

Child Labor on a Pomeranian Estate and its Effects on School Lessons (1887)

Abstract

In rural areas, proper schooling for underprivileged children continued to be less a universal right than a privilege. This report from the Prussian backwoods province of Pomerania shows that children often had to do grueling farm work outside of school hours and thus had little energy left for learning. In this author's view, the situation was not likely to improve soon, because agricultural employers believed that lessons in critical thinking and modern subjects like biology were nonsense. Such lessons, one landowner claimed, only prepared children's minds to accept Social Democratic heresies later in life.

Source

Even if one only considers the number of hours that children are employed, it can surely be said without further observation that children aged eight to fourteen years simply cannot cope physically with such prolonged periods of work. When it was time to thin out the turnips, which usually took four weeks in these parts, the children at my school, after being dismissed, trotted home as soon as they were out of my sight. Barely five minutes later, they appeared on the double, breakfast sandwiches in hand, at the gathering point, where the supervisor already awaited them. Then it was off to the turnip field—and not exactly at a leisurely pace. They ate breakfast while marching. When short-legged children wanted to come along, they had to run to catch up with the disappearing pack. At 8:45 a.m. all of them had to be sitting in their rows. Back at the village around noon, you could see the children wandering out to fields again at 1 p.m. They returned at 9 o'clock at night. On some days when there was no school, the children, I was told, had to show up at 5:30 a.m. Have I really gone too far in saying that such working hours have an adverse effect on the health of eight-year-old children or children with weak constitutions? An eleven-year-old girl had to be sent home from the field because she fell ill. Is such work advisable for healthy children if it makes the weak ones sick? Let's look at the weather conditions. In damp, cold wind or rain the working children easily catch cold; in drought conditions they frequently suffer from headaches and sore knees. One can see how, during school, some boys cannot hide that they have sore knees; they often clasp and squeeze them. According to my diary, I received the following reports of illness during the turnip-thinning season: one child sick for five days, one child for three days, two children for two days each, and two for one day each. What's more, I recently had to send several girls out of class, repeatedly, on account of nausea. The prolonged, exhausting work has made their bodies more susceptible to illnesses: scarlet fever and measles currently keep two-thirds of the students out of school. Thinning out turnips, however, is not the children's only work in the fields; it is preceded by planting potatoes and followed by thinning out cabbage. The latter requires no small effort, given the hard soil typical of turnip country. If, beyond that, we also think of [their work] sorting potatoes in musty cellars, of picking rocks, of guiding the horses, and of the potato harvest and second harvest, we soon become convinced that our children are overburdened with agricultural work throughout the whole summer. [...] During the summer semester, the successes of the winter semester cannot be preserved. The students' spirit slips out of our hands. We are unable to hold their attention consistently, even when we try to make classes as interesting as possible. Because they are physically exhausted, their intellect is slack. The all too brief night's sleep, perhaps violently interrupted, is in reality continued at school. Are we supposed to be angry with eight- or nine-year-old children when they fall asleep so gently during classes? But we cannot tolerate that they sleep, that they sleep intellectually. We have to make every possible effort to heal the wound that agriculture inflicts on us by way of inner discipline, through lively class activity. After all, we

can never be sure that we won't be suddenly surprised by a school inspection. [...] In our efforts, however, we face the same problem as the physician who wants to heal an open wound with internal medication alone. Our work on the children's heads is useless. The heads are empty; the intellect has sunk down into the torso and limbs, whose sluggish posture is testimony to their state of repose. The children sit there in a dream-like state; their eyes are glassy, lacking shine. Mental freshness, liveliness, which is otherwise typical of children, has completely vanished. Neither math nor even singing class can awaken spirits. It almost drives one to despair. What to do? Can the children help themselves through preparation at home? Impossible. They lack the time, energy, and desire for that. Nothing is left for us but the awareness that our working children are becoming stupid little by little. [...] When I drew a landowner's attention to the fact that turnip growing was a true disaster for our elementary school [*Volksschule*], that child labor caused so much harm, he made remarks along the following lines: "The demands made by our rural schools these days are simply too high. If the children learn religion, reading, writing, and a bit of math, perhaps a little history as well, they know enough. Geography, biology, drawing, and all of this nonsense constitute an incredible burden for the school. Children who learn something consider themselves clever when they are all grown up, and they become Social Democrats. People who have learned nothing are better workers. [...] What we need are basic elementary schools," he went on to argue. "Discipline and order are imperative."

Source: Teacher Gossow in *Pommersche Blätter für die Schule und ihre Freunde*, Stettin, 11, 1887, pp. 102–6; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 133–35.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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