

A Noblewoman from Schleswig-Holstein Reflects on Her Idyllic Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century (published posthumously, 1896)

Abstract

Despite illnesses and untimely deaths in her family, Countess von Bernstorff's (1789-1867) picture of her childhood and familial surroundings radiates contentment, comfort, and love. The social breadth of her significant relationships is noteworthy. The conjugal family was but one link in a larger chain of important human relationships.

Source

Between the Capital and the Manor. Childhood Memories of a Daughter of a Nobleman from Schleswig-Holstein

Elise von Bernstorff

I was born on January 27, 1789, in Copenhagen, and received the name Elise by holy baptism on February 15.

My parents were Magnus Count of Dernath, then in Danish services, and Charlotte, neé Countess of Bernstorff. My father did not have any siblings and died as the last of his family, since his sons had preceded him to the grave. [...]

On my mother's side, the closer relations were all the more numerous, and besides the grandparents Bernstorff, I am naming here my mother's siblings, not only because they will play such a major role in these pages, not only because from early childhood onward, I was devoted to them in enthusiastic love and admiration, but because the second, my mother's favorite brother, Christian, became my husband in 1806. [...]

My grandfather on my mother's side was the Danish Minister of State, Andreas Petrus Graf v. Bernstorff, owner of the magnificent Bernstorff estate near Copenhagen. [...]

I have only sunny, happy memories of my early childhood. I spent the summer with its pastoral delights just as cheerfully as the winter in Copenhagen. The solitariness in which I grew up – because sisters had been denied and brothers snatched away from me – did not feel to me as such at all, especially not before I received a governess, since at that time I played around the entire day near my Mom in her room, mostly with dolls that I loved like children.

If mother was not at home, her black-haired or her blond Schilling entertained me, two sisters that were in my mother's services, often the valet Wald, whom I had got to know while he was doing my mother's hair. By his versatile artistic skill, he created for me marvelous landscapes made of moss, teaching me all sorts of pretty things. My parents, however, did not rest until they had provided me with a female companion; they found such a one in the daughter of an old family friend, Charlotte Clausewitz, whose father had died, leaving his family very hard pressed. Thus, Charlotte, the same age as me and my playmate even earlier, was put together with me as a nursing sister, while her brother Gotthold was taken in by the grandparents Bernstorff and unfortunately got spoiled very much by grandmother.

Charlotte was a pretty girl, attractive to many because of her quiet, melancholy nature; but she was just not a particularly good match for me, her playmate, the continuously laughing Lilli (that is what I was called in my younger years, to my unspeakable annoyance). She had a very melancholic personality, and she took great pleasure in her melancholy. I remember my astonishment when, at the age of six or seven, she confessed to me with sentimental mien that she liked the dead tree in the garden better than the green one because it fit her mood better.

In the summer, my parents used to be either in Holstein with the grandparents Dernath on their estate of Hasselburg, or they used to rent a country house in the area surrounding Copenhagen, until my father subsequently bought the large estate of Antworskow.

Riding in the side carriage with my attendant on one of our journeys to Holstein, I remember falling asleep and being knocked over. A big apple that I had been holding had slipped from my hand; woken by the bump, I saw the apple roll across the path and can still hear my hue and cry and recall the astonishment of the people around me that I was not missing a limb but only an apple.

Another memory I have of Hasselburg – the friendly-beautiful place with the wonderfully large and magnificent “central living room,” the boldly ascending stairs, and the dizzying gallery – is certainly a rather gloomy one, namely of my first, and I hope, probably my last lie and the ensuing terrible punishment. It was not one of the two Schillings but my grandmother’s lady-in-waiting who had enticed me to nibble on forbidden nuts and keep it a secret. I was subjected to extremely strict discipline, especially at the table, until my mother basically had to let loose the tight reins, which she had kept on me in terms of food, when I moved beyond her reach at the grand table in Emkendorf, and as unfavorable as these rich dinners that took place at incredibly late hours may have been to my health, I nevertheless ascribe to this greater freedom in the choice of meals my transition from a very fussy and picky child into a person who definitely enjoys eating anything. That is something worth noting for overly strict parents.

I remember with particular delight the summer in Rudegaard, whose beautiful surroundings appeared to me even then in the magic green light that to this day transfigures all of the coastal regions in my memory. I still hear the rustling of the mighty forest adjacent to our garden, the forest that inspired a sense of both fear and delight in me. I still take pleasure in the more open, sunlit spaces in it, where I picked such delicious strawberries. My greatest delight back then, though, was my dealings with the old housekeeper Sagern, who went for walks with me and told me fairytales. It gave me such joy to hide her little belongings; once I even cut off the tail of her sack dress, announcing triumphantly that I had modernized it.

Antworskow Castle was very dear to me. Originally, it formed a quadrangle in whose middle was located the castle yard. One wing of the castle was partly dilapidated. The chapel, the great hall, the castle yard, the low, old-fashioned gate that was used as front door, the long, deserted monastery passageways, the narrow stairs, everything appealed to me romantically. My mother’s apartment was furnished pleasantly. From the bright garden hall one stepped onto elevated terraces, where the wind seized me with such merry force and whirled me around. Down in the narrow valley there were plenty of strawberries. For the large forest, too, of which we discovered new parts all the time on our walking and driving promenades, I had a fondness mixed with a degree of dread. One spot, where on dried trees, felled or half knocked over, one could see hundreds of herons’ nests, is still in my mind’s eye like an apparition.

Here in Antworskow, on August 28, 1796, my father organized a splendid birthday party for his father-in-law, the Minister Andreas Petrus Bernstorff. The party was combined with a harvest festival. After we children had crowned grandfather with wreaths, also reciting poetry to him, I hid away between his chair and my grandmother’s chair, which had been set up in fine weather in the castle yard opposite the large gateway. Peering from this cozy hiding place, I delighted with admiration and amazement in the

magnificent rural parade of so many well-mounted peasants and the large number of wreathed floats fitted with leafed canopies on which male and female peasants, jubilantly shouting, waved wreaths and scarves. During the subsequent dance on the planked cartilage, decked out with festive decoration, I was often drawn into the lines of the dancers as well. However, I had to pay for the excitement and the flush from the dancing with the first illness of my life. For on that night, I was suddenly stricken with nasty cramps that recurred at night from time to time over the following two to three years; on me, though, they made such slight impression that I never understood why they cost my mother so many tears. The remedies, on the other hand, that I was instructed to use, especially the innumerable leeches with which I was tortured, seemed to have no effect on the ailment whatsoever, instead apparently harming my hitherto unshakable health permanently. [...]

In Copenhagen, I had plenty of social contacts. In the family of my uncle, the Count Baudissin (his wife was my father's sister), I felt at home; with her, I attended every Sunday a children's circle that met alternately in the houses of the Brun, Kirstein, and Luetke families. At that time, Brun was still a small merchant; his good-naturedness and joviality had gained him the love of my mother's childhood friend, the subsequent poetess Friederike Münter. In those days, he still lived together with her in happy, even tender marriage, and their house was the place of friends. Four lively children were my playmates; I already called the eldest daughter, Lotte, my friend, while the youngest, Ida, who would subsequently become famous, frequently amused us with her funny ideas.

I remember with particular delight one of these large children's circles. It may have been on January 27, 1797. My governess, Miss Randahl, had prepared an excellent meal in my children's kitchen, which I had received for Christmas and which was so big that I, a very big child, could stand in it upright. For two days, the fine and competent Miss Randahl had cooked, fried, and even assumed the role of confectioner, with Charlotte and I being allowed to assist her. Finally, when this marvelous formal dinner was served in the lower hall on what seemed to me an immensely long but lower set table, I felt overjoyed. On both ends of the table, Charlotte and I did the honors and served the dishes; the splendid grandfather Bernstorff poured us the thinned-down, sweetened wine. I still see the tall, noble, and handsome old man before me, as he circles around our table in friendly delight, inquiring about some of the dishes, tasting some things, and praising our domestic skillfulness; I hear his sonorous voice, with which he, picking up one of our small glasses, made a toast to good health: of the entire dinner party, of the birthday girl, of the paternal home. [...]

Source: Countess Elise von Bernstorff (née Countess von Dernath), *Ein Bild aus der Zeit von 1789 bis 1835. Aus ihren Aufzeichnungen*. Volume 1. Berlin, 1896, pp. 1–6; reprinted in Jürgen Schlumbohm, ed., *Kinderstuben, Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700-1850*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 208–12.

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