end of the rope, and I myself was allowed to disconnect it. It fell to the ground and we remained suspended between heaven and earth.

Due to the loss of height, the glider swayed a little. Pop turned the glider so that we were sailing along towards huge clouds that looked like snow-covered mountains.

Suddenly I felt a jerk on the left wing. Our glider swayed, and the instructor called: “We’re rising fast!”

As we turned in a spiral, we were soaring skywards. The horizon receded from sight and we approached a big cloud.

Our speed increased and now we were flying in a straight line at a height of 3,000 metres.

“Aren’t you cold, Máša?” the instructor inquired. I shook my head. I never feel cold if my attention is as completely engaged as it was at that moment.

“Take the control column for a minute. Be sure to watch your instrument indicator!”

“Do you know where we are?” he asked after a while.

I replied that I had read it on the horizon indicator. Carefully I watched the narrow strip of forest far away. I pulled the lever and I adjusted to the horizon as soon as the strip widened a little, for this indicated that the glider was sinking.

“Still a little rough! I have told you already that you must handle the control column with care, because it’s very sensitive.”

Even up in the glider, flying high above the earth, I had to curb my temperament. I would never have thought that my character

could in any way be connected with steering a glider and with training to become a good glider pilot.

“Do you feel able to try a turn now?” Pop asked. “Careful, try the turn we practised.”

As I attempted the turn, we struck a down-current that caused us loss of speed. I regained it by pushing forward the control column and then I continued to turn while I pressed on the right rudder bar. The glider dipped, and my instruments showed me that the glider was climbing. Before the instructor could tell me, I corrected the tilt, and the restless indicator and my stomach both returned to their proper place.

“Good girl!” Pop called. “You’ve learned your lesson well. That was fine! Do you know how long we’ve been in the air?”

I didn’t.

“Twenty minutes already.”

That really was a surprise, for the time seemed longer to me than a whole morning at school.

We were about to land. Every second the ground was coming nearer. A sudden descent, and the glider jumped, then it settled down again, and we were dashing along the bumpy ground.

* * *

Pavel came to school with the news that Jan’s leg had been amputated in hospital. Fortunately nobody believed him. I for one could not imagine Jan hopping about on crutches like Paloušek, the tobacconist in our street.

We decided to visit Jan in hospital to find out for ourselves what had happened. Saturday before half past one found us standing in a group outside the big gates of the hospital. Every minute the queue behind us got longer.

A grumpy old doorkeeper opened the gates. We did not know where the surgical wing was; we were not even sure if this was where to look for Jan.

“Let’s ask the old man,” Šuška suggested.

Finally we found the surgical ward without asking anybody. But then we were up against another problem. None of us knew Jan's surname.

As we were walking along a quiet corridor a nursing sister passed. Otakárek went up to her and asked:

“Could you please tell us where we can find Jan, the glider pilot?”

She glanced at us, startled, as if we were creatures from another planet. Shrugging her shoulders, she disappeared behind the nearest door.

“Let's go up to the first floor,” said Šuška.

We walked up to the first floor and to the second floor, asking everybody we met for Jan, the young man from the steelworks training department.

In the end we sent Šuška to inquire at the doorkeeper's. Success!

Jan had been, in fact, in the surgical ward, but yesterday he had been dismissed to be nursed at home. “Of course he has not lost his leg,” Šuška informed us. “And his second name is Zeman.”

What were we to do now? Should we go and visit Jan in his room? The heat was unbearable and we didn't feel like walking right across the town. And for all we knew Jan might not be in his room; he had probably gone home to his family in the Orlický Mountains. The main thing was that he had not lost his leg.

* * *

Every Saturday we had a weekly check-up and servicing of equipment. We cleaned the glider, tidied up the hangars and checked the inventory of all items entrusted to the gliding pupils. We also had to make a list of all flights accomplished during the previous week.

We shared the work, and we hurried to finish as soon as possible so that we could join the others out on the airfield.

I washed the inside of the glider cabin and, behind me, Šuška

polished the surface with a dry duster. She was getting on rather slowly with her work. Chatting all the time, she forgot to use her duster.

Then we learned some surprising news: that very morning our assistant flying instructor had married a girl glider pilot.

Eliška and I were not interested in the marriage. But Šuška's eyes were sparkling, and her duster nearly stopped altogether. Obviously she was seeing herself as the bride.

But my dream was of a girl of moderate good looks who could dance like a fairy and sing like a lark; she was also as strong as a boy and dived fearlessly into the water from the highest board; she was first in swimming and ski-ing; and she skated like a world champion. Recently she had become a famous glider pilot, and besides this she was in love with a boy who looked just like Jan.

But I did not see her as a bride. For me, marriage means something like death, and the bride who leaves the registrar's office seems to me like a star that has set.

At last our work was finished. We pulled the glider out on to the green grass, ready for the launch.

Today again we were to be launched by winch. After several flights performed by the soloists, the newly-weds joined us. Šuška whispered something into my ear; she did not approve of the young wife wearing her gliding trousers as usual and the same old pullover. When her turn came to be married, she would be dressed differently!

The motor bicycle pulled the Kmotr, a glider for experts, to the launch point, and the young couple prepared for their flight in it. "For their honeymoon," the gliding pupils said.

If ever I should happen to have a honeymoon, I too would prefer to fly through the air than crawl along by train from one station to another.

Pop, our instructor, started the young couple off, advanced pupils held the wings of the Kmotr, and the rest of us sang the bridal song from *Rusalka*, the opera by Dvořák.

Meanwhile a wall of dark clouds had formed to the west. I watched them building up. Since I had started gliding, I was constantly watching the sky. What colours and shades I would put down on paper if ever I were to paint!

All of a sudden, a mighty storm came up.

Our gliders had already landed. The winch was silenced. Yet it was in vain that we scanned the sky for Kmotr which carried the newly-wed couple.

Every minute the excitement at the launch-point increased. We listened to our instructor who was talking to a group of advanced pupils. He was speaking of certain clouds with dangerous characteristics. If Kmotr encountered them it would not be able to withstand them.

Kmotr ought to have landed in good time if a storm was approaching. Possibly the glider had run into storm clouds or into a strong gust of wind, and had had to land in a field somewhere. This was of course what we hoped. Without letting each other know how we felt, we were all terribly worried at the thought that the Kmotr had crashed and that the two glider pilots were dead.

The caterpillar motor bicycle came to fetch us. We pushed the remaining gliders towards the hangars. Nobody felt like talking. Even Šuška, the chatterbox, was silent.

Only the instructor and two of the advanced pupils remained at the launch-point. A plane was sent up to search for Kmotr.

Before we had reached our dressing-rooms, a terrific thunder-storm broke. The rain fell in sheets and a grey mist enveloped the airfield.

What an unforgettable wedding day for the young couple! I imagined the bride, soaked to the skin, sitting somewhere in a field where she had landed with her parachute in the fierce storm! And the bridegroom, no less drenched, worrying about his bride!

The search plane returned, but without success.

However, it was already known that the storm was raging only

up to an altitude of 2,000 metres, so that it was at its most violent in the lower layers of cloud, at an altitude of about 1,000 metres. The glider had had time enough to climb above the strati where the storm raged and had a chance to land elsewhere. As the storm was travelling at eighty kilometres per hour, the sky above us would soon be clear, and then we would perhaps see what had happened to the glider.

At last the thunderstorm subsided, and the rain was no more than a transparent curtain.

Two more planes took off to search for the missing glider.

In the west the sky cleared. Only some round red clouds reminded us of the thunderstorm that had passed.

I do not know which of us was the first to distinguish the glider below the red clouds. Several of us called out at almost the same time.

We were so excited that we almost stopped breathing. We could hardly believe our eyes. Could it be our Kmotr?

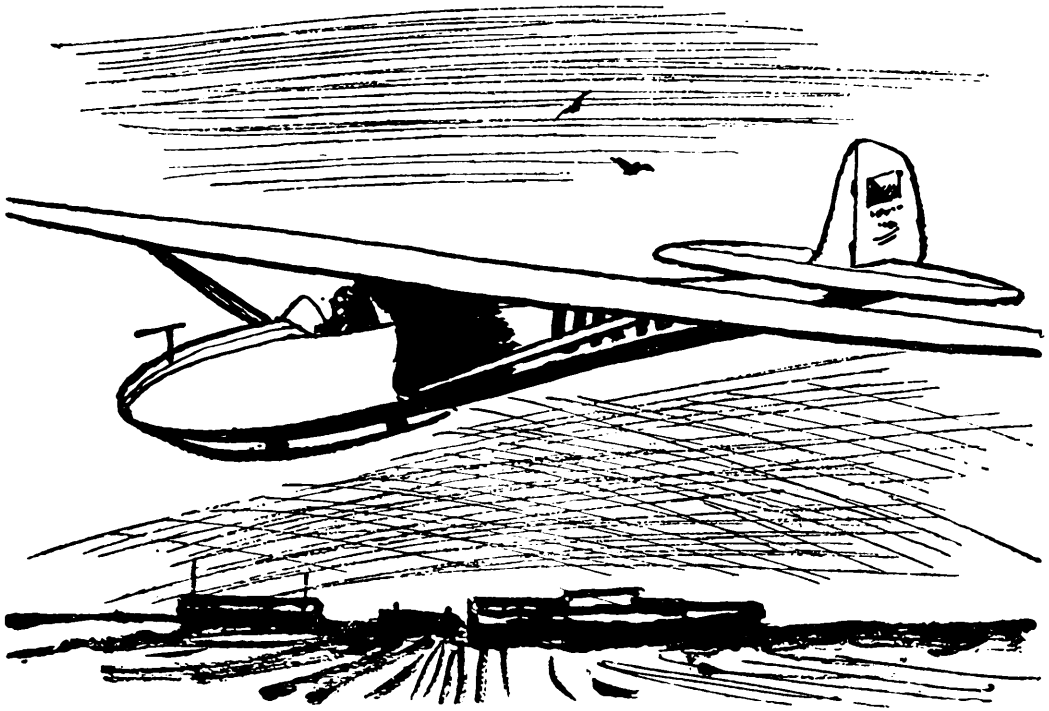
After it had flown across the airfield, we were certain. It was ours! It was our Kmotr!

We ran all over the place, we shouted and jumped for joy. We dashed up to the glider. The bride had to be lifted out of it. And the bridegroom looked as tired as if he had just finished a race.

This is what had happened. First they had dropped below the clouds, but soon they found an upward current, and could hope to regain height and land before the rain started.

As they approached the storm centre, they had soared even higher. They had drifted along helplessly, while the storm raged below them. They could not think of landing, because they were separated from the earth by an impenetrable layer of cloud.

"I thought the storm would carry us to somewhere by the sea," the husband explained. But then the storm came to an end. They managed to get to the right of it. Turning south, they were in danger of hitting a cold front, and of getting into trouble with dangerous gusts.



But without their realizing it, this cold front had brought them back to the airfield.

Kmotr had been forced to perform aerobatics in the thunderstorm.

“At that stage we did not know how it would all end,” said the husband. But suddenly the cloud cover had broken up for a moment and they had seen they were in the vicinity of the airfield.

Without saying a single word Pop listened attentively to their account. We guessed there would be an aftermath to this trip at our meeting the same evening. Possibly the husband would be severely reprimanded. He would have to make his apologies.

“He must have seen the storm coming,” the boys were saying, “therefore he ought to have returned at once. That’s what it was! He left it too late to land.”

The general mood at the launch-point was somewhat subdued. We could not concentrate, so we finished well before sunset.

Meanwhile the young wife had recovered, and her husband was a little less silent. Pop had got over his anger. There was to

be dancing after the meeting, we were told. I decided that this was the time to pretend that I didn't feel well. I slipped away as soon as the boys began sorting out records for dancing in the club-room where we sometimes watched films.

I sat on the concrete floor, listening to the music, the laughter and the shuffle of dancing. I was glad to have escaped, but all the same I felt like an exile.

Quiet steps could be heard approaching. Through the gloom emerged the figure of Pop, and he sat down beside me. I think he was not surprised to find me there.

I pretended that I had hurt my ankle. Expertly he examined it, and I sensed that he was laughing inwardly.

"That's nothing, Máša," he comforted me, "nothing at all. Come on, let's dance! That'll make you feel better."

I was almost in tears.

"Come on, come!" He dragged me behind him. As soon as we were in the room, he led me into the circle of dancers.

But we didn't move at all. We stayed in the same place. Several times Pop pushed me forward energetically, then he turned me round gently, but I only stumbled over his feet and we were back where we were.

Then he whispered in my ear: "Relax and don't be afraid! Listen to the music and follow my lead!"

Eliška, Šuška, the bride and the other girls were moving as if they were floating on air. I made a great effort. Pop directed me this way and that way, and I was getting more and more desperate. All I could do was to exercise my will power to prevent myself from bursting into tears.

As soon as the record stopped, Pop, for everybody to see, took my foot in his hand and examined it thoroughly. In the end he announced: "Your foot must hurt you badly. Better rest it."

In this way we could leave the dance floor without looking conspicuous.

Again we sat down in the store room. In the darkness I gave way to tears.

“Don’t worry!” said Pop’s kind voice. “You really need not worry about that ankle of yours.”

Again I could hear him laughing inwardly, but entirely without malice.

“What does it matter if your foot hurts when you dance!” he continued. “You’ll still be first among the girl glider pilots!”

* * *

Coming home from the airfield, I usually took off my shoes at our front door. Then I walked barefoot to the hand basin, and then to the stove where my supper was prepared.

No good! Even in her sleep my aunt could hear the faintest noise.

She woke up and said: “Late again? You are on a slippery slope, Matylda!”

After a while she roused herself once more and asked: “Did you lock the door?”

My aunt is afraid of burglars. She doesn’t trust anyone. Distrust is in the very air she breathes. It runs in her veins instead of blood.

When she sets out for her trip to her sister at Třebíč, she will never allow me to consult a railway timetable. Who knows, perhaps a printing error slipped in on the very page we need to consult, or the timetable might be altered all of a sudden. She ignores posters giving times of departure at the station. Who can tell? The railway official may have made a mistake! She prefers to ask other travellers, and before she takes her seat in her compartment, she checks again with her fellow travellers.

Soon she begins to worry how the journey will end, and then her thoughts return to the deserted flat.

“The gas, Matylda! Did you really turn it off properly? Are you sure? Oh, why did I not make sure myself?”

She did in fact try all the taps several times before she left as well as the catches of the windows and the locks of the cupboards.

Only without being aware of it, she might have opened them again.

With her sister from Třebíč she competes in imagining all the things that might happen to our flat or to the cottage at Třebíč. There the hens might be killed, the apples picked, the pickled eggs stolen from the cellar.

This year, I decided, I must get out of my visit to Třebíč!

Yet when I thought of the little cottage and the nice smell that is typical of it, I felt as if it were my real home.

I was also very fond of the quiet little garden where everything that wants to grow in profusion. In one corner stands a dilapidated summer-house that smells of dry wood. I always liked to play on the wooden seat by the wash-house which is overgrown with ivy. I liked to peep through the dusty windows into the room where no washing has been done for years, and where all sorts of odd-looking things lie as if in a deep sleep.

* * *

Next morning, as I was getting ready for school, it poured again.

“The hawthorn is in bloom,” my aunt remarked. “That means the cold will last. In any case, I won’t take your coat to the cleaners yet.”

As far as I was concerned, I made myself believe it was warm. I simply wouldn’t wear a coat – not even if instead of hawthorn blossoms, snow covered the ground.

Twenty-four more school days! Maybe even more. Rumour had it that we were not to break up before June 30th. But we hoped it would not be more than those twenty-four days on which we had reckoned. Even that was too long.

Quickly I put on my mac and was at the door in no time. I stood for a while in the street, undecided which way to go. There was a time when I would have hurried to Stalin Street to be with Eliška whenever I had a moment to spare.

But between Eliška and me things were not as they used to be; we no longer wished to be together all the time.

In my mind I could see Eliška sitting in her recess in the large room, and then as my mind wandered through their whole flat I made a sudden decision: drawn to her, I hurried through the streets without stopping until I came to the door that led to the flat of the Sušil family.

As I went in, I felt relieved. Here I had always found everything I longed for.

Paní Sušilová was baking little yeast cakes. “Eliška has flu,” she said. “Probably you caught cold at the airfield. Don’t go near her, I don’t want you to catch it!”

Eliška was in bed in the little room behind the kitchen. Thoroughly wrapped up, she sat up with a towel round her forehead, so that only her beautiful eyes and her golden curls peeped out.

She expressed neither surprise nor pleasure at seeing me. Puzzled, I sat down on a chair. In the old days I would have certainly sat on Eliška’s bed. We were silent. At last I asked her how much chemistry I ought to revise.

She replied that, if she were in my place, she would look up the alcohols and aldehydes, also the heterogeneous compounds.

After a while I ventured to say that I would go and look at my chemistry. I waited in vain for Eliška to persuade me to stay on. So I got up to go.

“If I can’t go to the airfield,” Eliška suddenly said, stressing every single word, “thank Jan for me.”

I stopped dead at the door, as if someone had struck me. For the first time Eliška had admitted that she was competing for Jan with me. And by keeping silent, I too admitted it.

Abruptly I turned and left hurriedly through the kitchen.

“Máša, where are you off to in such a hurry?” paní Sušilová called. “Come and have a cake.”

I didn’t want a cake. Not even one of paní Sušilová’s lovely little yeast cakes.

“Little love birds, you can’t be one without the other, can you?” she laughed, closing the door behind me.

* * *

As I revised my chemistry my thoughts went back to the question: what was it that Eliška wanted to thank Jan for? Turning the problem over and over in my mind, I found the explanation at last: Jan had written to Eliška from his home in the Orlický Mountains.

To know this did not lessen my anguish. Rather the contrary. How I wished I had someone I could confide in!

Then Otakárek came to my mind. We had always got on well, and recently we had gone home from school together, for he too went home for lunch.

But I was afraid he wouldn’t understand me because he was only a boy. Usually we talked about the future together. He let me into his plans: he wanted to go to the school of technology and become a radio engineer.

A sudden thought occurred to me. I could see why Otakárek would not understand me. It was because girls meant nothing to him. Where I was concerned, he made an exception, but that was only because he saw me as a boy rather than a girl, for both of us were learning gliding and we were both at the same stage.

If only I could go to the airfield! It would have stopped me from worrying about the letter Eliška had received from Jan.

During the following night my aunt woke me with a mighty shaking. She stood beside me, a candle in her hand: “For heaven’s sake, Matylda! Wake up! What is the matter with you? You are nearly throwing yourself out of bed!”

I muttered something to the effect that there was nothing the matter with me. Closing my eyes again, I recalled the dream from which my aunt had roused me: I was flying in a thunderstorm above the roof-tops of our town without wings or glider. Then

I stopped dreaming; I was wide awake as if it was already morning. Why couldn't I hear any water spouting from the pipes?

I jumped out of bed and peeped outside. It was moonlight, just as I had seen it in my sleep. Hurrah! To-morrow we would go to the airfield again.

* * *

Next day, at the airfield, there were more gliding pupils than usual. This big group had assembled because we were to practise for the first time circling and landing, using the winch! We would have to wait a long time for our turn.

I looked for Eliška, but could not see her.

Soon the boys from the steelworks training department arrived, Jan among them. His foot was lightly bandaged and he was limping a little. I blushed for joy to see him again after such a long time. But then I remembered that he had written to Eliška and that I was to give her message; which is why I did not join those who had run up to him to greet him.

Before the solo flyers had their turn, Pop went off for a high altitude flight. First he performed a spin for us, then he did a dive, and finally he turned on his back – an aerobatic feat of great difficulty. Then he disappeared for a long time among the snow-clad peaks.

As our flying assistant was missing at the launch-point today, Jan was entrusted to take the place of our instructor during Pop's absence.

Jan turned to me and asked me to enter the names of the glider pilots in the log book.

Delighted, I ran to the table reserved for whoever was in charge of the log book. Then I watched the launching, and tried to judge their performance before Jan dictated to me the mark to be entered in their books. Then I entered the time and the height reached; on a special list intended for statistics I inscribed the times the gliding pupils made as well as details about the flights.

I wished I could concentrate on learning my chemistry and my physics as well as this kind of work!

During a short lull between two launches Jan asked me: “How are you, Máša?”

I remembered Eliška’s message and all I could do was reply casually: “Thank you, I’m fine. I’m always fine.”

At last our instructor returned and took over the arrangements at the launch-point. Jan climbed into his glider and, like an arrow, he rose into the air.

I watched Jan’s glider climbing in steep tight spirals. All of a sudden it rose vertically, nose pointing towards the sky, and then it swooped towards the ground. Closing my eyes, I shrieked with fright.

I expected to see Jan and his glider crash to the ground. Instead it levelled up, then it dived again, nose pointing downward, straightened up once more and then sailed calmly above our heads.

“You were afraid for him, weren’t you?” our instructor asked me, and again I imagined him laughing inwardly, as he had when he danced with me.

It was evening before the beginners’ turn came. By then the tall mountains of cloud had disappeared into the distance, leaving the sky clear as a mirror.

One of the Žužu boys started first, and my turn came immediately after.

I was particularly careful to do everything well, though this time I was only to watch my instructor, not to take over the controls myself.

As we reached a certain height, I released the rope and watched how the instructor adjusted the craft for gliding, then for circling exactly above the airfield.

Soon it was time to land. “Take the control column,” the instructor told me. We were going to land. I eased the control column. With its nose dipped, our glider made for the ground. The instructor took over the controls, and said: “You’re gliding too steeply.”

When we had landed, he patted me on the shoulder, smiling. "All the same, Máša, I'd be glad if you were more cautious. Caution is the first quality of a good glider pilot, and don't you forget it," he repeated, shaking his head.

* * *

When Otakárek came back from his flight, he sat down by me.

"How did I do?" he asked. "Did you watch me?"

I shrugged my shoulders, though in fact I had watched his flight carefully.

"What's the matter with you?" he wanted to know.

I simply did not feel like talking. He gave me a surprised look, for as a rule I was not "moody like a girl".

I was wondering how it was possible for things to change from one day to another. For years now, Eliška and I had been friends, but with one stroke our friendship had come to an end.

I was torn by conflicting emotions: my old love for Eliška and my present dislike of her.

One of the Žužu boys was the last to land. We were finishing for the night. We pushed the gliders back into the hangars, our "heavenly birds" whose gay yellow colour shone in the deepening twilight.

Jan, who was somewhere behind us, caught up with us; he stood by the left wing of my glider and, slightly limping, he walked beside me. I was afraid that he would hear my heart thumping.

"Have you heard the news?" someone was calling. "Tonight we're to have a film after our meeting."

On the screen we were to see pilots at work, performing steep turns, spins and dives. The film was said to be so remarkable that one had the illusion of sitting in the cockpit piloting the plane oneself.

Suddenly Jan turned to me. "Did your friend give you the textbook I sent you? She didn't? Then ask her for it and read it

carefully. It is very interesting and vividly written. Afterwards you can pass it on to the others.”

Jan could not possibly guess how upset I was. Now I had decided about Eliška. I would never forgive her for not passing on the textbook.

“The author who wrote the book,” Jan continued, “is one of the best Polish gliders.”

In the sky hung a brightly shining star. Jan, too, noticed it, and I felt proud to be able to inform him it was the planet Venus.

“Venus, Venus,” he repeated. “What a lovely name! Do you know whom it would suit? Your golden-haired friend.”

* * *

Eliška was not at school, nor did she come to the airfield. Anyway, I would have taken no notice of her, even if she had been there. For, according to my resolution, I kept myself busy all the time. I did not talk to anybody except about flying.

Stubborn as ever, I had not changed a bit since I was a little girl. What was strange was the fact that I was against all those I loved best.

I went to the airfield and found it buzzing with preparations for an air display the following Sunday.

Before we took leave of each other, we arranged that on Sunday all the glider pilots would meet near our changing-room.

“Don’t forget to tell Eliška about it, will you,” Jan said to me, “so that she can find us easily.”

There and then I told myself that I would stay at home on Sunday, even though that would mean a sacrifice almost as hard for me to bear as death.

At school nothing was talked about except the air display. We glider pilots were overwhelmed with questions from all sides. Pavel talked as knowingly as if he had already accomplished

aerobatic feats. Those in our form who did not glide were convinced that he was the most advanced of us.

Sunday was the loveliest day imaginable, the first we had had that year.

For a while I studied, then I read and in the end I altered some old summer frocks. My aunt watched me in silence, at a loss to understand what prompted me to stay at home on such a lovely day, and a Sunday too!

“I’ll tell you what we could do,” she suggested. “Let us go to the cemetery together. Or you’ll forget your poor parents.”

The cemetery lay on a height from which I could overlook the military parade ground and the old cemetery where I used to go with Eliška.

In the far blue distance the airfield stretched out, and the air vibrated with the motion of the planes.

My aunt was lost in thought, remembering the dead. I looked absent-mindedly at the tombstone where I could read the name of my relative called Matylda. Almost at the bottom of the tombstone was my mother’s photograph, a coloured one from the days when she was young. In the middle of the tombstone was a plaque to commemorate my father who had died as a result of his experiences in a concentration camp.

Above us a jet plane passed, quick as lightning, interrupting the heavy silence with its deafening roar.

“What fools they are!” my aunt cried. “That awful noise! Not even on Sunday can one have peace.”

If she knew how high I had already flown! If she guessed that I wanted to become a glider pilot! There and then I came to the conclusion that it is the grown-ups’ own fault if children keep things to themselves.

“Come on, do something!” my aunt said in her sternest voice. “Go and fetch water from the well and throw those faded flowers away.”

Suddenly I saw a glider moving without a sound above me. At that moment I felt almost broken-hearted with pain. To think

that I might have been the happiest creature on earth myself, flying high in the air!

* * *

It was eighteen days before the end of term when we were told that our form was going to the mountains. The whole form welcomed the good news, but for us glider pilots it meant losing much precious time.

We left in a downpour of rain. We glider pilots did not mind the poor weather, for it would not be fit for gliding anyway. What spoiled our pleasure somewhat was the fact that our chemistry master was escorting us. We quite liked him but, as Mirek said, "He never exerts himself on our behalf."

Suddenly the mountains rose before us with their hazy outlines hidden by mist. And as soon as we spotted our mountain chalet, we all shouted with joy.

But of course the mountains looked different from the way they had in winter. Surrounded by green, the peaks looked higher and the slopes steeper than in winter.

We recognized everything and yet we recognized nothing. Where was the slope where Alena had rolled down so that only the end of her skis could be seen? It was over there – no – it had happened not far from a path, yet there was no path to be seen over there.

I slept by the wall where I had slept before, and once again Šuška was next to me. We did not talk to each other. She was always hanging on to Eliška and both of them avoided me, just as I avoided them.

The nights were very cold. On top of our pyjamas we put on our training suits, pullovers, socks – in other words, we dressed for bed as if we were going mountaineering.

As I lay ready to fall asleep, I felt a hand on my face. It was Šuška's. Bending over me, she put a rolled-up slip of paper under my chin.

“From Eliška,” she whispered, then turned away.

I neither moved nor replied. All the same I held the slip of paper in my hand. When I woke up in the morning, I was still clutching it.

I waited till the girls had gone to wash in the river before I unrolled it.

“I do not know what I have done to you to make you so cross with me,” Eliška wrote in her neat handwriting. “Do tell me what it is, and after that we can part company for good.”

That is the way our quarrels always used to end. There was always a little slip of paper passed under the desk at school. It did not matter which of us wrote the note.

After each quarrel I would do anything for Eliška, anything to show her my affection.

But this time I did not reply immediately. As I sat at breakfast wondering what to do for the best, I noticed her puzzled expression.

Once again I felt about her as I always had. Suddenly I could find no wrong in her. Up in the mountains Jan was forgotten. It all seemed to have been sheer imagination.

Hurriedly I scribbled on the edge of a newspaper: “I’ll wait for you behind the big stone by the stream.”

We could not meet by the stream after all, for we were going on excursions in different directions that day. But we were again inseparable, holding hands sometimes, just as we used to do.

* * *

We left the mountains in the rain and we returned to streets wet with rain. We learned that it had been raining all the week we had been away, so we had missed nothing at the airfield.

When we got to school we discussed the brigade work we were going to do during the summer holidays.

“Hurrah! We are breaking up three days earlier than expected!”

For brigade work in the summer some volunteered for the

harvest as far away as the southern frontier of Bohemia. They wanted to travel and see a district they did not yet know. Many were going to plant trees in the Jeseník Mountains. The mountains were calling them. They rejoiced at the thought of being high up day and night, and they were even going to cook for themselves.

We glider pilots needed to arrange our brigade work so that we could stay near the airfield.

Attracted by the thought of delivering letters full of secrets, Šuška decided right away in favour of the post office. Pavel was going to work on the tramways. He would be free as soon as he had completed his morning or evening shift. Otakárek had not decided, but for him too it was likely to be the post office; he wanted to do parcel post delivery because he would be off duty after midday.

Eliška asked if she could join me working for the agricultural brigade.

Having put away our satchels, we sauntered past shop windows, slowly making our way to the office to settle details about our work.

Furtively, I watched Eliška. This time it was taking longer to make up our quarrel fully.

In the office where we enrolled for the agricultural brigade there was an unpleasant girl and a friendly old man.

“Well, girls,” he greeted us, putting us at ease right away. “What we need at the tractor station are two smart young people like you.”

We learned that we would not have to drive tractors. We were wanted as clerks to make up the accounts. It would be child’s play. Very nice work. From six to two o’clock. It was only eight kilometres from the town, and the bus stopped right at the gates.

“And what about the pay?” asked the old man. “Doesn’t that interest you? The pay varies, but you can count on six hundred Kčs.”

Heavens, never in my life had I earned so much money! I would buy a winter coat with it. No, I wouldn't. I'd better buy a bicycle, for that was what I needed more.

We entered our names and that settled the matter.

As I went into our kitchen, I found my aunt reading a letter from Třebíč. Looking at me from over her glasses, she said:

“When do your holidays begin? It's time to put your things in the travelling basket.”

I replied, behaving as if this was the most natural thing in the world, yet stressing every single word: “I have just accepted a job for the whole of the summer holidays. I shall work in an office, and the pay is six hundred a month.”

My aunt did not take in either the office or the money. Horrified, she exclaimed: “What are you saying? Don't you want to go to Třebíč?”

I explained that I had to stay at home because I wanted to go to the airfield throughout the whole of the summer.

“What is going on at the airfield? I really have had enough of it!”

I took my courage in both hands. For the first time I rebelled openly against my aunt. Yet I controlled my excitement and replied calmly: “I am a gliding pupil. I am learning to fly a plane without an engine.”

“Matylda!” she exclaimed in a warning voice, “think where you are going! You'll have a good education and find a good job among decent people – at least, that is what I pray for every day. Perhaps you'll even get married. But I don't approve of your running about at night. Mark my words: you'll come to a bad end!”

My aunt was shaking all over, but I said nothing. I opened my book, and pretended to be studying, but all the time I watched her secretly. I kept waiting for something extraordinary to happen.

But nothing happened. A martyred look came over my aunt's face, but she did not say a word. Her silence led me to believe that I had won. This victorious battle had far-reaching results: it was

the first foray into my aunt's despotic power, it was part of my liberation.

* * *

The moment we went to the airfield after our trip to the mountains, we regretted every single day we had missed.

Jan welcomed us back; his welcome was addressed to all of us without exception. I made it obvious to him that I did not care, and I was very cross indeed with him.

But my ill-humour did not last when I was entrusted with the starter's red flag for the first time.

How proud I was of the flag! I sent up in the sky all the solo flyers, Jan too, and later also the dual control gliders.

When my turn came, I reluctantly handed the flag over to the Žužu boys.

This time, to practise steep turns, we were towed by powered aircraft.

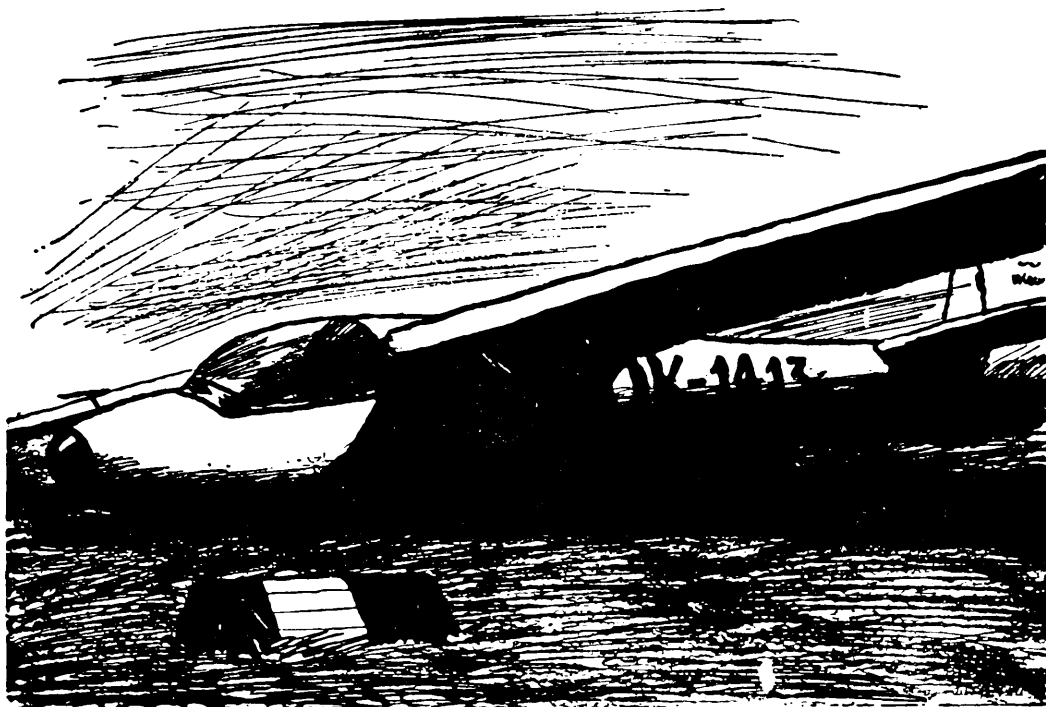
The plane took us up to an altitude of 600 metres and then it released us. Alone with the instructor I remained under the pale sun behind high clouds. After a long time we were so high up in the air that the earth below us looked quite unreal. I noticed with pleasure that I was no longer afraid to look down.

The instructor showed me how to make a steep turn to the left and, with cheeks burning and my lips pressed together, I repeated it, watching the unsteady little indicator on the instrument panel.

The turn to the right gave me much more trouble. It hadn't occurred to me that I could run into difficulties here. At the third attempt I did better, but I still found it difficult to turn the glider to the right.

Pop said to me: "Practise it on the ground, Máša. Keep practising till you can do a right turn."

When we dropped to 200 metres above sea-level, the practice flight was over. I prepared for the landing and I approached the ground, determined to make a good job of it.



We landed quietly on the grass, though a long way off the starting line.

From our group from school only the boys and I were practising steep turns. We were therefore in advance of Eliška and Šuška.

“Let me tell you,” Pavel said, “glides, dips and spins won’t be easy.” He always told us lots of things we knew at least as well as he did. “You must see in good time when the plane begins to spin,” he went on, “and you must know how and when to perform the spin correctly.”

“You don’t say!” Otakárek replied impatiently.

We watched the sky, wondering how long it would be before we too performed glides, dips and spins during our first solo flight, entirely dependent on ourselves and the glider.

* * *

It was raining again, but to compensate for it we were breaking up at school. The long-awaited day had arrived at last!

The form was so lively that one could not hear oneself speak.

We took leave of each other as if we were bidding farewell for good, in spite of the fact that many of us were soon to meet again on brigade work.

At home I found my aunt busy with the wicker basket trunk.

In the last few days she had occasionally forgotten she was offended, and spoken in her normal stern voice. Then she had remembered, and had become cool again, restrained and aloof.

As always at the end of term, I put down my satchel and the folded report on top of it. As always, my aunt began to search for her glasses.

“Matylda,” she cried, alarmed, as soon as she saw the two “threes”, one in mathematics, the other in physics. “You are heading for disaster.”

Poor aunt! She was convinced that I was coming to a bad end because I wanted to spend my holidays on my own, running after gliders and “roaming about at night”.

Before she closed the trunk, my aunt, bewildered and without glancing at me, asked quietly: “Matylda, am I really not to pack any of your things?”

This was the moment of victory! For the first time I heard my aunt talking to me submissively as she had never spoken to me before. Yet, strange to say, I was rather ashamed, and suddenly felt sorry for her. Quickly I promised her to come to Třebíč at the very end of my holidays, so that we could return together.

Half an hour too soon we went to the railway station. I carried my aunt’s heavy bag. Out of breath, she walked behind me, dressed in her warm Sunday coat, carrying two more coats over her arm. Besides her handbag my aunt carried an umbrella and a paper bag containing her hat, intended to be worn at Třebíč on sunny days.

I did not know how to while away the time before the arrival of the train. I was so bored. I listened once more to all sorts of good advice, even though I had heard it twenty times.

At long last, the train arrived!

As it pulled out of the station, my aunt looked out of the window of her compartment, calling:

“Don’t get into a plane, do you hear? Or you’ll kill yourself! I forbid it!”

Without saying anything, I waved to her. As the train disappeared I made for home, running all the way as if my feet had wings.

The holidays would start to-morrow!

* * *

During the holidays my day began with a mighty bang at the door. It was paní Suchomelová, our neighbour, who came to wake me up.

The bus left at half past five. Usually I was at the bus stop before Eliška, early enough to find the bus half empty so that I could choose our seats. All the same, we usually ended by giving up our seats to some old workmen who had come last.

Eliška and I stood under the open roof of the bus, the morning breeze blowing through our hair and down our necks and through our frocks. I found the world beautiful in the morning and was sorry I had only just found this out.

At five minutes to six we arrived at our destination at Březová. The office where we worked was a disused farm building.

Our work consisted in calculating the working hours of the tractor drivers according to the slips they handed in to us, and in entering their wages in various books and statistical forms.

The first day the work seemed difficult. Soon it became easy.

At ten o’clock we ate our bread and butter and ran out into the garden to look for some gooseberries or a few cherries on the trees. At midday we had lunch in an old barn turned into a dining-room in summer for the members of the agricultural co-op. Eliška and I were competing to see which of us could eat the most cherry dumplings.

After lunch the driver of our bus would sound his horn and we

would dash out to take our seats. Back in the town, we changed into another bus that dropped us at the airfield shortly after three o'clock.

And then, our gliding day began.

How long the daylight lasts at the beginning of July! Nor were our flying days over when the sun set. We would put the gliders into the hangars, and afterwards take a shower. Then we went to our meeting. During the hot July evenings the meetings were held in the open air, in the dark. We talked without seeing each other, as if we were talking into the night sky.

We never felt like calling it a day. But Pop, our instructor, was cross if we stayed up too late, for a good gliding pupil must get enough sleep. So home we went, and quickly to bed.

* * *

There had not been a drop of rain since the beginning of the holidays. The days were scorching hot, and when we travelled to work at Březová in the morning we could smell the ripening corn.

At midday the heat was terrific. As we ran to catch our bus after work, our sandals stuck to the asphalt of the road.

Some of the gliding pupils had gone away, so that there were not so many of us as in June. Secretly we were glad of it. If there were fewer of us, we could make several flights one after the other. But Pop was cross about the absentees, who were missing a lot.

Šuška too was missing a lot. She disappeared nearly every time it was her turn. She jumped on the pillion seat of someone's motor bike to fetch petrol, lemonade or anything that happened to be wanted, and we carried on just as if she were not there.

We practised glides and spins so that we knew what to do in various situations in order to avoid a crash. Those corkscrew spins did frighten me!

"Are you afraid?" Šuška whispered to me when it was my turn. Not taking any notice of her, I ran towards the Pionýr; I put on

my parachute as swiftly as I slipped on my school clothes. Then I took my seat in our craft and strapped myself in. The glider rocked gently as the instructor sat down behind me, and I closed the transparent top behind him.

As I released the rope at an altitude of 600 metres, I let the instructor take over the controls.

Soon we went into a spin. I did not notice that anything remarkable had happened to the glider, except that we were turning. Yet I felt very much aware of a terrific force that pressed me down to my seat; it affected my balance and made me feel dizzy.

But already we were out of it and flying on the level again. I took a deep breath. Again the glider went into a spin.

“Well, Máša, now do what I did!”

Pop told me what to do and I concentrated hard on doing what he said. When the glider was in the spin, I no longer thought of dizziness, but only of the controls and the altitude, and as soon as the merry-go-round stopped I had to bring the glider out of its resulting dive.

As soon as I got back my breath, I repeated the whole performance correctly once more.

And this time my stomach rebelled only a tiny bit and I only felt about as dizzy as one would after turning round a few times.

That was the end. We had reached an altitude of 400 metres. Once more the instructor took over the controls and I was entitled to a rest, enjoying the pleasant feeling one has after a task well done.

That same evening, after our flight, we met in the open air, sitting on the earth still warm from the sun, while a thin crescent of moon was to be seen in the sky.

As the others discussed the various gliding performances of that day I watched the moon moving fast towards the horizon. As it sank lower the darkness around us grew denser.

All this time Jan and Eliška were sitting separated from the rest of us, talking continuously.

As I listened to Jan's voice, Pop asked me what I would do if

the wind blew from the side. I could not gather my thoughts fast enough, which caused him to say that the moon had a bad influence on gliding pupils, which was why, from now on, no more meetings would be held out of doors.

Jan and Eliška stopped at once. The moon disappeared and I could once more marshal my thoughts.

* * *

It was July 8th – and had become very hot.

Travelling to my work at Březová I saw the huge orange sun in the sky. The corn was ripening fast.

At our tractor station the times of work changed. The tractor drivers started for the fields at daybreak and returned before mid-day when machines, animals and human beings had to rest until the sun went down. Only then did work get going again.

Eliška and I were flooded with slips handed in by the tractor drivers. We could hardly manage to calculate and enter all the figures. We had not time even to go into the garden to look for fruit.

But for our break Toník brought us some cherries from the garden. Toník was nice – he brought us tiny pears from the orchard, or wild black cherries.

During the intense heat there was no life on the airfield either. Like a sleeping dog the wind sock lay flat on the roof of the main building.

The heat was a calamity for the glider pilots. There was no cooling-off during the hot evenings, only a few puffs of air.

We hung around until someone called: “Let’s go for a swim!”

What a good idea! We decided at once to go to the sand pits, across the marshland. Sand deposited in a former arm of the river lined dark hollows flooded by water. And to our delight several ponds had appeared, each one prettier than the last.

I can swim like a fish. I can hold out in the water as long as I like without feeling in the least tired. Eliška and Šuška only swam

across the pond a couple of times before they got out; but I stayed in to play water polo with the boys.

When we had had our fill of bathing, the instructor called out to us to come back.

We obeyed, but on the airfield we felt just as hot as before.

Šuška had news of Mirek Zapletal who was doing his brigade work at the post office. Had we heard the funny story about him? Apparently he had delivered parcels wearing his swimming trunks and a broad-brimmed straw hat, and had driven through the streets blowing his horn so loudly that he frightened the old horse so that it shied and turned over the cart.

It was a miracle he had not been sacked after this incident. But now he had to stand at the counter for eight hours a day and weigh parcels. He was counting the days, as we did at school before the end of term, waiting for his job to come to an end.

Meanwhile the fiery sun set gloriously. The daylight faded away and by and by the big stars appeared.

The instructor returned to the launch-point, his parachute on his back, and turned to me: "Well, come on then, Máša. How wise of you to wait so long – now you can fly by starlight."

Jan himself held the wings of our Pionýr. This flight was a special check-flight before my first solo.

The plane lifted us up to an altitude of 1,000 metres. We floated above the darkened land. The river and our lake beyond the moorland shone like silken ribbon.

In the still air we had a steady speed, and we rose continually. I balanced the loss of height and I watched the horizon, the black wavy line in a phosphorescent sky, and I saw to it that the plane kept level.

"Now I'll demonstrate thermal soaring to you. You're coming along nicely," the instructor said.

As we felt the impact of the up-current of air on the wings, he observed that the thermal was not very strong, so we had to keep close to its centre. Pop watched me all the time in order to take over if necessary; I took the glider into a turn by pressing my foot

on the rudder bar and by lifting a wing. We circled in the narrow up-current. Our speed increased. I felt tired.

In my gliding textbook I had read about "spiral fatigue"; I had also read that climbing in a thermal is more tiring even than aerobatics. In the same way, long sharp turns on a bicycle or on skis are not easy either.

But already we were out of the thermal. We had gained as much as 300 metres.

"Excellent!" the instructor called behind me, and took over the controls so that I could rest and enjoy my flight.

We returned to the airfield. How I wanted to stay longer in the air!

It was still baking hot. Someone suggested we have another swim before our meeting. What was the motto for a good sportsman? To get enough sleep. But who could sleep in such heat? So we went for a short swim.

At first I swam beside Šuška and Pavel, then I left them behind me. Passing through a channel I reached the next pond, the largest.

As I swam along, something sharp flew past me on the surface of the water. I stopped, trod water, and looked round. Now I could see what it was: someone was playing "ducks and drakes".

"Come and have a rest," a voice was calling from the bank. I recognized Jan's voice and the outline of his figure.

I swam towards him as fast as I could, my face in the water. Jan stretched out his hand to help me out.

Then we sat down side by side. Talking about barographs, thermal soaring and about his home in the Orlický Mountains, Jan went on playing at "ducks and drakes", and I listened to the stones swishing across the water.

"Let's swim," he said suddenly, and at once we both jumped into the pond.

Jan was an excellent swimmer but I could easily keep up with him.

The others had already left the water. We ran after them and

Jan held my hand so that I didn't fall on the uneven ground. We didn't catch up with the others until the launch-point.

"Here they are," Pop said, and he sounded as if they had been talking about us.

I could picture Eliška's astonished and hurt expression.

* * *

At home I found on the doorstep a plate full of little yeast cakes from our neighbour, also a disgruntled letter from my aunt.

"Matylda, what is the matter with you? Are you ill? You haven't even sent me a card! Lisa and I are having dreadful dreams."

But soon my aunt found her usual style again and continued: "Do you air the feather beds? Are the flowers still alive? What do they cook in your canteen in the village where you work? Will you please write – at once! We hope you are remembering what I said and are not flying in planes."

I wanted to reply: "I am very well indeed. My health is quite, quite excellent. I eat a lot, up to thirty dumplings filled with fruit. I air the feather beds sufficiently, in fact I do not make my bed at all and leave the window open all the time. I do not fly in planes, only in gliders. I do not know when to fit in writing to you. I can't possibly write in the morning before five o'clock, at work I have no time, on the airfield in the afternoon I could not concentrate even on one hurried sentence, and in the evening I fall asleep as soon as I put my head on the pillow."

I only wrote to my aunt about day-to-day events. But the bare facts were sufficient. According to her she could fill in the gaps herself – but she would be miles away from the truth.

* * *

Eliška was first at the bus stop, and from her expression I knew right away that she was angry.

It was hotter than ever. The heat rose to thirty degrees in the shade.

In the village of Březová everyone was working in the fields. In our office it was so quiet that I could hear Eliška's pen scraping on the paper.

Taking a deep breath, I said that I was looking forward to swimming.

Eliška stared at me and then asked with great emphasis whether I knew that Jan had already left for home, and that I would have to swim by myself in the large pond.

I did not answer, for I was so taken aback that I could find nothing to say. Eliška took up her work again and I told myself, seething with anger: This is the end!

Tonight I would throw away all the slips of paper she had sent me during lessons at school that I had kept up to now, as well as her photograph signed: "Forever yours".

As we returned by bus after lunch, we sat next to each other. Eliška made a remark about the heavy clouds – as if I could not see them for myself.

The heat was abominable on the airfield; there was no shade at all. But there was no time for swimming. The gliders were being launched one after the other, continuously, both by aero-tow and winch.

Otakárek was on duty at the winch.

"I could drink a river dry," he called out, exhausted, and he took two bottles of lemonade from Šuška.

Many people in our form did not particularly like Otakárek. But I had always had a soft spot for him. An idea flashed through my mind: why must I have a girl friend? I might as well have a boy for a friend. Talking seriously, I said to him: "Let's be friends, shall we?"

He gave me a surprised look. "What are you talking about? We *are* friends, aren't we?"

"I'm thinking of something different. Real friends, I mean."

“Go away,” he cried, rudely. “That would be something for the others to gossip about at school!”

I was wondering how I could make clear to him what I meant, when he continued:

“Look her, Máša, I don’t really like girls. But I don’t include you. You’re very nearly like a boy. And after all, we have been friends for a long time – what else do you want?”

They were calling us, and we ran behind the glider that was being towed out. As we ran along together, Otakárek became more emphatic:

“We are friends, that’s certain. And now forget it.”

* * *

After another spell of rainy weather that had made flying impossible, the sun was shining again at last.

I jumped out of bed, clapped my hands for joy, and started singing.

It was time to catch my bus.

But on second thoughts, I decided to ride on the carrier of Otakárek’s bicycle. That way we could go when we liked and as fast as we liked, racing against the wind.

A rainy spell always caused more gliding pupils to come out, like mushrooms after the rain. Heavens, what a crowd! Almost everyone was there.

But Jan was not among them.

I had no time to think of him, for today was a very special day for me. We, the youngest, were to fly with a different instructor to take a check-flight, and if we passed it we would be allowed our first solo.

Only five of us had been selected. Eliška was excluded as well as the boys who had missed a great deal, and naturally Šuška too.

I was trembling as much as I did before hard examinations at school.

“Take it easy,” Otakárek advised me. “Look at me. Look how relaxed I am!”

Distracted, I watched him clenching and unclenching his hands, and counting aloud to thirty. I was thinking: What good is that? Why doesn't he count to thirty-five?

Then Otakárek lay flat on the ground, assuring me that his mind was completely blank. Never could I achieve that.

I felt best when I thought of what was in store for me. My greatest fear was caused by the thought that instead of Pop a strange instructor would be sitting behind me.

But this turned out to be an advantage. As long as I knew Pop was behind me, I felt as if I was learning to ride a bicycle whilst a hand steadied me from behind, ready to hold me and protect me.

With the strange instructor this feeling stopped. I almost felt as if I were all by myself in the glider.

I demonstrated what we had learned: first a launch by aero-tow, then disconnecting the rope, spinning, diving and gliding, then steep and medium turns, circling the airfield, approaching it and landing.

The whole performance, together with putting on the parachute, took less than twenty minutes.

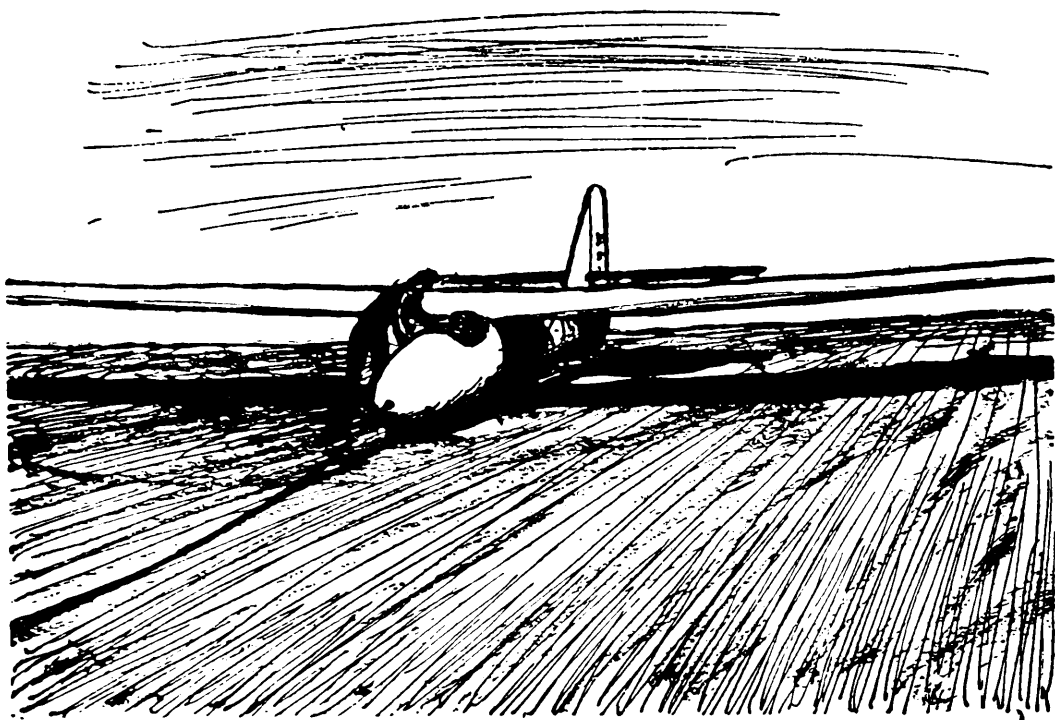
Afterwards I sat on the ground in the same spot as before my flight, but with a feeling of relief to have got it over.

It was not long before Otakárek joined me, and sat down. Together we watched Pavel and the others.

We did not know which of us would pass the test. It was not enough to give a correct performance. Even a slight hesitation or indication of doubt would mean that a pupil would not be allowed to undertake his solo flight.

Conditions for a first solo flight were good: the clouds were low (they must not be higher than 600 metres), and the speed of the wind was so moderate that it felt like a gentle breeze on my cheeks.

So all the conditions were favourable, and yet we were in doubt. I didn't know what I had done during my first spin which I had practised so many times that I no longer felt afraid of it. On a



given order I could stall the glider so that it fell downward with its nose and turned at the same time, and then I could get it out of the spin – as calmly as if I were turning my bicycle on the road.

At long last a committee, including our instructor and the strange teacher, decided who had passed.

Pavel and one of the Žužu boys were eliminated, and young Honza won first place.

I had no time to comfort Pavel, for I was starting third after Honza and Otakárek and, in a rather selfish way, I could only think of myself.

Every flight was scheduled to last for ten minutes. How long the time seemed before Otakárek returned to the ground! It seemed like eternity.

At last I put on my parachute and sat down in the craft, fastened myself in and shut the roof over my head.

I was all on my own!

Yet not quite alone, for with me was my Pionýr, which I had got used to as if it were a human being. Only the seat behind me was empty.

The biplane started in front of me, and my Pionýr followed it like an obedient little dog. We got off the ground almost simultaneously. I took great care to keep at the same height as the plane. I knew a slight pull was enough to cause the glider to rock. With my glider I had to be almost the plane's shadow.

All went well. No warning hand was raised in the biplane to tell me that the rope was too tight or that I was lifting the plane's tail.

We had reached an altitude of 400 metres. Now a hand was raised in the biplane to indicate that I should release the rope. I would have done it even without being told.

I continued to fly straight. At first I turned through ninety degrees, and then I rested on the up-current. Even though I watched the horizon intently, I found time to look down on the ground where all the corn had disappeared and upwards at the fat feather-beds of clouds, then I turned my attention again to the horizon and to my instruments.

I made the second prescribed turn and then I prepared for the landing.

My confidence increased every minute. My heart was beating loudly, but I hardly noticed it. My only wish was to take the glider round a second time.

Below at the launch-point signals were given for my landing.

I moved the control column sideways to raise the wing. The nose dropped below the horizon as the rate of descent increased. Nearing the ground I decreased the speed. My glider continued to fly above the ground for several metres before it landed at a distance of about twenty metres from the landing marks.

Like every first solo, mine too was greeted with applause. It was a good flight. I was worried about the landing; all the same I had a feeling of having accomplished a great feat.

* * *

I wished I could tell the whole world: I am a solo glider pilot!

As I returned from the launch-point, Pavel was the only one

who did not congratulate me. He wasn't talking to me or to Otakárek, and as there was a certain coolness between Eliška and myself, our group had more or less disintegrated.

Šuška, the traitor, ran from me to the others, pleased to spread rumours.

Pavel, she said, had said that our instructor favoured me.

We all knew that whatever Šuška was told, she couldn't keep it to herself, and if she whispered it could be heard everywhere.

Pop must have heard the rumours too for, looking straight at Pavel, he said at the end of our meeting that, in the same way as he had to punish carelessness most severely because it concerned our safety, so, too, he had to prevent pupils from flying solo if they did not show enough calm and prudence.

There was a tense silence. Pavel blushed. Suddenly he raised his head, and blurted out that it was not fair on him, that he was excluded from flying solo "in front of the girls".

Then it was my turn to blush, for "the girls" was directed at me.

Our instructor was angry. He arranged the log book on the table, and we hardly dared to breathe. Then he remarked, almost as if talking to himself, that he was responsible for his pupils – "And why should I mince matters – it is Máša who has shown the most level-headedness and inborn talent." And he also said that it did not befit a member of *Svažarm* to overestimate himself whilst underestimating a girl, and that Pavel was not going to fly solo until his teacher thought it possible.

I could not be cross with Pavel, for I was too happy.

Compared to the heat we had suffered recently, the summer weather we were having was more like June. The cool nights, together with the July sun and the damp ground, provided the very best conditions for flying.

Jan did not show any surprise at my recent gliding success. He was getting ready to perform a high altitude flight.

I felt the same kind of anger as always when he disappeared at a high altitude or when he did not turn up at all.

Towards six o'clock the cumulus clouds disappeared, depriving the solo flyers of good flying conditions.

Jan was the first to return, followed by Pop, who had reached an altitude of 3,900 metres.

Meanwhile the wind changed direction so that we had to change the launch-point. There was a short break and someone suggested that we go for a swim in our pond.

Eliška and Jan were standing close to each other, absorbed in an important conversation. Then they slowly walked towards the pond. I had given up all thought of swimming.

Everybody had gone and I sat down in the grass. After a while someone sat down by my side. It was Pop.

"The water will be cold as ice," Pop remarked. "You were right not to go swimming."

But Pop did not know how much I liked icy cold water. I didn't reply; at a loss what to say, I took a deep breath.

"I wish you wouldn't worry as grown-ups do," he said, averting his glance as if he were addressing someone else. "You are still very young. Today," he continued, "you really did very well."

I would have liked to throw my arms round his neck.

* * *

Eliška worked her last day at Březová and, for the time being, she also had to bid farewell to the airfield. She was going to the country with her brothers. I was glad of it, for she would miss so much that she would not be able to catch up with me, and for all the time she was away she would not meet Jan.

It was the turn of our group, the beginners. One after the other we took off by aero-tow to practise steep turns.

After so many launches with a co-pilot and several solo flights I had gained the kind of skill in steering that goes right into the muscles without passing through the brain. Though I flew the glider behind the plane with all possible care, I was able to think about something else.

We had reached an altitude of 600 metres already, and the bi-plane released me.

Just as I steered the glider out of the steep turn, I felt the control column reacting violently in my hand. The nose of my glider pointed towards the sky.

A thermal, I told myself.

I pressed on the control column. The glider dipped its nose, at the same time it yawed strongly like a ship in a storm. It was then I knew for certain that I was in trouble in an air current, which is to a glider pilot what an iceberg is to the seafarer.

I was seized by a terrible anxiety. I could hardly breathe. Keep calm! I told myself. I shall manage, I must, I must manage it!

The glider then went into a spiral dive. Carefully I corrected this.

All this happened in no more than a minute, yet it was a minute that seemed endless.

Without any doubt this was, up to now, the most decisive moment in my life. But I managed it! After such a baptism I would never again be afraid, and the glider would for ever be obedient to me.

As soon as I had landed, the gliding pupils came as one man to pat me on the back.

“Why did you perform a dance up there, Máša?” the instructor asked me casually, but in his voice I could detect concern. For Pop was well aware that it was a gusty current of cold air that had given me trouble. “You’ll tell us about it at the meeting. Now calm yourself and try to remember everything.”

During our meeting I hardly listened to a report by the Žužu boys on our flying progress.

Silence fell as I got up to speak. Once more I repeated what had happened to me. It took a long time to describe the incident which in fact had taken up so little time. It was agreed that I had proceeded correctly and that I had made no vital mistakes.

At the end of the meeting our instructor reminded us not to

hurry, for haste could easily spoil all good work, including that of a glider pilot.

* * *

During the mornings in August everything was almost as it used to be. But there was a difference, after all. The light was no longer as bright as it had been in July, and the trees threw longer shadows.

Šuška and the boys had finished with their brigade work and were now enjoying their holidays. I was the only one who still went to Březová. Frequently the tractor drivers worked in the fields at a great distance so that I was often alone in the office for quite a long time.

Another letter came from my aunt in Třebíč. This time it was only a request for me to come to the village fair. But I was no longer a little girl who could be tempted by the fun of the fair. On the Sunday the fair was to be held we were to begin flying solo using the winch. How could I possibly be absent and allow the others to overtake me! I could hardly wait for Sunday to come!

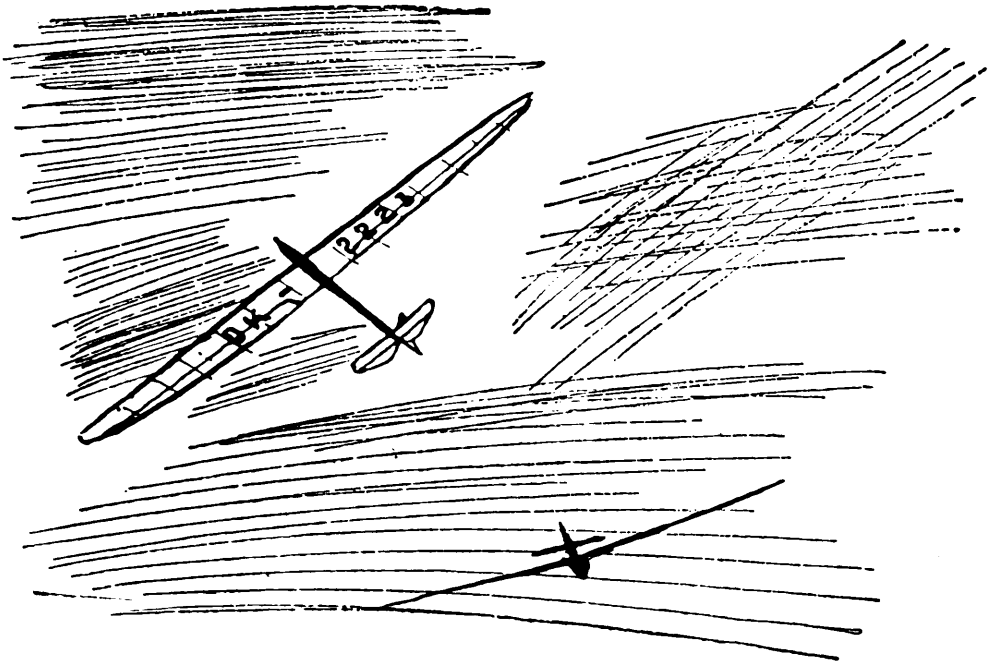
In the morning of the great day I was waiting impatiently for Otakárek. He was five minutes late in starting. To make up for it he hurried all the more on our way to the airfield. But on the high road his tyre burst with a mighty bang.

Otakárek got off his bicycle to mend it; I hurried on, running all the way. But when I got to the airfield, nothing was happening.

The gliding students were sitting in front of the hangars where our gliders were kept. The tarmac was pleasantly heated up by the early morning sun. In the golden haze the green expanse of the airfield stretched into the far distance.

Šuška and Pavel were there, and the boys from the industrial college, as well as the Žužu boys and two more experienced gliding pupils.

We were waiting for our instructor, for the boys from the



training department, and for Otakárek who eventually arrived tired out by the heat, his bicycle not yet repaired. He lay down on the ground without giving me a look.

“I could go to sleep,” he grumbled. “I could sleep and sleep,” he added, yawning and making us yawn too.

The sun was beating down on us, and to pass the time we lay down too and let ourselves be tanned by it. As if we weren’t brown or black enough already!

“Let’s go for a swim,” someone suggested, but there was no reply. An awful Sunday. Laziness and sleepiness had got hold of all of us.

I never could stand Sundays. I like to hear the hum of work around me, the buzz of everyday life. Since I had started to learn gliding I didn’t dislike Sundays quite so much. It was a day like any other day for me.

Yet there is a difference, though I can’t quite make out what it is.

“Máša,” Šuška roused me from my torpor. “Do you realize that school begins again in twenty-three days?”

Who would have thought it! She too remembered school!

“She talks about school – listen to her!” cried Otakárek.

“That girl dares to mention school – it’s lucky for her I can’t move!”

Without taking any notice of him, Šuška continued: “I am quite looking forward to seeing the girls. I wonder if Alena really went on a walking tour with her brother from Slovakia; that’s what she intended to do in the holidays. And I’d like to know whether Jiřina and Jarmila really went canoeing.”

The assistant flying instructor arrived and we hurried towards the gliders.

“I like winch-launches best,” Otakárek told me. “I think it’s more sporting.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Pavel agreed. “To get the glider up to 150 metres by itself – that’s an art. To let oneself be towed up to 1,000 metres by a plane – that is almost like a tripper going up a mountain by cable railway.”

Otakárek and I winked at each other, a signal that all was well with Pavel.

But then Pavel was cross again because he was told he couldn’t fly solo yet by winch-launch. He had not completed all his flights by aero-tow. Today he was to go up along with the rest of us, but for him it was not to be the last winch-launch with an instructor before his examination.

We had completed our solo flights by winch-launch, so we really had nothing to do. The solo-pilots were taking off and it was a long time before some of the gliders returned.

Some of us had gone for a swim in the ponds. There was an unforeseen lull.

I remained at the launch-point by myself.

Lying on the ground I studied the sky.

Treading lightly, someone approached me and settled down in the grass by my side. I was afraid that my loud heartbeat might give me away.

“I thought you were asleep,” Jan remarked. “I’m glad, though, you aren’t. At least I can see what nice blue eyes you have.”

My joy knew no bounds! What a terrific day this was!

“Hallo there!” a voice called.

We turned and looked west.

“Are you having your Sunday rest?” asked Pop, and I caught his observant glance directed at me with a special twinkle.

The others were coming back. Work was to be resumed.

* * *

Next morning at Březová I heard for the first time the call of the wild geese hurrying to the water. It was a sign of autumn, the age-old reminder of their long journey to southern climes.

Březová was preparing for the harvest festival. We must not miss it, we were told; for we were part of the tractor station. But as far as I was concerned, no matter what happened I did not want to stay away from the airfield.

There was a great deal for me to do in the office. The tractor drivers brought me so many slips and now, when Eliška was away in the country, I had to enter all the numbers in columns single-handed.

At home I found a parcel from Třebíč waiting for me at the entrance door. It contained lovely cakes from my Třebíč aunt and a new yellow swimsuit from my aunt as well as a severe letter from her. The best thing would have been not to read it at all.

I had completely forgotten that I was soon going to be sixteen. For about six months I had already been going about claiming to be sixteen.

I braced myself to read the letter.

“We have heard that you come home late in the evenings, so late that paní Suchomelová can never talk to you; and the meter reader could not find out how much we owed for lighting. It is high time for me to return home. But I want to make apple jelly from the windfalls, and besides my knee is suddenly hurting me. You are still a little girl, far too young to be out late. That sort of thing was unheard of when I was your age.”

So – all of a sudden I was a little girl! Usually my aunt told me

that in her youth girls of sixteen were married and thrifty housewives while I still liked to play and had no sense in my head.

She never made sense. Sometimes she said one thing, sometimes another.

What she wrote about late nights was not true either, but in her opinion it was advisable to be at home behind locked doors as soon as night fell.

* * *

We were standing round in a circle, attentively watching the preparations Jan and Pop were making for their great air trip.

They fitted barographs into their competition gliders to record the altitudes reached. Carefully they examined their instruments. They also put into their cabin oxygen masks and flight maps.

It was good gliding weather. The sky was full of cumulus clouds on which they would skim along like a toboggan on good snow.

We who stayed behind felt like all those who have to look on while others prepare for a journey, with an unquenchable longing for distant places in their own hearts.

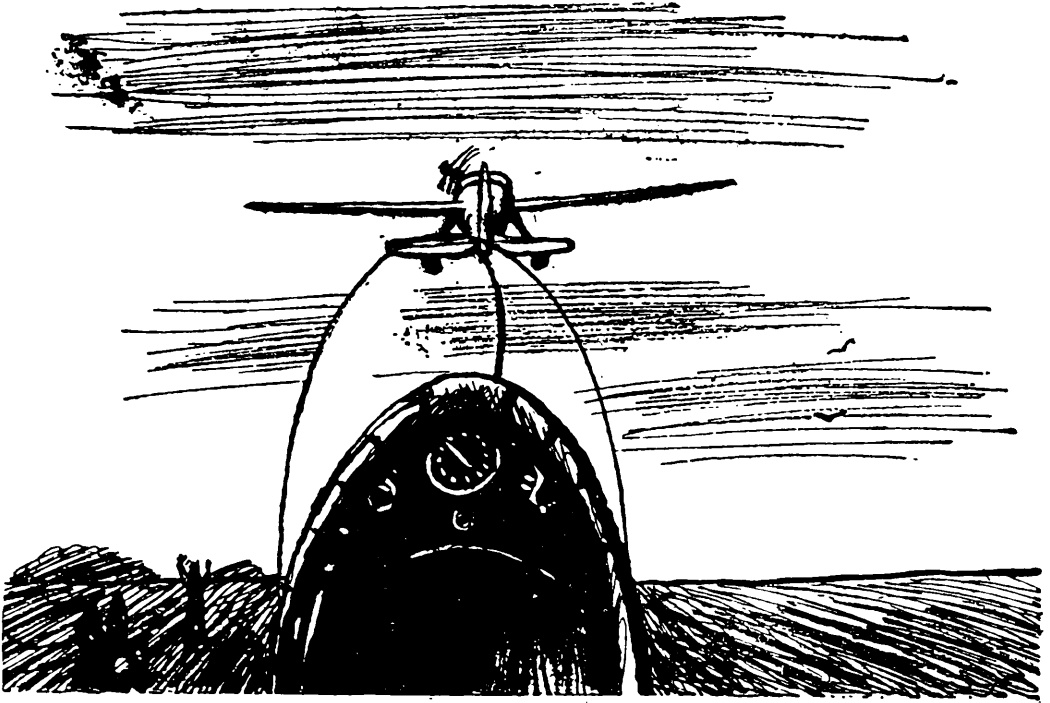
Then Pop, our instructor, handed the responsibility for the launches to the assistant who took his place during his absence. Then he turned to us, saying in his usual friendly way: "Well, now, see to it that I hear only good things about you when I get back!"

Jan started first. It was a solemn moment. He shook hands with each of us in turn, giving the glider pilot's salute, "*Ahoj!*"

Then Pop's glider took off and soon he too had disappeared.

I did not really feel like having a winch-launch, just to circle round the airfield and to practise smooth landings on the landing marks.

Before it came to our turn, the cumulus clouds had dispersed, and the sky had become covered with a light layer of dazzling white flocked clouds with blue peeping through.



That afternoon was important for Pavel. At long last he was to make his solo flight by winch-launch – if he passed his pre-examination flight.

He had hardly paid any attention to Pop's and Jan's departure, so impatiently was he waiting for the strange instructor with whom he was to fly.

Ready for my own flight with my parachute on my back, I watched him circling the airfield and landing quite smoothly. He had passed his test. All of us from school gave him a good clap, for we were glad that he too could now fly solo.

At school we knew hardly anything about Pavel. We only knew vaguely that his father did not live with his mother who lived with her unmarried sisters. All the women in his family admired him and spoiled him.

You only had to look at him to be aware of it. He had everything you could think of. His conceit was enormous. He stood out from the others on account of his expensive, well-cared-for clothes, which were very important to him. Yet I had the feeling he was unhappy, though I did not understand why.

Who could tell? Perhaps he worried about his father.

And then a thought flashed through my mind: he would be the right friend for me, not Otakárek, who was happy in his secure home where everything was as it should be.

Before his solo flight Pavel was so terribly restless that I urged him to calm himself. "Take it easy, Pavel," I told him, "you *must* take it easy."

At last it was his turn. He took his seat in his Pionýr; I was holding the wings and Otakárek, who was on duty at the launch-point, waved the red flag.

Silently the glider started. I watched it rise and begin to climb steeply.

"There he goes," Otakárek said. "Silly boy, what . . ." He did not finish his sentence. At about 1,500 metres the glider got into difficulties; it banked steeply and fell to the ground where it turned a somersault.

We all stood frozen to the spot, then the assistant instructor and a pilot called Frýcek started running. They pulled Pavel out of the glider, and as we watched we saw how they supported him, almost carried him towards the buildings on the airfield.

Some of us ran to the glider.

"Don't touch anything!" the assistant instructor called. I noticed how scared and unhappy he was because this accident had occurred whilst he was in charge.

Everybody wanted to know what had gone wrong. In the end we agreed that Pavel must have disconnected the rope too soon. Some had seen the rope touch the ground before the glider.

I could remember the incident clearly. Like a slow-motion film I could dissect the dramatic seconds of the whole thing.

It took some time before the assistant instructor returned with Frýcek. They said Pavel was perfectly all right, apart from shock. All the same the ambulance took him to hospital for a check-up.

Before long we learned what had actually happened. Pavel had pulled the rope over too hard and it snapped, and because of the pressure and insufficient height the glider could not keep steady.

There were no more launches. We had all had a turn, and nobody was in the mood for more. We lay on the ground and waited for Pop and Jan.

There was no sign of them. We went on waiting. I studied the sky and the cloud formations.

Then one of the gliding pupils cried out: "A glider! One of them's coming back!"

Before long the glider circled the airfield and prepared to land.

It was Jan. As he touched the ground, the other glider could be seen, a mere speck among the clouds.

We waited for Pop to land with great trepidation. At first, the talk was about heights reached and distances covered. Then the assistant flying instructor reported what had happened. Pop looked as if he did not quite understand. Without saying a word he gazed towards the spot where the damaged glider was lying.

That was the end of yet another gliding day. We tidied up in haste and cleared away the gliders, feeling guilty, as if we had done something wrong.

* * *

Pavel had joined us again. He was perfectly all right. And the Pionýr, our faithful glider in which we had gained our first experience in gliding, would fly again after repairs and a test.

Yet we still did not know what would happen to Pavel. For the time being he was excluded from flying as unreliable. The instructor ignored him completely.

Then I decided to speak up for Pavel. I made use of a short break when Pop was alone. Talking hurriedly, I said things I did not really know for certain, I could only feel them. I explained how Pavel's lack of confidence compelled him to try and outshine others. It was because he suffered from continual fear that others would overtake him that he often behaved the way he did.

Serious and attentive, the instructor listened to me. My cheeks were burning. At last I admitted that I could put myself in Pavel's

place because my home too was different from most of the others': we were both "different from the others".

Interrupting my flood of words, Pop asked: "You're an orphan, aren't you? Aren't *you* happy either?"

"Oh, no," I replied, "it isn't like that. I'm quite happy, only sometimes I get upset. When I was younger it was much worse. Now I hardly think about it."

I had never in my life talked so much to explain myself and to defend another person.

Pop patted me on the shoulder, saying that some pupils were good at theory, but disappointing in practice work; all the same he would think about Pavel again and see if anything could be done. It was only a vague promise, but I knew it would be kept.

* * *

As we finished, I noticed Pavel with our instructor. Together they were walking along the airfield to the hangars. Pop had put his arm around Pavel's shoulders and, judging by Pavel's bent head, I guessed he was crying.

From then on, though he was always punctual and stayed to the end, Pavel was somehow not quite with us. He took part in the ground work without talking and he began to join in our meetings in the evenings. Yet he remained somehow aloof, as if he were not really one of us. He was subdued and silent.

I stayed near him like a sister. At first he was surprised, but soon he became used to it. Then I noticed something about him: he accepted all signs of sympathy and attention as his due without giving anything in return. But I could not desert him now, because he needed me.

One day we had hoped to fly by aero-tows. Just as we had once looked forward to winch-launches and had had enough of being towed by a plane, so now we were bored with flying round the airfield. We wanted once more to fly at high altitudes and to make wide sweeps in the air.

But we were disappointed. Once again we were to perform our usual circuits, using the winch.

“I bet I’ll get dizzy,” groaned Otakárek.

Before we had finished, the sky was covered with red clouds heralding a storm. A bad sign for us, the youngest pilots. If there was a strong wind we were not allowed to fly solo.

But the boys paid no attention to the signs in the sky. They were absorbed by a jet plane which passed with a terrific noise.

How fast it was flying! Compared with jets, our gliders were poor things, for they usually flew at only twenty-five kilometres an hour, or at the most two hundred in a rising current. The boys behaved as if they were prepared to exchange all our gliders for one jet plane and a month of gliding for one flight in a jet.

Meanwhile the weather had changed for the worse once more. It was raining and cold.

At Březová people were getting worried about the harvest festival next Sunday. We glider pilots knew that a cyclone did not last long, that it would get warm and clear up again.

As I hadn’t much work to do, I took time off to go and have a look at old paní Mráčková. She was in charge of the calves. Through a chink in her neighbour’s door I saw a lot of lovely cakes baked for the harvest festival.

I learned that the pigs had been killed; they were to be made into sausages, brawn and other tasty things. It was too good to be missed.

But whatever happened at Březová the following Sunday, I knew that I couldn’t stay away from the airfield that day.

* * *

Once again – oh joy – we had the finest possible weather for gliding. Best of all, we were again to be towed by plane.

At long last, it was my turn.

First our instructor took me for an observation flight, and after that I had an aero-tow.

I was afraid I had forgotten how to control a glider launched by aero-tow. But no, I could remember exactly how to keep the glider level with the plane.

As the plane left us, I turned the glider into the wind.

In the distance Jan's high-performance glider showed clearly against the western sky. I aimed for the same direction, when I heard a mocking voice behind me:

“Whatever are you doing? Don't chase after that glider! Always be independent, girl! You'd better make for that nice cloud over there that looks like a mountain. The side wind will bring us down, but that doesn't matter; we'll rise and then we'll show that glider over there what we can do!”

Well, I took the Pionýr towards the white cloud that Pop had pointed out to me. The side wind carried us away and forced us out and then down; we lost speed but I was able to make up for it by using the control column continuously.

Oh dear, it was a long way to that cloud! And we dropped by nearly 200 metres.

At that moment the control column in my hand vibrated and I felt the familiar impact of a current on the wings. “Here we are!” called the instructor.

We rose in wide circles, and made up for the 200 metres we had lost. We reached an altitude of 1,500 metres and still we went on climbing.

“Are you satisfied?” Pop asked. “I hope you're glad now that you didn't go after that solo glider?”

As white wisps of cotton-wool loomed around our transparent top – a sure sign that we were in the clouds – Pop took over the controls.

At an altitude of 2,000 metres we were surrounded by steam-like fog. The earth below and the sky above had disappeared. Our speed was remarkable: it was nearly 200 kilometres. Yet I did not feel that we were flying particularly fast.

The instructor entrusted the control column to me so that I could experience what it feels like to control a glider when one cannot see the earth.

I could see nothing. All around us was impenetrable mist. Carefully I watched the instrument panel.

Now I had to take the glider into a turn. It performed a very irregular spiral.

“Step on the rudder and press on the control column!” cried Pop. I followed his instructions. Immediately the speed increased and the circles became wider.

“You’ll be very tired,” Pop said kindly and once again he took over the controls.

Already we had reached an altitude of 3,000 and we escaped from the clouds. Above us was the calm blue of the sky. The earth below us was covered by clouds. From time to time, through gaps between them, we got a glimpse of the earth.

We turned into another cloud, the glider swayed and climbed higher. In no time at all it went into a corkscrew dive.

And then we were floating calmly on the level again.

I was so happy that inwardly I was singing for joy.

* * *

The weather turned really hot again. But the days were becoming noticeably shorter.

One day, for the first time that year, I saw from my glider a paper kite. I got a shock, for this was a clear indication that autumn was approaching. But for the moment, at least, it was still summer.

All Sunday morning we were flying underneath a fine cloud formation. It dissolved before midday, leaving the sky completely clear.

It was very hot, and the solo flyers could not get far because the up-currents were low. The assistant instructor went to see if he could get a biplane for us, but he was unlucky. Later perhaps.

I suggested we should go to the harvest festival at Březová. We could catch a bus.

It was hot to suffocation in the bus. All the same we had great fun. Soon we reached Březová. On the outskirts of the village the rowan berries were like bright red flowers.

It felt strange to do my daily journey in company with the gliding pupils and with Jan! Everything was as usual, only there was a festive glow everywhere.

We stopped in front of the farm buildings as I did on week-days. From a distance the band could be heard. All the buildings looked their best, as if they were prepared for something grand.

“Heavens,” said the assistant instructor, “we do look a mess.”

We were wearing shorts, blouses and jackets that were crumpled and dirty from the harness of the parachutes. What was to be done? We wandered to the football field where the festivities were being held.

“Let’s have a drink and then go back to the airfield.”

“What are you talking about? The bus doesn’t run until the evening.”

To one side of the playing field was a wood, and that was where I took my party. From there, hidden by the undergrowth, we gazed at the stalls full of food and drink. The clink of glasses made us feel more thirsty than ever.

“I’m hungry and I’m thirsty,” Otakárek sighed.

Who was it who had had the idea to go to the harvest festival? Whose duty was it to see that we got something to eat and drink? It was Máša’s! Everyone decided that since I was on home ground, it was up to me to do something about it, and I’d better be quick!

Šuška and Libuša, the wife of our assistant instructor, were willing to come with me.

First we made for the lemonade stall. Before we had collected all the glasses, Toník spotted me and cried at the top of his voice: “Look here, more dancing partners have arrived!”

I had to come out with the truth, so I told them that our boys

from the airfield were in the undergrowth and didn't dare to show themselves.

"Quick!" Toník shouted. "A table for our brigade worker and her friends!"

Engineer Kuba from our tractor station looked into our glasses, protesting: "Poor things, they're drinking water. Bring some beer, beer for the wings of our country!"

"Leave them alone!" Toník called him to order. "They aren't footballers, they're glider pilots."

"That makes no difference, they too have got wings."

But we firmly refused the beer. Perhaps we were hungry? Maybe some of us had had no lunch? We were all treated to a liver sausage, and in addition to that we could buy cheaply what we liked. Roast meat and stew had already gone; but there were some chops left.

Šuška made for the stall that sold sweets and confectionery, but I preferred the stall with savouries. As I filled my plate it turned out that I did not need to pay because I was entitled to my portion as a worker of the co-operative. And I was given coffee and a piece of cake as well.

All the time the band was playing for dancing. Libuša and Šuška soon found partners, and so did Pavel and Otakárek, obviously very proud to show what they had learned at their dancing class. Jan hesitated for a while, then he asked a fair-haired girl for a dance. She looked like Eliška. I remained sitting at the table with the Žužu boys, forgotten and angry.

By and by, as the band played the last dance, people were beginning to leave. Almost everything had been sold from the stalls, except for a few cakes. They were to be auctioned and the money was to go to the local children's crèche.

We hurried along to join in the fun. On a large dish sat a hedgehog: it was a chocolate-coated cake. Its prickles were made of almonds, and it gazed at us with large eyes made of jam.

The bidding started at fifteen crowns.

"Fifteen crowns I'm bid," called the auctioneer. "Now, any

advance on fifteen crowns? Twenty? Thank you. Twenty . . . twenty-one . . .” The bidding went to thirty crowns. “Any advance on thirty? No? Then going for thirty . . . going . . .”

There was a moment of tense silence.

“Thirty-one,” cried Šuška, and that concluded the sale. Nobody wanted to bid higher. The hedgehog belonged to Šuška. It turned out that she only possessed eight crowns.

“That girl is the limit!” exclaimed Otakárek.

Šuška was almost in tears. We all agreed that we must pool our resources. In the end we produced the money, but we had to give all we had. Then we shared out the hedgehog according to how much each of us had contributed.

Šuška, after all, was entitled to the largest piece. No sooner had we begun to enjoy our hedgehog cake than we heard a scream: “Fire! Fire!”

In no time the football field was empty. With other people we hurried along the dusty path towards the buildings behind which flames could be seen rising.

Fortunately, it was only a large barn filled with hay that was burning. But the neighbouring houses and barns were in danger. To make matters worse, the fire engines weren't working properly. They had already been brought up to the surrounding buildings whilst the barn was burning like a giant candle.

As a woman shrieked in despair we hurried to her cottage that was threatened by the fire and we carried out into the garden everything we could lay our hands on. The fire hoses had soaked us, and we looked as if we had fallen into the water. Someone slipped into my hand a rope to which a cow was attached. I led the animal to safety, amazed that it was so willing to follow me.

* * *

The barn was completely gutted. The smell of burning pervaded the air. We carried everything we had saved back into the cottage. It was only then that I felt a bad pain in my knee.

At the first-aid station all fire casualties were attended to. I showed my black knee. A lot of dirt had got into the wound.

It was going to hurt, for all the dirt had to be removed. An anti-tetanus injection as well, to make sure!

But Jan was by my side, holding my hand, and I wished the cleaning and bandaging would last a long time.

The last bus had gone and we were a long way from home. Someone suggested I should stay at Březová for the night as I had to start work at six o'clock in the morning. As my leg was bandaged it would have been the best thing to do.

But I really could not stay. If the neighbour who called me every morning had no reply to her knocks I knew she would have the door broken open and if she found I was not in bed, she would go and search for me in all the hospitals and mortuaries.

We had something to eat in the cottage where we had helped, then we started on our way home. Though I was soaked, tired and limping, I would never have denied myself that walk of twelve kilometres with Jan!

Once we were on the high road we all felt refreshed, and somehow we found the strength to walk briskly.

* * *

I slept like a log. For the first time during the holidays paní Suchomelová, our neighbour, could not rouse me.

I missed the bus, and had to take the second bus to Březová, so I did not get to the airfield until four o'clock.

From a distance I recognized Eliška. She looked lovely in her new blue jumper, which was just the right colour to set off her cheeks and her golden hair.

I found that Jan had already started on his high altitude flight. We were watching the horizon for we wanted to spot his glider coming back.

Suddenly there was a shout: "Look out, gliders! One, two, three, four, seven gliders!"

But they were migrating storks that we had mistaken for gliders. They were flying southward in a right angle, their leader at their head.

At last I spotted Jan's single-seater. The gliding pupils waited impatiently for his return. He had taken his oxygen mask and barograph with him, so he had evidently intended to fly high.

Already he was circling almost above us. As soon as he touched ground, he was surrounded by gliding pupils. As I watched from a distance, my heart was beating rapidly.

Looking around, Jan caught sight of Eliška.

The way they looked at each other! They might have been alone on the airfield.

The cheerful hum of talk around me continued. That night Jan was going to tell the meeting about the height he reached. Pavel, who kept repeating this to me, did not see that all this was agony to me. He simply didn't notice how I felt.

"Máša!" called our instructor. "Where are you? Get ready for your flight!"

With my parachute on my back I waited to follow Otakárek who was going up before me.

When he returned I took my seat in the glider, and rose from the ground. I was very nearly crying.

Twice a hand made a sign to me from the tow-plane to indicate that I was pressing on its tail.

With a great effort I pulled myself together, and then I took the glider carefully up to 600 metres where I disconnected the rope and proceeded on my own.

I started to fly in a wide circle outside the river bend and the curve of the road and soon I reached the outskirts of the town and the plantation, then I turned round by the hangars and began another circle.

It was supposed to be a good deal smaller than the first one, so I dropped to 350 metres. How did I manage to make it as wide as the first circle? All along the western length, above the river bend and part of the town, an easterly wind blew me off my course.

I readjusted my speed quickly, but I had lost so much height that I found myself at an altitude of a mere 150 metres above the town.

This meant that I ought to have returned to the airfield right away without finishing the prescribed second circle. But the approaching wind made me confident that I could complete it and still land safely. So I flew on, but my circle turned out somewhat wider than I meant it to be.

Before me I noticed a small cumulus cloud. I told myself that it might carry me upward possibly for about 100 metres so that I could return and land safely.

We were strictly forbidden to fly into an advancing storm. But the cloud was already almost above my head.

As I reached the spot where – as I believed – I had seen it, it was carried away by the wind and I found myself at a height of only 80 metres.

Now I was terribly frightened and I knew I must land away from the airfield for I could not hope to reach it.

Feverishly I thought of all we had learned about landing away from the airfield “after a gliding flight that is finished involuntarily”. A stubble field. Low growth and farming land. High-grown corn. Dense forest. Water. Rocky ground.

I was all confused. In order to choose a suitable place for a forced landing I ought to be at a height of at least 100 metres, but I was hardly at 60!

I could see a large level meadow behind the plantation that I had forgotten to draw during the first days of our gliding course. A question flashed through my mind: what punishment would I get for making a forced landing through my own fault?

But just now I didn't care. All I could think about was that I wanted to be on firm ground.

Now I was above the plantation. I could distinguish every single treetop. All went well. I knew that I must not use the brakes or valves. Another couple of metres and I would be beyond the plantation. Then I could land on the meadow.

I was calm. Punishment or reproaches no longer seemed important. The main thing was to reach the ground.

Suddenly I felt a jerk and the right wing dropped. I moved the control column, but the wing continued to drop. The glider went into an uncontrollable spin above the plantation and I had not enough speed for a recovery.

I pressed the control column in order to escape disaster. But I was frightened, and my action was too sudden. The glider's nose dived towards the green treetops.

Steady it, steady it, was the thought that flashed through my mind. I operated the controls and the glider righted itself into a horizontal position. At the same time it settled in the treetops.

It was a gentle swaying impact, but it caused a mighty crash among the branches.

Then I realized with relief that I was unhurt and so, I believed, was the glider. In the book written by the famous Polish glider pilot I had read that after such a landing one has to climb out of the cabin very carefully so that the shifting of weight does not cause the craft to fall down from the trees.

I tried to disentangle myself carefully from the trappings.

But my first move caused the glider to lean on its side and I fell out of the cabin. I hung upside down, helpless.

For a while my brain seemed on fire. Then there was darkness and oblivion.

* * *

How long was I suspended between heaven and earth? It was for less than half an hour. The gliding pupils had watched me and had begun to run in the direction of the trees at the same time as I was flying towards it from the outskirts of the town.

I heard loud calls and the crashing of branches. As I opened my eyes, deft hands pressed me to the trunk of the tree. They were Jan's. "Don't be afraid," he said. Firmly he got hold of me round my waist, then he raised me a little and let go.



Only then did I realize that I had a leather strap round my waist and was hanging on a rope thrown over a branch, the other end being held by someone down below.

Not far above the ground someone got hold of me and placed me on my feet. It was Pop.

We walked back to the airfield, and Pop led me along, his arm round my shoulders. I felt such a tremendous happiness at being alive that I burst into tears.

* * *

Under the lights in the hangar the gliding pupils examined the glider they had taken down from the tree and brought back to the airfield. The damage was slight. I breathed a sigh of relief.

As if nothing unusual had happened, our meeting began with our political quarter of an hour, followed by administrative matters, and only then did we go on to discuss the flights that were made that day.

As I had started last, I had to wait until the end. Meanwhile I was on tenterhooks.

When it was my turn to give an account of my flight, I was shaking all over and my voice was unsteady. It was just as if I were standing in the headmaster's study at school, and had to own up to some misdeed. But all the incidents that had ever happened at school seemed trifling compared to today's event.

I described my whole flight from the launch up to the instant when the glider landed in the tree-tops. I admitted that my second circle should not have been so wide, and that subsequently a side current had carried me away. I said nothing about the cloud on which I had relied, and I repeated twice that, for my landing, I had carefully selected the oblong meadow just beyond the plantation to which I would have flown if there had not been a downward current above the trees in which I was caught and that I could not avoid.

I also kept to myself the fact that I had not concentrated properly at the beginning of my flight and that I had been muddled and excited as I prepared to land.

My faltering confession resulted in swinging opinion in my favour. My only fault, it turned out, was that I had started my second circle too far away and, being obstinate, had wanted to complete it and so had not returned to the airfield in time.

Pop invited the gliding pupils to discuss the matter, mainly in order to help me understand the last moments before the landing which were not quite clear even to myself. At these words I blushed deeply.

Since nobody wanted to begin, he called one after another. At last they began their discussion and I felt as if I were standing at the blackboard at school during a mathematics lesson. Only this was much worse.

"She said herself that she should not have gone so far from the airfield at a low altitude. Go on."

It had been noticed that at the beginning of the flight I had

seemed rather vague, that I had not been ready on time, and had had to be reminded to come and get ready.

“Go on! go on!” the instructor urged the gliding pupils. They went over my whole flight in detail. At last they got to the point where I had reached the vicinity of the plantation. The instructor drew my aerial flight and the plantation on the blackboard.

Considering my low altitude, my first mistake had been to choose the meadow beyond the trees for a landing. Then I had made a second mistake in putting the nose of the glider down too steeply, thus losing too much height.

The conclusion was that I had not reasoned calmly; on the contrary, my thoughts must have been confused and muddled.

Then a vote was asked for to decide on my punishment. Everybody kept silent. The instructor then called on me to decide my own punishment.

Now I was standing in the pillory. In a hardly audible voice I blurted out my own death sentence: not to be admitted to the final examination for the “A” pupils.

At last our instructor spoke. “I want to talk to you as your teacher,” he said solemnly. “I am responsible for every one of you. It is a great responsibility, as you yourselves will admit. That is why I must know each one of you well so that I can judge what to expect of you. I must admit that today Máša has disappointed me because she did not concentrate. You simply have to give all you’ve got to the job in hand – this is particularly so where gliding is concerned. I am not going to ask Máša why she failed to concentrate, but I ask her to promise us – in her mind – that she will never fail again.”

Once more my tears welled up, but I pressed my lips firmly together, and this time I held back my tears as befits a good gliding pupil.

“With regard to her punishment,” he continued in his usual voice, “I must veto her suggestion. Let’s look at her log book. It shows that she has completed sixty-five flights with instructor, and nine hours thirty-five minutes’ solo flying, all with the best

results except for this last one. Throughout she has given proof of the most important qualities a glider pilot must show: courage and self-discipline. I would consider it unfair if she excluded herself from the examination that ends the training of an "A" pupil. In my opinion Máša should, as her punishment, prepare a paper for each of our meetings about a subject I myself shall choose. It will help you all and she will be kept so busy that she will hardly find time to breathe. And now I propose a vote should be taken to see who is for my suggestion and who is against it."

All of them agreed with Pop by raising their hands.

"Tonight we will end by singing the *Song of Labour*," Pop continued. "We'll sing it to express our thanks for Máša's safe return and as a promise to put duty before anything else."

The gliding pupils rose and sang. Someone timidly seized my hand. It was Eliška. I left my hand in hers and I raised my voice more and more so that it might reach out to the night sky.

* * *

There were only seven more days to the examination. From our group from school only Otakárek and I were to take it.

In a week's time I was to go to Třebíč to fetch my aunt home with all her bags full of fruit, jam and apple jelly.

And the following Wednesday school was to begin again.

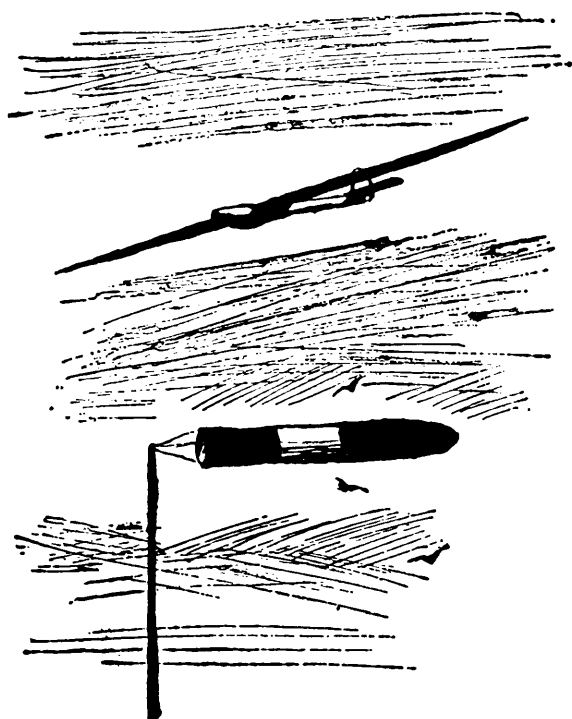
I had only one more day's brigade work at the office at Březová. As soon as they gave me my pay I intended to go with Otakárek to buy my own bicycle.

Life was a whole succession of tomorrows. Life was grand, it was indeed!

* * *

I had my own bicycle, a man's dark-red bicycle, almost a racing one. And I had bought it with the money I had earned myself.

I had enough cash left over for a much-needed winter coat.



We polished the gliders for the great event, the examination. Otakárek called for me, but this time I bicycled to the airfield on my own machine.

Although we hurried, the Žužu boys were there before us. But all our haste was in vain. There was no telling when our turn would come!

We lay on the ground and let ourselves be burned by the sun.

The committee, consisting of two strange instructors and of Pop, did not appear before one o'clock. By that time all the gliders that had been out training had returned and all the gliding pupils had assembled, even those who were not to take the examination. Pavel and Šuška had come and Eliška too; she was wearing her new blue jumper.

At first we took our examination in theory. Each of us was examined for a quarter of an hour.

Then, towed by another plane, we took off with a strange instructor, and performed what we had been learning for such a long time: gliding turns, dives, spins and finally a smooth landing.

Afterwards followed the solo flights to an altitude of 600 metres, including wide circuits.

The examination also included a launch with the tow-plane and one with the winch, with the strange instructors taking charge of the winch in turn. After that we flew solo, and we circled the airfield at an altitude of 150 metres as accurately as if it were the rim of a plate.

In the end we lined up and were told the results of the examination, together with the results entered in our log books that were now closed for good.

I had passed – and if I kept on working as hard at my flying as I had done till then, I would gain a glider pilot's diploma. Of course it couldn't be done in a day – but next year, I told myself, next year!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helena Šmahelová is one of Czechoslovakia's most popular writers. Her parents died when she was very young and she was brought up by various relations. Towards the end of the 1930s her first stories were published, but she became aware of gaps in her education and decided to devote her time to study. In 1952 she took a degree in psychology and aesthetics.

Translations of **YOUTH ON THE WING** have appeared in German, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Latvian and Yugoslavian.

As well as books for children, she has written several unusual novels for adults.



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