

Hellmuth von Gerlach Describes a Conservative Election Campaign in Rural Silesia (1880s)

Abstract

Hellmuth von Gerlach (1866–1935) began his career as an antisemitic journalist and follower of the Christian Social Party, which functioned as a wing of the conservative movement. Later, he became a strong advocate of liberal and pacifist views. In the passage below, drawn from his autobiography, Gerlach describes an election campaign in his native province of Silesia. Gerlach uses the term “Junker paradise” to indicate how easy it was for a rural nobleman to be elected there. Another contemporary term for the same kind of district was a “Riviera constituency,” because the conservative candidate was so certain to win the election that he could spend the campaign vacationing on the Riviera. Local conservative notables could influence the election outcome by virtue of their social standing, economic influence, and local authority. But gradually habits of deference eroded and such districts became hotly contested.

Source

The Junker Paradise

The first eighteen years of my life were spent in the district of Wohlau in Silesia. This district together with Guhrau and Steinau formed an electoral division that was called “the golden borough of the Conservatives” because it had never sent either to the Reichstag or to the Landtag a representative who did not belong to that Party. It was not necessary for the candidates to exert themselves either physically or mentally in running for office. Any Herr von Kessel or Herr von Nitzschwitz or Graf Carmer might be nominated by a committee of big landlords presided over by the Landrat. Thereupon his election was assured.

This department was so extremely reactionary that even the Free Conservatives were looked upon as dangerous revolutionaries. On one occasion a clergyman, who was also district school-inspector, ventured to run for the Landtag as a Free Conservative candidate with the help of some of the public-school teachers. His presumption aroused a storm of resentment among the country gentry. In its name a certain Herr von Seydlitz published a statement in the local paper accusing the clergyman of base ingratitude because, after having been in his younger days graciously received into the family of one of the large estate owners as a tutor for his children, he had ventured to set himself up against the will of the landed interest.

Inasmuch as the landlords enjoyed the right of appointing most of the clergymen and teachers, the latter were utterly dependent on their favor. My father’s nearest neighbor was a certain Baron von Beust, a gentleman of Saxon origin. On one occasion he had to appoint a new incumbent for the parish on his estate of Herrnmotschelnitz. Several aspirants presented themselves for the position, each of whom delivered a probationary sermon. I personally heard all of them. Finally, a very young clergyman, who had preached what was obviously the worst sermon of the series, was appointed. When I took Herr von Beust to task for this he merely grunted, “Well, you see the chap plays bully skat.” That qualification was decisive.

My father was a Protestant, but he had the appointment to the living at the Catholic church and school in Gross-Schmograu. He hated Catholics. He used to say, “They are even worse than the Jews.”

Consequently, he did all in his power to get the most anti-Catholic priest he could find for the parish. Before long his policy was detected. After that the clerical aspirants for the position always represented themselves to my father as extreme freethinkers. After they were appointed, however, the lord of the parish had no control of them, and they always turned out in the end to be perfectly orthodox, and in several instances unusually zealous, priests and defenders of the Church. This only confirmed my father in his conviction that they were a breed of “Jesuitical hypocrites.” My private idea was that his experience only proved the immorality of the whole institution of clerical patronage; although the Junkers considered it the very foundation stone of their power and defended it with tooth and nail.

Wohlau is in Central Silesia. We did not have the great latifundia of Upper Silesia. Our estates were for the most part of comparatively moderate size, ranging from two thousand to five thousand acres, and were usually “circulating properties”—that is, they repeatedly changed proprietors. Landlords whose families had been permanently rooted in the soil for many generations, as they were in parts of Pomerania and Brandenburg, were rare in our neighborhood. So when a family had owned and lived upon the same property for fifty years it was usual to confer upon its head the Order of the Red Eagle IV in honor of the event.

[...]

Much of the property in our vicinity was owned by officers who had been dropped from active service. They knew nothing whatever about farming, but they imagined that although they had failed in a military career they were at least abundantly competent to manage a large estate. Naturally they made one blunder after another, and their bailiffs robbed them right and left. Thereupon they would deliver long harangues on the depression in agriculture and clamor for higher duties upon grain. They were not consciously insincere. They regarded agriculture as a highly respectable calling that required no special preparation but that nevertheless ought to support a gentleman according to the standards of his class.

Those standards were very modest, at least in their own opinion: saddle horses, a couple of spans of coach horses, a dozen carriages, a well-stocked wine cellar, a hunting-preserve, good hunting-dinners, and ability to educate their sons as Corps students or cavalry officers. These things were assumed as a matter of course. Gambling, which was such a curse among the country gentry of Upper Silesia, was kept within bounds. A few frivolous-minded young bloods might play hazard after a hunting-dinner. On such occasions, however, they often had to use matches as chips in default of ready money. But most of the card-playing was confined to humdrum whist and skat.

Our landlords had their own economic code. If a man owned an immense park, he considered the cost of its maintenance a necessary operating-charge of his estate. Instead of sending his children to the public schools, he kept private tutors and governesses and regarded the expense as a perfectly proper cost-item in his farming-operations. He felt the same about his hunting-expenses, which first and last were very considerable—although he might have leased his hunting-rights for a goodly sum. The gentry hardly took the handsome castles and manor houses they occupied into account as revenue. I remember hearing one of our neighbors abuse the Landrat roundly at a neighborhood gathering because that gentleman had assessed his castle, which had twenty windows on the front façade, at a rental of nine hundred marks a year. He had declared it for only three hundred marks. When I asked him how he reduced it to that figure, since the interest on the cost of his residence would have amounted to several thousand marks, he said: “In my village the only other possible tenants would be farm laborers. They earn so little money that taking them altogether they couldn’t pay more than three hundred marks rent.” Yet this man was absolutely convinced that he was right. In fact, the country gentleman had economic theories that were all his own.

Our rural laborers were intensely ignorant and lived in a most primitive sort of way. Almost their only indulgence was liquor, which on all festal occasions, such as Christmas, Harvest Home, and the opening

of the hunting-season, they obtained by liters from the landlord's distillery. The women of the gentry class would wax indignant at the farm hands' drunken orgies every Saturday and Sunday. At the same time, they took great satisfaction in the big profits that their distilleries paid. Their ethical code was well satirized in this little quatrain:—

Lern, lieber Sohn, das Leben kennen,
Sehr nobel ist es, Schnaps zu brennen,
Bedenklich schon, ihn zu verkaufen,
Ganz unmoralisch, ihn zu saufen.

(Learn, my son, this rule of conduct:
It is very noble to distill whiskey;
it is a questionable business to sell it;
it is utterly immoral to swill it.)

At that time farm laborers were politically merely tools for maintaining Conservative ascendancy. Their miserable wages prevented their indulging in the luxury of a newspaper of their own. Their landlord would let them subscribe at his expense for a little Conservative daily or a pious Sunday sheet. At Christmas he gave each of his tenants a calendar adorned with patriotic mottoes and stories or with Christian admonishments to humility, obedience, and contentedness. No village innkeeper dared to grant the use of his dancing-hall for any other than a Conservative meeting; otherwise the neighboring landlord, who was also the local magistrate, could make it exceedingly disagreeable for him. On Election Day laborers were marshaled in a column during the noon interval and marched off to the polls, with the bailiff in front and the forester behind. At the door of the polling-place the bailiff gave each laborer a Conservative ballot, which the landlord immediately collected from him in his capacity as judge of elections.

The machine worked perfectly. The only discordant notes in this political harmony came from the few villages where peasant freeholders lived. At such places a few ballots would be cast for Independent or Clerical candidates. Our Junker circle was for this reason particularly hostile to the peasants, though later the Landlords' Union managed very skillfully to bring most of them under its control. But when I was a young man the peasants in my neighborhood were looked upon as uncertain and unreliable fellows. A few of them were even presumptuous enough to refuse to lease hunting-rights over their land to the *gnädigen Herrn* because that gentleman's game had damaged their crops.

We had in our vicinity only one solitary really modern man among the Junkers. He was a certain Graf Pourtales, who was managing as trustee an estate at Glumbowitz. He had the crazy idea that the English system of government was a good one because it encouraged able men to go to Parliament. For this heresy he was roundly abused as a "Liberal." For the same reason, however, the freeholding peasants elected him to the Kreistag; and he took his seat in that body right among them.

This was going beyond all bounds. Such an offense was unforgivable. So Pourtales was ostracized by all his social equals. None of them would have anything to do with either him or his family. In fact, he was so utterly banned and isolated that he finally went off to America and stayed there ten years, until the grass could grow over the grave of his crime.

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