The Childhood and Youth of a Prussian Nobleman in the Late Eighteenth Century. From the Memoirs of Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz (published posthumously, 1908)

Abstract

Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz (1777–1837) gained fame as a soldier in the years 1806–1815. During that same period, he also emerged as a leader of the conservative opposition, centered among the landed nobility, to the Stein-Hardenberg reforms in Prussia. In this brilliantly drawn portrait of his family, childhood, and youth, Marwitz evokes the lives and spirit of the eighteenth-century Prussian military aristocracy. As his memoirs show, he struggled to prove himself as a soldier worthy of his eminent forebears, but his intellectual formation was by no means neglected. His account of his education points to the complexity of the German nobility's cultural identity.

Source

Order and Discipline in my Paternal Household

Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz

a. Autobiography (1832-37)

[*Ancestry*]

I, Friedrich August Ludwig v. der Marwitz, was born on May 29, 1777, on Wilhelmstraße in Berlin, in what used to be the Voss house and is now the palace of Prince August of Prussia. I was baptized by the famous provost Spalding at Nikolaikirche. My father was Behrend (or Bernd) Friedrich August v. der Marwitz, Royal Chamberlain, former Lord Stewart to Prince Ferdinand, brother of King Frederick II., and since 1786 Lord Stewart to King Frederick William II. My mother was Susanne Sophie Marie Louise v. Dorville, only daughter of Royal Minister of State Johann Ludwig v. Dorville from his second marriage to Charlotte Friederike v. Béville.

The House of Marwitz is among the oldest in the march of Brandenburg and originally hailed from Neumark and Pomerania. […]

[*Childhood*]

I was born to the aforementioned house on May 29, 1777. I spent my earliest childhood with my two sisters, whose births followed shortly after mine. More than in other German cities at the time, French was the general language at court and among the nobility in Berlin. […]

Thus, from my earliest years, I learned French and German at the same time, and I was as fluent in one as the other. French was spoken throughout in my parents' house as in all others with whom we kept company. Yet even when I was still a child, a change occurred and German came to dominate, so that my youngest siblings, who were ten to fifteen years younger than me, didn't learn French simply by practicing as children but instead had to be taught.

When I was four years old, in 1781 or early 1782, my sisters and I got a governess from the colony, or as one used to say back then, “a French Mademoiselle”. Her name was Mlle Bénézet and she was a very mean woman who cuffed our ears a lot, locked us in a cold corner in the winter and made us stand at the window in the summer, with our back to it so that the sun burned onto our heads through the glass. Yet she was industrious, taught us tidiness, reading, writing, arithmetic, and also a little geography.

[…]

Generally speaking, the aim of our education was for us never to see, hear or let alone think or do anything evil, but instead always to do our duty; it was impossible for one of us to secretly get up to something, be a lazy student or not do what we were supposed to. Thankfully the more recent aspiration to emphasize mere knowledge and cram children’s heads to the extent that they get a skewered view of God and the world did not exist back then. It was unheard of to make noise in front of our parents, to roll around on sofas and armchairs or to eat in a messy and unclean manner at the table, etc., as many children do today. When we entered the room our parents were in, we paid our respects at the door, approached and kissed their hand as well as that of any stranger who was present. […]

Education (1785–1790)

My tutor, Mr. Rosa, was a virtuous man, a lover of order, who did not find any fault with me and taught his lessons diligently. Other than that he was an ignoramus, however, from whom one could learn nothing by today’s standards. He taught me Latin by having me learn the declinations and conjugations by heart and later gave me Gediken’s text book (a novelty at the time) for translation, and I had to find the vocabulary myself. […] Once we had finished with Gediken, we started on Eutrup’s text book. Six years went by, I entered the regiment, and things came to an end. […]

I learned religion, history, and geography from him together with my sisters. For religion, he had us read the Bible, the New Testament, the psalms, Solomon’s proverbs, Jesus Sirach, and the historical books one by one. He explained it quite well and this was the only lesson where he really contributed something himself. I owe my good knowledge of the Bible and my preparation for solid religious instruction to him. – In history, he read Schröck’s general world history to us and when he had finished, that was after about a year, he started over again. We were supposed to write down what we had heard, but it was impossible to put to paper everything that had been read for an hour almost every day from a work that was so dense already. On Saturdays he did repetitions so we had to recount. […] What I gained from this was the ability to speak freely and coherently and I knew the course of world history by heart. […]

When I was about eleven my father engaged a teacher of mathematics for me. His name was Lange and he was a friend of my tutor who knew only a little more than he did. His mathematics was limited to drawing plans, drawing geometric figures, and calculating their contents, without any argument and that was it! He also lectured me in fortification and architecture. He first taught me the names and context of all fortification structures according to all known systems, and I learned to draw them. Why and for what purpose they were built in this way, though, was never explained. I was supposed to study architecture so that I wouldn’t be cheated on agricultural construction in the future. Mr. Lange, however, dictated a kind of academic treatise on architecture to me through which I learned to draw floor plans, vertical sections and profiles of buildings as well as all about Roman mortar and the classification of columns. Of the things I was supposed to learn, such as understanding an estimate, construction, or the bearing capacity of different woods, I heard nothing. This and reaching the age of thirteen ended my education, for I now entered military service. […]

We also had a dance instructor and since I was not too clumsy I subsequently became a good dancer. – I was not strong enough yet for the fencing lessons that I received since I was about twelve; […]

From Joining the Army to the Death of Frederick William II (1790–97)

It never occurred to me or my parents that I could ever become anything other than a soldier. Nearly all my ancestors and relatives were and thus there was no deliberation of any kind about whether I should enter this class or another, just as it was assumed most decidedly that I could only join the regiment of gendarmes. For about hundred and forty years, as long as there has been a Brandenburg-Prussian military force, our family has given it several hundred officers, and among those seven generals. Fate had determined me to become the eighth. There are few families who have given their fatherland more war leaders. […]

Thus on January 2nd, 1790 I entered the regiment of gendarmes, where both of my uncles had served and which they had led, that is, I was signed up for it and temporarily exempted from service since I was still too young and frail. […]

I had begun riding lessons about three months earlier. My father held the belief that one should learn all kinds of physical exercise properly right from the beginning in order not to develop any bad habits in them. Therefore I was sent to the royal horse track to see the famous equerry Ploen. Since I didn't have any experience at all and was very short for my age, however, it was very difficult for me and I did not learn very much.

[…]

I now wore a uniform and truly began my military service in the beginning of 1791. – I was very short and frail and a bad horseman. When the exercises began at the end of March things became very unpleasant for me. Since all exercise began at the earliest dawn in those days I usually had to be at the stables at two-thirty in the morning to clean them. This meant I had to leave our home on Wilhelmstraße at two in order to be at the stables in the academy building at the end of Unter den Linden on time. At half past three everyone went home in order to dress, and at four thirty we were back in the stables for saddling; we rode out at five when the entire regiment exercised in front of Hallesches Tor, on the field near Tempelhof. This was followed by almost an hour of marching, the same on the way back, and about two hours of exercising so that we were back at nine o'clock and home at about ten, after the watchword had been issued.

[…]

In this year, 1792, the second of the three generals v. Goltz (a colonel at the time) who was my father's cousin, returned from his posting to Paris, where the Revolution was in full swing. He had been there for nearly thirty years and since my father was his closest relative and almost the only person he knew in the fatherland he visited our house almost every day. He was a very well informed and educated man, and while none among us or our acquaintances ever found anything to excuse or praise about the nonsense happening there [in Paris], we were thoroughly informed very early on about the causes and forces of this terrible rebellion of human haughtiness against divine order and law as well as about the lies, slander and machinations of those rebels due to his expert knowledge of the situation there. Now, after so many years, few of those who have made an effort to study the true history of the revolutions are this well informed while the large majority believes the lies of the revolutionary authors and even the newspaper writers to be the truth. It was thus unavoidable for us to develop a thorough disgust for those evildoers. […]

That summer [1793] my father got progressively worse. […] On the evening of September 19, as I was about to go out, our groom arrived on horseback; his laments and the letter bearing a black seal had convinced me of our misfortune even before I read its contents. […]

We buried him on the 23rd. My brothers (six and three years old) and I followed the coffin which, accompanied by the ringing of all bells and followed by the singing congregation, was carried by six landowners, through the gateway and the tower to the church crypt, to which I have subsequently accompanied my mother, wife, and three children (and the fourth since! 1833), while these two brothers beside me found their death on the battlefield! […]

When the testament was read and the inheritance examined we were given cause for great alarm since we were told we had nothing and that Friedersdorf estate had to be sold. The former was about right, the latter was wrong, however. There was my mother's considerable fortune. – My father had never owned any capital or been able to save any since he had to take over the debt-ridden estate, which had been parted among his many siblings, from his brothers at a very high price. […]

After spending about fourteen days in Gusow my mother returned to Berlin and was now forced to economize by the standards of those times. This economizing consisted in her renting out the smaller part of our residence (the lower floor of what today is Prince Friedrich's palace on Wilhelmstraße plus one of the rear wings) and only retaining fourteen rooms. She also disposed of any redundant staff, horses, cook, valets, foresters, and servants and only kept two horses, a coachman and two servants. She later limited herself even more. – At age seventeen I was put in the position of a kind of family father. It did not take long until my mother consulted me in all matters; I supported her in raising my younger siblings, whom I tutored myself once I had acquired more of an education, and in the years before my majority my guardians consulted me in matters regarding Friedersdorf about which I knew more than they did: Minister Voss due to his many state affairs and my uncle because agricultural matters were not his cup of tea. –

[…]

[*1794–1804*]

I now began to make up for the deficiencies in my education. – I studied Latin properly and logic as well as some other philosophical elements, both of which resulted in correct and sharp thinking, and since it was so easy for me I began believing back then that we burden children and youngsters much too early with these things. They are confused and glad not to have anything to do with it anymore and spend their young years in idleness and wildness. Learning should be limited during the childhood years; instead there should be the father's supervision and example, the order and discipline of the father's house, an awakening of the senses in order to learn by seeing, hearing, and participating, and not just by listening to the teacher preaching. Physical exercise and effort as well as the thorough study of single sciences one after another rather than all at the same time are appropriate for the young man. […]

b. Testament (1828/1831)

[…]

Admonishment to my children

I hope that all my children will continuously remember the house they originate from – a house which never pursued earthly goods but only honor, the true and just, a disposition for which there have been several shining examples. I hope that all my children will follow this direction and will always remain in unity and love for each other so that they will not be jealous of their brother if fortune favors him and so that he won't complain in case his siblings should cause him a lot of effort and work. They must always remember that their position is not that of consumers of their earthly possessions but only that of loyal guardians and that they are to leave them to their heirs just as their fathers have left them to them.

Man is not an isolated plant within creation which lives and dies alone, but his families are a connected

whole, which must remain connected and continue good intentions according to the will of the creator. […]

On the education of my sons

As far as the education of my sons is concerned, they shall not receive a so called academic education which only skewers and paralyzes reasonable judgment and the energy which the creator has given Man; instead they shall study mathematics, languages, history, and geography properly, they shall be encouraged to think and act for themselves, their bodies shall be exercised and strengthened and they shall be led to invariably have God, who is higher than all human knowledge and reason, in their minds and hearts. […]

Both of my sons should first become officers, the second one should later become a farmer. The army will give him a much better education, also for any other government employment (should he have to seek it), than classroom exams and the learning by heart of constantly changing and ominous theories. […]

I hope my sons will never attach themselves to a thing as unsteady and fluctuating as money. This idol will devour everyone who sacrifices to it. The usury and speculation with it are an undignified trick by which one seeks to transfer one's neighbor's earnings to oneself or at least a lazy way of getting through the world.

In contrast to that I hope that they will maintain and take care of their landed property, not like fearful and isolated farmers but simultaneously as fathers, providers, and examples to their subjects, and strive to protect them from ruin and keep them loyal to their property, industrious and servants to their fatherland. Therefore, I hope they will also take charge of schools, the church, courts, and police matters and lead them insofar as the law still permits it; that they will not shy away from any tasks and efforts concerning the province, for the towns can only prosper in connection with the province. Finally, I hope they will defend the fatherland as often as is necessary. […]

Source: Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz, *Ein märkischer Edelmann im Zeitalter der Befreiungskriege*, ed. Friedrich Meusel. 3 vols. Berlin, 1908. Volume 1, pp. 3–143, 716f; reprinted in Jürgen Schlumbohm, ed., *Kinderstuben, Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700–1850.* Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 188–208.

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Recommended Citation: The Childhood and Youth of a Prussian Nobleman in the Late Eighteenth Century. From the Memoirs of Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz (published posthumously, 1908), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-3627> [October 15, 2026].