Primary School East, a single-storey low rise building with many windows and a recreational garden for its pupils was situated about a kilometre away from our house. Right opposite of the main entrance the caretaker lived in a small cottage.

It was the day of primary school registration, all parents made a pilgrimage to school with their six-year-olds. So did my mother, carrying me in her arms. For me this first visit to school was tremendously exciting. The teachers felt the same when they first caught sight of me. What did my mother want with me there, they asked. For disabled children there were special schools. That would surely be in the best interest of little Franzi. Integrative schooling – such a concept was absolutely unheard of! No, no, they were certain – Franzi needed special care in a special school for disabled children. In Vienna there was one of those, and the teachers assured my mother that they would gladly refer her to that school.

If my mother had learned anything through me over the previous six years, then it was tenacity. And so she just stayed
seated. The teacher and the headmaster at first were quite embarrassed, but then they found a solution adequate to the Austrian educational system: Franzi would have to be tested.

The teacher showed me flash cards with pictures on them for about a second, I then had to name the images I saw on them: house, tree, car, pushchair… I found this game quite dull and childish. After I had passed the test with flying colours, their helplessness again became obvious. So a new test was scheduled: I had to reach over my head to touch my right ear with my left hand. They sneered: Quite evidently, Franzi was not ready for school yet. “But, as I said, do try the special school in Vienna”, the headmaster added.

However, my parents did not even start thinking about just sending me away. And in any case they did not understand why I should not be allowed to go to a regular school like any other child. But as the school had refused to accept me, they started looking for a private teacher. They could not find anyone.

One year later my mother again showed up at the school with me. I smiled at the teacher and the headmaster and promptly proceeded to show them how excellently I could reach over my head with my left hand to touch my ear. Maybe it was due to a lack of further testing methods, maybe it was my heart-rending friendliness: In any case I was accepted as a first-year pupil. On trial, of course.

This suddenly created a whole new problem: How would I get to school every morning? “By car” said my mother. But for that she would first have to buy one, and get a driving license. “You could also push him on a bicycle” proposed my grandmother, through that statement implicitly refusing to make any monetary contribution to financing driving lessons or a second-hand car. My father had a hard time making the decision he now faced as the sole earner of the family: on the one hand he did see that it would be extremely difficult for my mother and myself to roll to school on a bike in every weather all throughout the year. On the other hand he had hardly any money due to the fact that he was right in the middle of building a house. My grandmother regrettably was not to be convinced of the necessity of a car. So we had to take out a loan, and one day a brand-new blue second-hand “duck”, a Citroen 2 CV, was parked outside our house. The floor had already rusted.
through, leaving a big hole, but that did not matter the least bit to us. We loved the rickety banger whose fabric roof made it into a convertible in summer. The Citroen practically seesawed at every movement, it leaned into each turn quite dramatically and mastering the heating was more than tricky: In summer it could not be turned off, and in winter cold air blew out of the ventilation slots.

Of course Mama passed her driving test with flying colours, and so we wobbled to school in our blue duck. There one of my classmates was already waiting to carry my schoolbag upstairs for me, while I entered the classroom being carried by my mother. I had my own specially padded chair and a rug on which I was allowed to lie down – but not sleep – in between.

The teachers did not only like me because of my performance in class. They carried me around during breaks, and one of the teachers always pretended that she wanted to bite off my nose. I used to be really scared of that! If she really did that, I used to think, then I would quickly and firmly bite her ear. When I was not being carried around, I crawled through the classroom and through the recreational area. The fact that I could not walk was peculiar to my classmates only in the beginning, after a while it had become the most natural thing in the world. I have no recollection of any bullying ever taking place. Together with the boys I played “catching the girls” almost every day: They would catch our female classmates, I would tickle them. I was the class winner in tickling!

From P.E. lessons I was exempt. That way I could either have a lie-in and my mother would bring me to school later – or I would sit in the gym next to the teacher, setting the pace at which the other children ran their laps by banging the drum. Today I think that I might as well have joined in. For sure I could have participated in some of the exercises. But in those days people did not rack their brains over such matters.

I only realised much later how much I owe to my primary school teacher. My integration was an exception. Nearly all other disabled people I met throughout my life and with whom I became friends later on had been to schools for handicapped children. For example, there used to be – and still is to this day - the so-called “forest school” in Lower Austria, remote, far away from society and from the parents. Physically handicapped children from all
over Austria used to be and still are being sent there. The level of teaching seems to be good, but in this “ideal world” of disabled children negative stereotypes are created, an artificial division between “those out there” and “us in here”. The pupils forget how to normally interact with people who are not disabled, insecurity and prejudices take the place of familiarity and knowledge. The common sense and love of my parents prevented me from being pushed off to some far away boarding school. They fought for my integration, for my participation in life with equal rights. Today the form of integration in school that I have experienced is being belittled as “untamed integration”. But many of the things my teachers back then delivered self-evidently today only happen when special resources or more funds are being granted.

Today nearly every primary school has an integrative class – undoubtedly this is a political success. But in reality it depends on the teacher how integration in these classrooms really works out. After fifteen years of integration in our school system there are still teachers who close themselves to this new challenge, pointing to the fact that they never learned to deal with disabled children during their teacher training.

I marvel at all the parents of disabled children who fight for their children's integration. Even though many things have changed for the better for disabled persons in this country – for example concerning nursing allowance or in view of the school system – it still is and will most likely also remain a struggle. However, those who step up to the challenge and struggle are also rewarded by the children. This for example is how Heinz Forcher, father of a disabled child, turned into a pioneer of the newly founded parents’ movement. Similarly, Maria-Rauch Kallat made her way into politics through her struggle for her blind daughter. My parents were and are no political activists; they were fighting for their son and won that battle. I surely owe my further development and career to my admission into primary school. Out in the lower Austrian woods my life would have taken a different turn.

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