

# Johanna Schopenhauer, the Daughter of a Danzig Merchant, Reflects on Her Childhood and Youth in the 1770s (published posthumously, 1839)

## Abstract

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These pages paint a lively picture of the prosperous and stable world of the merchant class in the urban republic of the great Baltic port city of Danzig, which enjoyed virtual self-government within the Commonwealth of Poland. In the following excerpts, Johanna Schopenhauer (née Trosiener, 1766-1838) recounts her ambivalent education, which drew her toward higher learning and the arts, but still kept her far enough away to preserve her marital eligibility. Later she suffered an unhappy marriage imposed upon her by her father. Fortunately, however, she was able to develop her literary talents within the marriage, and after her husband's death she became a notable intellectual in Hamburg, Weimar, and Bonn, and the first female writer in Germany to support herself with her royalties. She is the mother of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and writer Luise Adelaide Lavinia Schopenhauer.

## Source

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### Youthful Life and Scenes from Travels

*Johanna Schopenhauer*

[...]

[*Lessons at school, from a private tutor, and from a neighbor*]

[The preacher of Danzig's English colony, Dr. Jameson, lived in the house next door.]

[...]

As I was growing up, Jameson became my teacher, my guide, my advisor, staying by my side, guarding over my young soul, not parting from me until the time came when another man assumed the responsibility to care for me by taking my hand at the altar. [...]

I was hardly more than three years old, when I was already sent for a few hours to the school located barely two hundred feet from my parent's house – twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon.

[...]

Learning to sit still was all that was demanded initially; to begin with, I protested loudly against this unreasonable demand, but no one cared. I had to walk the miserable way to school, though by the second day I already enjoyed walking it, since in addition to me, 20 other children from the neighborhood, boys and girls, were gathered there for the same purpose. [...]

I was nearly six years old, had studied Weissen's primer from cover to cover. It was an epoch-making work in those days, that first welcome herald of an immeasurable series of children's books that have followed to this day and will continue to follow; I had retraced the colorful pretty pictures in that book as well I could, and thus, I had fully outgrown the school I had attended until then.

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[...]

In order that something should happen after all, for the time being a language master was hired for me, the best one in town, since he was the only one; an old, dull Frenchman who had half forgotten his native language and had not learned another one. The lessons lasted only a few months; my father soon became aware that by taking lessons with the good old man, I could only make retrograde progress, so for the time being he limited himself to speaking as much French with me as possible to ensure I did not totally forget what little I had brought along playfully from school.

However, I nevertheless needed a more serious pursuit than provided by my dolls – which incidentally I loved tenderly –, even though I had furnished their household in respectable style, heading it with great enthusiasm; and thus eventually my parents, following the common practice in those days and despite my very young age, had to decide nonetheless to provide me with a teacher. He was a candidate of theology recommended to them on all sides, who assumed the duty of spending one hour with me every morning. The organization of the lessons he wished to give me was left entirely up to him. When I was introduced to him, though, he certainly looked in amazement at the six-year old little thing with whom they wished to burden him as a pupil; the attempt was made, and the lessons went better than both of us had expected.

Candidate Kuschel, that was my new teacher's name, was the son of a tradesman without means though very worthy.

[...]

[Keeping nearly daily company with Dr. Jameson] I gradually learned English, almost without realizing it; I learned it like my mother tongue, only chatting initially, but eventually reading and writing as well.

A girl learning English! What good in the world would that do her? The question was repeated every day by friends and relatives, for in those days this was something outrageous in Danzig. In the end, I began to be ashamed of my knowledge of the English language, and thus a few years later, I steadfastly refused to learn Greek, as much as I wished to do so in my heart, and as kindly as Dr. Jameson pleaded with me.

The aversion to the thought of being regarded as a learned woman burdened my young soul even then as it continues to do now, no matter how many praiseworthy things my candidate told me about Madame Dacier and Professor Gottsched, who on top of that was my countrywoman. [...]

On beautiful summer evenings, when the children had been sent to bed, when my father smoked his evening pipe under the chestnut tree that shaded our perron and my mother sat quietly and graciously beside him, Jameson, who never failed to turn up, showed me the stars, as far as the limited horizon permitted us to observe them. [...]

I also had to calculate the longitudinal and latitudinal positions of the various countries; I could tell him precisely what the clock had struck in Paris or Archangel when it was three in the afternoon here. He was able to tell me something about every butterfly, every bug that buzzed by. Thus, I was learning constantly; I have forgotten most of it, but I got used to paying attention to what happened around me, not staring into the world thoughtlessly. [...]

Meanwhile I had gained, quite unnoticed, almost as much command of the English language as of my native German; I read and understood and spoke it with great proficiency. From the *Spectator*, the *Tales of the Genii*, and the letters of the Lady Montague, Jameson moved on to the poets, and a world abundant with warm, delightful life opened up to me.

[...]

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Romans, Greeks, Shakespeare, and Homer, what chaos all of that had to wreak in such a girl's head! Even though Kuschel and Jameson did everything to counter it, I was surely in extreme danger of becoming an unbearably high-strung and cranky little person, a type of educated young woman. But luckily a new appearance saved me from this; a publication to whom I, my contemporaries then, our children, and in part even our grandchildren owe so incredibly much.

It was Weissen's *Kinderfreund* [*Children's Friend*], which had only just appeared on the scene. It was this excellent, still unsurpassed work that, whenever my poetic exaltation threatened to become overly effusive, always led me back to the element in which I belonged after all, in the quiet, pleasant child's world, which at that very time was gradually liberated from the heavy yoke of miserable pedantry and ignorant severity, under which it had groaned up to then. [...]

[*The society of young ladies*]

[...] I had reached the ninth year, I needed constant occupation and I had so much to learn yet, which, though I was entrusted to such outstanding hands, neither my mother, nor Jameson nor Kuschel could teach me.

[...]

Boarding house establishments did not exist in our parts then, and they could not exist; indeed, I even think that one hardly had any idea about the nature of such a fostering institution.

Separating from one's child to have it educated in a strange house by strangers was something unthinkable to mothers in those days; [...]

My mother, who otherwise tended to give in all the time, had immediately spoken out against hiring a governess in a manner that showed clearly how little she was prepared to share with a strange woman both the love and supervision of her children. "They may learn from others, for I know too little to teach them, but no one else but I shall raise them," she replied to my father, for which he would subsequently reproach my mother sometimes, when we had committed some kind of naughtiness.

In addition, even if she had held a different view, finding the type of governess my father desired, would nevertheless have been a difficult wish to fulfill. [...]

However, coincidence [...] favored [...] my father's wishes for the welfare of his children; suddenly and unexpectedly, chance brought to him fulfillment of those wishes, in fact from a city, from which one would never have expected it, from Stockholm.

Just about this time, a beautiful Swedish princess [...] had worn out her last children's shoes.

[...] a French junior governess, who for many years had lived very closely to the princess, allowed herself, by the very modest dictates of her heart, to be led to the city of Danzig, which was entirely unknown to her [...].

This [keeping the girl occupied] had also taken place almost to excess; Jameson, Kuschel, the dancing teacher, and a dear old woman, who came to teach me sewing and darning fine undergarments took up my morning hours until noon; at two o'clock, I was taken to Mademoiselle Ackermann, where we stayed until seven o'clock; and upon returning home, I often found my friendly Jameson waiting for me, spending the last evening hour before supper there quite cheerfully.

My new teacher had scarcely spent a few months instructing me when I already began, to the astonishment of *tous le monde*, to chat French so fluently as if I had done nothing else all my whole life;

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however, considering my early acquaintance with this language, continued with my father's help, though very imperfect, this was nothing extraordinary, but no one thought of that. Because of the little parrot I was, Mademoiselle Ackermann soon became so well known and famous that in no time she had a choice among the young daughters of Danzig's foremost families. In far less than a year's time, the number of her pupils was complete, of whom she had promised my father to take on no more than twelve, something she always kept sincerely. Besides, she was indeed fully occupied with us.

[...]

At the time, educational institutes were not yet known in our parts under this name; a place where children were sent to take classes was simply called school, but the Swedish princess's former governess shuddered at the plebeian word. A school! *Quelle horreur! quelle platitude!* What she received five times a week in the afternoons at her house was a *société des jeunes dames*. She was the most good-natured soul, but she would not have forgiven either in life or death any unlucky person who had the audacity to associate her name with that degrading term.

[...]

Naturally, our conduct also had to be transformed in keeping with these surroundings; she would not let us get away with even the tiniest offence against conventional decency and social manners without immediate reprimand. Awkward behavior, a clumsy gait, slamming doors, any kind of unnecessary noise, resulted in lengthy lectures, which seemed like a very harsh punishment to us, because they caused us the most horrible boredom. We were also not allowed to omit the curtsy at the door, still common at the time upon entering the room; anyone forgetting it had to make up for it on the spot; anyone carrying it out negligently in haste had to practice it again until one succeeded in performing it more gracefully.

Looked at somewhat superficially, all of this may certainly look terribly ridiculous; it will appear less so, however, if one is able to transport oneself back some 60 years; though the saying goes, "other times, other manners," only the form changes, whereas the reason remains the same. Early habituation to that which good manners and societal propriety demand of us is of great benefit now as it was in those days when entering the freshly blossoming rosy times in the springtime of life. In that way, we feel neither chained nor embarrassed by it, neither fall silent out of awkward bashfulness nor fall into that overly warm trustfulness that is initially admired as priceless naiveté, and then ridiculed as all too clumsy audacity. Even in subsequent times, adroit sureness of conduct both in domestic and social relations puts the more earnest housewife in good stead, helping her spread over her own life and that of dear ones an air of calmness and grace which can be felt though not analyzed.

[...]

Translating in written or oral form from French into German or the other way around, memorizing reading exercises, and reciting the materials learned took up the first few hours; until it was her turn, each one of us occupied herself quietly with the task assigned to her, and this alternation of our work always kept us in busy attentiveness. We were never assigned any homework. Exercises in handwriting and, if there was any time left, a bit of geography brought on teatime at around five o'clock, and as if by magic spell we were transformed from pupils into a real *société des jeunes dames*.

The teapot was served, just as such a society required. Mademoiselle Ackermann presided over this on the sofa, allowing the oldest ones of us to alternate assuming the role of hostess under her supervision; the others gathered around the table or stood and walked about the room, laughing and chatting as they wished; anything seemingly was permitted as if it were really a company of ladies invited for convivial entertainment; only speaking German was and continued to be highly deprecated.

[...]

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[What to the “businessman and scholar turned grey in work and honorary posts”] was his academic times, is to me, though it almost sounds ridiculous, that *société des jeunes dames*. Of course, back then I was still at least ten years short of the age at which parents let their sons enroll in university, but my sex always walks ahead of the male counterpart by ten years. [...]

That *société* will and must always remain valuable in my memory because it opened up to me a new, rich source of joy; through it, I was taken both out of the narrow restricted circle of family life and out of my overly extended world of ideas, and into the most cheerful, sociable contact with girls my age, and yet I always came back from our lively youthful activities with enjoyment not stunted vis-à-vis all those things that had been dear to me from earliest childhood. [...]

[*The merchant’s daughter wishes to become a painter.*]

[At the age of ten, Johanna felt the desire to become a painter.]

A consoling thought [...] arose in my soul then, I considered that no one is a born master, and that consequently even Angelika [Kaufmann] would not have become one without any lessons. I would like to learn; what others are able to do cannot remain impossible for me, and I wish to become a woman painter, a second Angelika Kaufmann; this decision was anchored more firmly in my mind with every passing day; after much contemplation, I also thought to have finally found the way to make the realization of that decision possible.

The time approached when my father intended to meet up, as arranged, with his Russian trading partners in Leipzig, when I finally plucked up some courage, revealing my wish to my parents at a moment I thought rather opportune. More heartfelt, more warmly than I had ever asked for anything, trembling, passionate, hardly capable of uttering my words comprehensibly, I implored my father to take me with him, to bring me from Leipzig to Berlin, apprenticing me formally there to Chodowiecki, the greatest painter who in my view existed in the world, but definitely in Germany at least. [...]

The way in which my request was received became the first rather bitter experience of my life. My father, despite his characteristic vehemence nevertheless so lenient concerning the inexperience and foolishness of his children in other respects, – he was unrecognizable to me!

And even now, more than 60 years afterward, I dwell rather reluctantly on how mercilessly he laughed at my childish-fatuous idea, as he called it.

[...]

[*Pushed into the ranks of the grown-ups*]

[...]

It was around the time of Saint Dominic’s Day [August 8]; in the course of the previous month, I had completed my thirteenth year, and I began considering myself a rather grown-up girl, even though I had not yet broken off all dealings with my dolls: for the sake of my sister Lotte, as I wished to persuade myself and others.

[...]

On a rather hot, sunny morning my mother accordingly stood in our cool hallway, engaged in eager negotiations with a Bohemian glass trader concerning the procurement of her table glasses. With burning cheeks, breathless, hurrying like a bird escaping from the net, I flew down the stairs, right into her arms.

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“Mother,” I gasped frightened, “the Candidate wants to marry me,” clinging more firmly to her; startled, she dropped the glasses she was holding in her hand. However, she soon pulled herself together, the glass trader was seen off for the time being and asked to come again at a more convenient time, the little daughter, however, interrogated for the moment. Nothing much emerged from this; whatever lamentations and sob stories I might have told her, I do not recall them any more, but they did prompt her to go see the Candidate in the room where I had left him, as I ran away in the midst of the lesson. I, on the other hand, totally intimidated, stole myself to the nursery, which was still my actual home, my refuge in all distress.

Not I, as my mother may have feared in her initial fright, but my good *Philoteknos* [friend of children] had lost the *Tramontane*, his head, a bit, to put it politely. The cordial love that I showed him quite openly at every opportunity, the genuine joy with which I performed everything that he asked me to do, in addition my childish way to lean out of the window as far as I could to gaze after him when he left, and, whenever possible, to wave a farewell to him, all of this combined had given good Kuschel – with his lack of knowledge of the world and experience of life – cause for a total misunderstanding. It had induced him to forget that with my thirteen years I was nothing but a good-natured, grateful child.

[...]

About that morning that had put me to flight I only know that the Candidate had wanted to embrace and pull me toward him, he, who had never even touched my hand! At the same time, he had called out, “Would you not become my dear little wife!” But that was enough, more than enough to drive me, as if flying on the wings of a storm, down the two great flights of stairs toward my mother’s protection. [...]

On top of that, I felt as if my teacher had committed an enormous crime; my earlier love for him had disappeared, and I was terrified of the thought of having to see him again, and yet I cried with grief about having lost him in this way.

As a very sensible woman, however, my mother succeeded, without any ado at all, in bringing both the Candidate and me to our senses. Making his wrongdoing and his hardly excusable rashness clear to Kuschel was probably not very difficult for her; [...]

Whether my father ever learned of this tragic-comical aberration of good Kuschel, I do not know; the incident was never mentioned in my presence, which indisputably was the most reasonable thing to do. Both regarding the rest of his relations with our family, too, and the conduct of my parents toward him, not the slightest change became noticeable, which seemed to contribute substantially to his reassurance.

Thus, the incident, at bottom quite trivial, was shrugged off, and it fell into oblivion, but for me it nevertheless had the serious consequence that contrary to the prevailing tradition, I advanced to Confirmation two years earlier than was the case usually. Due to the excellent instruction with which fortune had provided me, the material I had learned had rushed, as it were, ahead of my years. In many respects, however, I nevertheless remained a rather childish child both in terms of age and in terms of reason, while I was pushed into the ranks of grown-ups unreasonably early.

My parents, though, had no choice but to separate me in this gentle way from my teacher, whose earlier services toward my education rendered utmost indulgence a duty. [...]

Probably in no other period or place than in those old free cities at the time, where complete equality was supposed to prevail among citizens has an aristocratic disposition bordering on the ridiculous taken firmer root. It raised its head blatantly in the context of every religious celebration, weddings, baptisms, even before God’s altar, during Holy Communion, and it frequently gave cause for highly unpleasant scenes, especially among the women.

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Back then, I would not have been permitted to participate in the public Confirmation of children at any cost, for it was deemed proper only for the lower bourgeoisie; [instead, Johanna was confirmed alone at the parsonage. – Subsequently, at the age of 18 she married Heinrich Floris Schopenhauer, a major merchant 20 years her senior. Her son was the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.]

Source: Johanna Schopenhauer, *Jugendleben und Wanderbilder*. Braunschweig, 1839, excerpts from Volume 1, pp. 9-242. Reprinted in Jürgen Schlumbohm, ed., *Kinderstuben, Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700-1850*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 336-59.

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