

A Boy's Childhood in Cologne, c. 1810 (1862)

Abstract

Writing without bourgeois prejudice and in a sympathetic Dickensian spirit, author Ernst Weyden (1805-1869) describes the life of the common folk in his native Cologne. He describes a sub-culture unaffected by Enlightenment ideas or strivings, one in which occupation and neighborhood intersected with religion and folk belief to define ordinary people's narrow horizons. The state was a distant presence, except when it intervened in the form of the much-feared army recruiter.

Source

Cologne on the Rhine Fifty Years Ago

[...]

Street life.

[...] Endless are the rows of dirt and ash piles in the streets, for even though in the busier streets, ash and sweepings were put out in baskets for the 'dirt man' to pick up, it was the boys' favorite pastime to knock over these baskets. On top of that, any type of garbage and refuse imaginable and unimaginable was dumped without any inhibitions in front of houses, frequently piled high in some spots, even in the middle of the city. [...]

Quite often in the most passable streets, pungent wood fumes sting your eyes; it is the coopers that sulfurize their barrels, just as they usually conduct their trade in the open streets with deafening hammering. Thick coffee but even more often, chicory fumes belch toward us, almost suffocating us in some places, since the street is also used for coffee and chicory roasting.

[...]

Frequently, we encounter on the squares, in the streets, the adolescents fighting heated battles; for the individual squares such as Domhof, the Altenmarkt, the Heumarkt, and the Augustinerplatz and the different school were hostile toward each other. Quite often, this hatred among the boys erupts into wild clashes, in the course of which windows and street lamps did not exactly escape damage, repeatedly necessitating police intervention. [...] These boys' riots, recurring regularly in the summer, had the consequence that a boy would not venture out of his district unaccompanied, which is why apart from our neighborhood – the parish – the rest of Cologne was a veritable *terra incognita* to us. [...]

In some remote streets, [...] where, however, anyone would rarely get lost without necessity, we encounter in the summertime a piece of Italy, Italian street life, the most abundant crowd of children, romping around half-naked or entirely in the buff. At the doors of the low, hut-like houses, in long rows dressed in the most casual negligee, are the lacemakers, the "*Wirkeschen*." [...]

The appearance of a stranger attracts attention. He is mocked, ridiculed, and woe is him if he gets into a battle of words with these women, or offends one of them. "He gets what was coming to him," as the native of Cologne puts it [...].

A sad picture of 'white slavery' were the so-called 'lacemaking schools,' numbering about 50, where perhaps 800 to 1,000 girls, sold completely to the heads of these schools for a certain number of years,

were taught lacemaking, forced to sacrifice their youth to the most outrageous, despicable profit-seeking.

The interior of the houses.

[...] The living room of the lower citizen, mostly the tradesman, usually serves, at least in the winter, as kitchen and workshop as well, if the trade does not demand a large room. Otherwise it features only the 'Stuff' [= 'Stube,' i.e. living room] and the chamber in which the family sleeps. Chairs and armchairs are rare; chests used to store anything serve as seating. [...]

None of the *Stuben* (living rooms) lack the crucifix under or over the mirror, below it is the case for keeping combs, the large or small '*hinkende Bote*' [an almanac] with the 'bloodletting tablet,' and behind the mirror, provided there are children in the house, the '*birke Juffer*,' a birch switch for the girls, and for the boys the bullwhip or the *Engkge Tau*.

Education in Old Cologne went by the Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach, who says: "Those who love their children do not spare the whip!" Regular beating executions were commissioned to be carried out by the Alexian Brothers [a lay brotherhood named after Saint Alexius], if some already grown-up son refused to dance completely to the parents' tune. In horror, we tiptoed by a house in Unter Kästen Street, where, as the stories went, during one such exemplary 'execution' a young man had been beaten to death – now haunting the place as a ghost. [...]

Childhood years.

[...] Even for the lowliest of citizens, a large family is a blessing; any increase of it is a joy; not without reason, the resident of Cologne says, "Many children, many slices of bread, but also many Lord's Prayers!" [...] During the first days, people inquire how the woman in childbed and the newborn are doing. Then the visits begin, and along with them the admiring of the infant, how heavy it is, how strong. If it is a boy, he is "a spitting image of his father," if a girl, of the mother.

The new member of the human race always gains something for the siblings: 'Sugar goods' [i.e. candy], sponge, spicy Christmas cookies, and similar children's blisses. When well-to-do women give birth, the children of the immediate neighborhood are pleased with the delicacies that the new arrival has 'brought in his or her diapers.'

An important business is the choice of the godfather and godmother, the "*Patt*" and "*Jot*." The result of a family council even among the more prosperous classes, one usually kept this office in the family circle. The lower classes regarded the choice of godparents as a speculative transaction, approaching richer citizens to assume the office of godparent. The true native of Cologne deemed it a sin to turn down this request, and even though one had someone else, a so-called '*Aaschjevatter*,' stand in at the baptism, a gift from the godparent never lacks, and if circumstances necessitate, the godparent never forgets his or her duty to act as a substitute for the parents. According to common opinion, the child took up the character of its godparent.

[...]

Above all, the infant was protected from air and wind, kept quite warm at all times, especially the head, which day and night did not go without the snug flannel or calico cap, the so-called '*Ging*,' over which is worn an additional decorative bonnet. Scurf and bad eyes were the results of this 'packaging system.' Much, much more significant than today was also the mortality among children. [...]

Many inhabitants of Cologne are still prejudiced against the preventive inoculation for smallpox, as a result of which one continues to see many faces marked by smallpox scars, '*usjestoche Bildcher*' [literally,

‘punched out little pictures’] from the period under discussion. To cure common illnesses, household remedies – *SimpeIn*, as the native of Cologne says – must help. The lowlier citizen will resort to a physician only in an extreme emergency and especially when the children are concerned. For children’s cramps, ‘*Bejofung*’ in vernacular, one definitely still tries to make do with ‘reading over’, i.e. ecclesiastical blessing of the children. Despite the French, superstition was far from eradicated. How much was told to us about the jinxing of the children, how the feather in the little beds formed into little wreaths by the power of witches, which caused children’s cramps. How strictly was it commended to us children not to allow strange women touching us in any case, not to accept anything from them, to make the sign of the cross if an old woman spoke to or smiled at us. [...]

When a child died it was put on display for the little children, the tiny head decorated with the death wreath and the little shroud strewn with colorful paper and fake gold cuttings. That was a treat for the children of the neighborhood, for on such occasions, a piece of gingerbread or a candy heart was never missing – to us children still true tasty tidbits. [...]

The corpses of distinguished persons, especially those of parish clergy, were put on display for a few days on the bed of state, a much-frequented spectacle for young and old, and at the same time, a rich harvest for the beggars.

The first thing taught to a child once it was able to babble a few words was how to make the sign of the cross. What followed were The Creed and the emotional children’s prayers, [...]

Even though in terms of children’s clothes, which incidentally were handed down over several generations, the more prosperous classes indulged in a certain degree of hefty luxury, this was not done with respect to children’s clothes in the first years. The ordinary attire for boys and girls was, up to the age of five or six, the so-called woolen, knitted ‘*JusseP*’ [i.e. undercoat, a doublet], which was probably knit a bit longer every year. At home, we children wore the ‘*Pungl*’ [i.e. dressing gown], which – because put on before going to bed – was a veritable horror to us many a time, for even in the summer we had to go to bed very early. And those laws were heeded with exceptional strictness. [...]

An important moment in any boy’s life was the first pants, in Cologne’s dialect called “*Boz*.” Pants and doublet were in one piece, buttoned-up from behind, with shoes tied together with shoelaces or buttoned over the foot. Since handkerchiefs constituted a rare luxury article among boys, the right sleeve of the doublet was usually colored, as it represented the spot of the handkerchief. [...] The boy’s pants never lacked the ‘St. Hubert’s lace,’ which popular belief regards as a protective measure against mad dogs. Amulets as scapular, named ‘*Teufelsgeistcher*’ [devil’s ghosts], could be found as well, especially if a nun happened to be in the family or among circle of friends.

[...] Among the lower classes of citizens, there was no question of school attendance; the middle classes sent their children to school – a horror for children. Most elementary school buildings were dark and musty caves, which saw neither the sun nor the moon. [...] One can legitimately describe the schools back then as veritable torture chambers, where from dawn till dusk the hazel switch, ruler, *Engkge Tau*, and the bullwhip reign or fly around in the classroom to admonish the negligent or the chatterers or to ask them to step forward to receive a systematic hiding. [...] The meager knowledge was literally drummed into the students. Nothing is more natural than children thinking of school with horror and dread, that boys in particular seize any opportunity to pass by school, to skip class. Barely a morning passes when you don’t encounter in the streets leading to the school boys howling at the top of their voices, who are being dispatched forcibly to school by a servant or even by the father or mother, quite probably also wrapped with a sheet, if a misfortune had befallen the little one at night.

The first source of knowledge is the ‘tablet,’ which has glued to it in printed form the upper-case and lower-case ABC, and which the young hopefuls of Cologne wear around their necks by a cord. Once

having managed within a year to know the letters and spell ‘Ba, be, bi, bo, bu,’ the child receives the primer. What a pride and joy, as the book was bound in quite colorful or even golden paper. [...]

With its entire weight, boredom burdened us at school; it was jolly good fun when we had a chance to practice the power of our lungs one class at a time, spelling out in unison. Otherwise one tries to amuse oneself with sculptural works of paper, formed into little roosters, ships, salt shakers or the like. [...]

Quite often in the afternoons, following the end of school, the books were hidden behind a rock so they would not interfere with playing, at times actually being used as sledges on the ice. It was not unusual to see youngsters leave elementary school only at the age of 17 or 18, when they had done studying and were able to read the title book or – even the newspaper. A laudable exception to these goings-on was the Protestant elementary school administered by a dignified teacher by the name of Almenräder. [...]

And what joy abounding with the poetry of a child’s heart was ‘Zinther Klohs’ – St. Nicholas! – a real children’s festivity. With what ardor did we pray for the opening of the gifts that the ‘holy man’ brought, who was accompanied by ‘Hans Muff,’ the terror of naughty children. Every child’s heart was thumping loudly with fear, since on the eve of the gift opening, 6 December, the holy man, accompanied by his maid, Saint Barbara, and Hans Muff visited the houses with his donations and serious admonitions, or apples, nuts and similar treasures were thrown by a invisible hand to the crowd of children kneeling and praying. How devout from the bottom of their hearts did the little ones’ Lord’s Prayers sound, when the bell rang from the street or in the hall.

And what a familial merriment it was, when on the precious day we put out our bowls and quite likely our shoes as well. [...] The main riches consisted [...] conventionally of gingerbread cookies, apples and nuts.

It was a true children’s festivity, rich in the poetry of belief. And how long, quite long one tried to keep at arm’s length the appearance that one knew who the holy man was, because then the gift-givings ceased. What’s more, in these gift-givings for children, no ostentation made itself felt yet. A picture or even a colorful Nuremberg illustrated broadsheet, what a delight! Though the odd specimen of toy, particularly sisters’ dolls, was examined and destroyed out of pure investigative curiosity, mother locked the major items away carefully, using them to make us happy only on special days; – the toys remained new and in the wealthier families, they were surely also passed on from generation to generation. Economizing with respect to everything was something our fathers, our mothers knew well [...].

The girls’ elementary studies in the Catholic schools were not pushed that far. In the middle classes, it is a rare occurrence for a beauty to be ‘experienced in the quill,’ that is to say, able to write and fluently read a bit more than just her name. The ‘mistresses,’ thus the honorable name of the female teachers, attached more importance to practical education towards domesticity. Something cultivated in particular is the art of knitting. [...] The girls usually received domestic work, a ‘Feier,’ i.e. the task of knitting a specified number of ‘little seams,’ with the strict mother paying close attention that these ‘Feier’ were done carefully. A few of the so-called French schools provided for the girls’ higher education. [...]

Children’s games.

[...]

At all seasons after school, on afternoons off from school, on the Sundays and holidays, of which there was no lack at all then, even though the French had already eliminated many, on all squares and little places there was the noisiest children’s laughter and merriment, the most boisterous, playful children’s happiness, and in the narrow streets themselves the most cheerful children’s life with its rich poetry. What a treasure of children’s songs! At any rate, the folk song continued to be cultivated most vividly in Cologne back then, as it had been in all German cities in the past. The pleasure and distress of public life

found expression in song, and the jester practicing coarsest bourgeois humor castigated sharply conspicuous absurdities and weaknesses. [...]

A common form of entertainment is storytelling by the children to each another, with the animal fable, the little stories of the Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood [*'Füssjen'* in Rhineland dialect means actually 'red haired child'], the tale of Tom Thumb, of Schmittchen of Bielefeld, of Johannes Unverzag, "Seven with one blow" [i.e. the Valiant Tailor], and all the rest of the collected fairytales providing the material. The manservants and maids are held in high esteem by the children, as they offer such a wealth of little tales, where ghostly happenings and witches' tales were so many and so horrific that the little ones would not get away without goose bumps and bad dreams, though fear was instilled in us as well. Among mixed children's circles, one also encounters *'Plumpsack'*, a type of tag game. When bad weather forces the children to stay at home or visit each other, the most common game is *'Piepiep!'*, as hide-and-seek is called in Cologne vernacular. In the houses of the wealthier people, sometimes an optical apparatus or a magic lantern delights the little ones with its wonders [...].

In the fall, the kites came out, called *'gepatte Vüge'* in Cologne vernacular. If a kite went missing, one would say, "It is off to Paris." Then there were the spinning tops, called *'Doepp'* in Cologne. This included the variants called *'Münche'*, *'Beginge'*, and *'Wipdoepp'*. From a strip eel skin, *'Oelefell'*, one made the whips, and the art consisted in driving the spinning top quite far, which often, in the heat of the game, when paying little attention to windows and lanterns, resulted in unpleasant and hefty smacks on the head. If a puddle of soft mud happened to be close to the playground – and one could find plenty of those – you would start a game of throwing the spinning tops into the mud. Two or three boys would play, with each one using a spinning top; it was placed in the flat of the hand and thrown up, the winning objective being to have it stick top first in the mud. It goes without saying that in any game that entailed winning something or losing the participants sometimes got into squabbling.

With the advent of the month of October, the boys got out their whips, as the ox market was on; the boy that could crack the best was the best man.

On summer evenings, when the neighborhood was sitting in ample numbers on the street in front of the doorways, chatting, the boys possibly gathered around a storyteller, who usually had a million fairytales and legends, stories about knights and robbers. What a shock it was when the familiar whistle or call urged them to go to bed. The girls pursued singing and dancing their ring-around-the-rose. [...]

Wintertime, too, held its pleasures for children. When the first snowflakes came down, the children would rejoice: "The Mother of God is shaking out the Savior's little bed, and the angels the beds of the saints." If there is heavy snowfall, snowmen are created in the open spaces, the more colossal, the more beautiful, with eyes, nose, and mouth formed from charcoal, the right hand armed with old brooms or sticks. Generally, throwing snowballs, often in the narrow streets, was such a public nuisance, since adults participated as well, that the neighbors would close their shutters. [...]

Source: Ernst Weyden, *Köln am Rhein vor 50 Jahren*. Cologne, 1862, pp. 31, 33–34, 35, 42–45, 53–63, 65–70, 72, 76, 79–81, 84; reprinted in Jürgen Schlumbohm, ed., *Kinderstuben, Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700–1850*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 241–58.

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