

Telephones and Electric Light (c. 1890)

Abstract

The late nineteenth century was a period in which technical innovations were becoming available to the general public. Focusing on one family in the city of Weimar, this first-hand account describes the impact of technical progress at home, where candle-lighting and kerosene lamps were first replaced by gas, and where, somewhat later, the telephone and electric lighting represented the cutting edge in technology. Different generations of Germans proved varying receptivity to these novelties; these distinctions are subtly noted by the cultural historian and writer Edwin Redslob (1884–1973) in this retrospective account of his boyhood.

Source

“Uncle Gustav owns a lamp that you can put on the table lengthways and nothing catches fire.” One day my brother came home from the city with these words, and to me they announced for the first time the advent of electric lighting. We had grown up with kerosene lamps; in the middle of the long hallway between the living rooms on the one side and the bedrooms and kitchen on the other was a narrow table upon which lamps were lined up like grenadiers. At the head was father’s study lamp with the green lampshade. When it got dark he would light it himself, after smoothing out the wick so that it would not smoke. Attached to the wall were lamps without lampshades, behind which round brass discs reflected the light. They were reserved for the corridor, the staircase, and the kitchen. Apart from that, there were insert lamps for the chandeliers, the largest one for the lamp above the dining table, where we sat even after supper, as father read to us, while we drew or carved, or pasted stamps in slip-folds into the album. Those were cozy hours, and though the lighting was not very effective, it emitted a dim but agreeable warmth. I cannot even imagine the novels our father read to us without the kerosene lamp—Gustav Freytag’s *Ahnen*, Viktor von Scheffel’s *Ekkehard*, and Fritz Reuter’s *Ut mine Stromtid*.

The kerosene, which always left its unpleasant smell in the hallway, was now banished. First there were chandeliers and wall lamps with gas flames that often hissed alarmingly so that you never knew whether the house was going to explode the next minute. But then we, too, got electric light. It was unpleasantly bright; because it was so expensive, after all, one did not think of dimming the bulbs or hiding them behind lampshades. One element of comfort ceased to exist. And yet: we had the new lighting now and went with the trend. Father, though, kept his study lamp; for we had stove heating that cooled down at night so that the heat radiating from the kerosene lamp felt good.

At about the same time the first telephones arrived in Weimar. Such a telephone did not sit on the table but was attached to the wall and was turned on with a crank. As I accompanied father to the Gothaische Bank one day, where he deposited some savings each month that would later pay for his sons’ university studies, the bank clerk showed me the new invention and lifted me onto a chair in order to make a phone call. But I did not know whom to call or what to say. So he put me through to the hotel “Zum Elefanten,” instructing me to simply ask whether Director Müller from Berlin had already arrived and surely the porter would give me an answer, allowing me to hear his voice from the distance. I was overwhelmed with astonishment and delight at this incredible occurrence. As we left the bank, I snuck from my father straight to the “Elefant” at the market square. It took me at least four or five minutes to cover the distance, and yet the porter’s voice had reached my ear the instant he had spoken at the hotel. Our father then bought us a toy that had recently come into fashion, a children’s telephone. It consisted of a cardboard frame covered with parchment and a long string between the discs. My brother and I each had

our own special tree in the garden, from which we could easily talk to one another. But now one of us held the new instrument to his ear, the other to his mouth, and we tried to communicate by means of the string. This was certainly much more difficult than simple conversation beforehand, but it was technical and up to date.

Source: Edwin Redslob, *Von Weimar nach Europa. Erlebtes und Durchdachtes*. Berlin, 1972, pp. 28–30; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen, 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 47–49.

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