

Memories of Sedan Day Festivities in the 1870s (Retrospective Account, 1930)

Abstract

German unification in 1871 produced a wide variety of commemorations, many of which reflected the empire's martial origins. Victory over French armies in the decisive Battle of Sedan (September 1–2, 1870) was not celebrated in all parts of the empire, and even where it was, festivities held divergent symbolic meanings for Germans of different classes, faiths, genders, and age cohorts. The variety of Sedan Day celebrations is well-known to historians, but these recollections by one young participant provide unusual depth. They were written by Florentine Gebhardt (1865–1941), the daughter of a jeweler in Crossen and, from 1897 to 1924, an elementary school teacher in Berlin. As Gebhardt's account suggests, festivities could involve days of preparation: to demonstrate national allegiance required careful practice. But the sense of anticipation and excitement conveyed here cannot be ascribed to her childhood naïveté alone: despite the need for frugality and the heavy demands made on teachers, many of the town's adults appear to have willingly participated in (and profited from) the celebrations.

Source

As a garrison town, Crossen was doubly patriotic and pro-monarchical.^[1] An appropriate celebration of Sedan Day was important even to the frugal town authorities, and they apparently dug a bit deeper into the town's pockets than they did on other occasions. Each citizen contributed to the extent that he could. Of course, all the houses were decorated with black-white-red flags, the flags still being available from the entry of the troops in 1871. The streets designated for the afternoon parade were decorated with leaf garlands, which either spanned the streets or were attached to individual houses. Naturally, we children were up much earlier than usual, even though the school celebration was first scheduled to begin at 9 or 10 a.m. In the town's secondary schools, the celebration took place in the assembly hall, first for the upper classes of the boys' school and then for those of the girls' school. Probably only the elementary schools had class celebrations; I cannot say anything about that. In and of itself, merely being permitted to set foot in the assembly hall, otherwise hallowed and locked, was something grand. With timid admiration my eyes strayed over the large glass cabinets along the walls, which contained stuffed animals (teaching aids for the boys' school) and a bust of the Kaiser in the background. And filled with a feeling of festive anticipation, I took my seat on the bench between my schoolmates—but not without casting furtive glances at them to see whether they, like me, were wearing their Sunday best. In the morning, I had to wear my woolen Sunday dress; the white one was saved for the excursion. Since I was not reciting anything, there was no need to don my Sunday white. Then the whole affair began. One of the teachers gave the official speech, to which we did not listen very attentively; a number of pre-selected pupils sang songs that had been rehearsed beforehand; and a few of the even more select chosen ones recited their poems. All this was accompanied by sharp criticism on the part of the envious non-chosen ones. Well, any of us could have done it like *that!* — After the cheer for the Kaiser and the [Prussian] national anthem, we were dismissed with the reminder to reassemble in the schoolyard at 1:30 p.m. — Now it was necessary to lend a hand in the final preparations. With some effort we had scrounged the groschen needed for the black-and-white-and-red sash, which seemed absolutely necessary for the procession, and for a paper balloon [i.e., lantern], because the class decided that we ought to have them. They were to be hung and carried on sticks wrapped with black-and-white-and-red paper. Green leaf wreaths as headdresses were more popular than straw hats. The boys had oak twigs in their hats, paper sashes as well, and lanterns on sticks. The inventories of the master bookbinders

Schöbel and Fischer were soon depleted. — Full of excitement, schoolchildren ran through the streets all morning long, singing patriotic songs such as “Die Wacht am Rhein,” “Habt ihr in hohen Lüften,” and “Heil Dir im Siegerkranz” well ahead of the festivities, and it was only reluctantly that one returned home for lunch. The meal was gobbled in haste, and then the agony began: “Mom, it’s already 12:30, I have to get dressed!” — The big production number—getting into the white Sunday dress proceeded with much impatience. We (that is to say, in later years my younger sisters as well) had embroidered gauze dresses with colored silk sashes. That the dresses, embroidered by Aunt Hannchen, were actually intended as petticoats (but were deemed too good by mother and turned into dresses by adding a gauze bodice) did not detract from their festive character at all. — Long before the appointed time we were ready and rushed out of the house. Only then could the mothers—for all the children surely behaved as I did—breathe a deep sigh of relief and think of themselves.

Between 2 and 2:30 p.m. the time came when the parade could finally start moving. Heading the procession was the police chief as the force of order; behind him was the band, and then the schools. The first one was the Werner Private Secondary School for Girls, all its pupils in white with blue sashes, blue-and-white shoulder sashes, and with blue-and-white balloons. That the town gave preference to this school over its own was probably only due to the fact that the officers’ daughters were of the Werner type. As “town pupils,” we were all the more envious because they had a blue-and-white school flag that was carried in front of the crowd of girls by the master saddler Maue, in whose house on Glogau Straße [Street] the classrooms of Fräulein Werner were located. By the way, next in the procession was the town’s secondary school for girls, then came the boys, and the elementary schools followed after a new military band. The associations—veterans’, singing, and rifle associations, etc.—fell in with them. And so the parade moved through Steinstraße, across the market square, along Schloßstraße (now Schaedtstraße), farther on through Roßstraße and Dammstraße, over the Oder Bridge and onto the Chaussee all the way to Bergmann’s Corner. Here, the groups split up—the meadows at “Tivoli” and along the Kähmenschen Weg had been specified as the festival grounds for the boys’ sections, while the girls had to continue walking to Hundsbelle. There was enough space on the meadows along the Oder behind the village, and lively activities soon unfolded there. Incidentally, only once did the boys’ sections celebrate apart from the others. The parents involved were simply presented with too many inconveniences, especially those who had children of both sexes participating in the festivities and had to “split up.” In subsequent years, we stayed closer together on the Hundsbelle meadows, whose rowen had already been cut for this purpose. The boys mostly celebrated near “Joachim’s Berg” (Jägerheim), the girls behind properties no. 1 and 2. The owners of open-air restaurants supplied food and drink, but this was not particularly satisfactory given the enormous throngs of people. Wise parents took along their own basic provisions. Incidentally, the elementary schoolchildren received a free drink—coffee—and a fresh buttered roll. Their teachers had to see to it that all of them got their fair share. Back then we did not comprehend, nor did the parents, what incredible effort such a “children’s festival” demanded from the teachers. Even my father shrugged off the complaints of the teacher Kohlstock: “Come on, this is nothing, just playing a bit! What kind of work is that for you!?” — For years, his own daughters have experienced first-hand what such a children’s festival means for the teachers—certainly a source of joy, but infinitely more so one of effort and burden—and that’s not even taking into consideration the anger and ingratitude they reaped.

After the refreshments, choirmaster Scheibel gathered his female choir around him; the other singing teachers did the same, and a singing competition was then fought out with patriotic songs, followed by gymnastics exercises. Herr Räthel first led his boys’ sections to the front to perform exercises, and then came the upper classes of the secondary school for girls, who even went as far as staging round dances. After this, the various schools, each in a separate spot, and the various classes—which were supervised by the teachers and joined by parents, relatives, friends, and siblings who were not yet of school age—played numerous games, insatiable and never tiring. Children back then were not as blasé as children of today, who, in my experience, tire very quickly when playing games in groups—unless they

can somehow put their little personalities on display and secure some kind of honor for themselves. — “Prizes” were also awarded back then. We children had taken a collection beforehand; the class fund and (most probably) the class teacher’s wallet had provided any money still lacking. Prizes were won through participation in races, ball and hoop games, or games like “Hit the Pot.” There was also bar climbing and sack races for the elementary school children. I owe it to the goodwill of my teacher, more than any skill of my own, that at the very end I would also get some type of “prize”—a folder with stationery or a colorful bookmark. For when it came to physical exercises, I was rather clumsy and much too shy to ever win a prize in fair competition. — When darkness descended, it meant that we all gathered together. The balloons, i.e., the Chinese lanterns, were lit; all of us assumed the formation again, and after a song we set out on the march home. The boys’ school fell in along the way, and so we proceeded slowly back to town, with music and singing, hoarse and tired, but overjoyed by the day’s pleasures. Festive candles burned in the windows of some houses, and paper lanterns shone solemnly from our procession—at least the ones that had not yet perished in flames. We made a stop at the market square; the mayor’s speech echoed over the heads of those assembled; the upper class of the boys’ school performed one last program with the Chinese lanterns; the music blared; the cheer for the Kaiser burst forth; and the parade finally dissolved. The students marched to the front of the school building, where they were dismissed and responded with jubilant cheers to news that school would not start until 9 a.m. the following day. The associations presumably continued to celebrate in some pub, and the festive day drew festively to an end.

NOTES

[1] Crossen, lying on the River Oder, was a county seat in the governmental district of Frankfurt an der Oder in the Prussian province of Brandenburg; in 1875 it had 6,489 inhabitants. [Footnote adapted from Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, p. 61.]

Source: Florentine Gebhardt, *Blätter aus dem Lebensbilderbuch*. Berlin, 1930, pp. 51–54; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, pp. 61–64.

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