

The Early Life of a Nuremberg Tailor's Son (1798)

Abstract

Born in 1744 to a master tailor and his wife, Johann Christoph Händler drew intellectual inspiration from his early tutoring and schooling, but unwillingly followed in his father's professional footsteps for lack of financial support for higher education. He endured the loveless marriage his parents forced on him, but his later life took happier turns. This text illuminates the material conditions and psychology of lesser artisans, whose exposure to higher culture through literacy often inspired unrealizable ambitions and rebelliousness.

Source

Biography of a Living Tailor Written by Himself

Johann Christoph Händler

I was born on April 24 in the year of our Lord 1744, the son of lowly yet honorable and Christian parents, right here in Nuremberg [...]. My father was the late respectable sexton Johann Christoph Händler, citizen and master tailor, respectively, right here in Nuremberg, my mother was Mrs. Anna Barbara, née Meyrin from Oberhochstatt near the Prince of Onolzbach's fortress of Wülzburg. [...] As soon as they noticed that some features of reason revealed themselves in me, my parents did not fail in teaching me the fear of God; as the years passed, a private tutor was hired for me who taught me the necessary knowledge both in Christianity and in reading, writing, and arithmetic. The theology candidate at the time and subsequent militia clergyman, Parson Hofmann, gave me lessons in the elements of the Latin and Greek languages; in music, my teacher was the late organist at the Church of Our Blessed Lady, also 'malt and barley clerk' [*Malz- und Gerstensreiber*], Mr. Gottfried Roth, who remains a blessed remembrance to me.

God, the Rewarder of all Good, will also not leave my teachers unrewarded for the work they have done unto me.

Now since he sensed a great inclination on my part, at some point the abovementioned Candidate Hofmann expressed toward my late father the wish that I be accepted into an elementary school [*Normalschule*, serving simultaneously for teacher training] [...] and after a brief exam I was taken on as a private pupil to the cantor at the time, Mr. Seiz, in the fourth and fifth year [*Tertia*] of Sebald School.

After three quarters of a year, when my teacher, Cantor Seiz, made a trip from which he did not return, Mr. Andreas Göz, M.A., was awarded the former's teaching post, and I was given the honor of being nominated as a true pupil of the *Tertia*. Our new cantor at the time, Mr. Hummel, was a musician to the core and appreciated talent in this subject. He recognized in me a voice that could be called more than an everyday voice, delighting me with the position of sexton for early morning mass; up to then my fortune was made, and in those days I was so proud of the post given to me that I would not have traded with my father; the cause of this had been provided by a fellow student of mine who had the mad idea to die; and since I read on the funeral plate, 'the respectable and learned...', I was completely infected with enthusiasm, since I imagined becoming a member of the Paris Parliament someday. [...]

[In 1758, Händler became *Primaner* [student in the second to last year of grammar school]; at Easter of 1760, he passed the school's final exam.]

My father [...] talked to me in thoroughly sweet tones, saying there was nothing one could do at all and it was up to me to think of ways to scratch the money together for university. “You have two more siblings, and what would they say if I became a poor man because of you. Choose what living you wish, and I will provide for you, only you must forget about studying.” I asked for a little time to think about it [...]

[The hopes for a scholarship are shattered.]

[...] My godfather remonstrated with me about learning the business, but when I carefully considered the matter that I should be an apprentice at 24 years of age, I did not like it, because I had too much pride for that. Therefore, I hoped for God’s help, leaving my fate entirely up to blind fortune.

One day, it was a Saturday, my father’s four journeymen invited me for a walk on Sunday morning; suspecting nothing bad, I did not imagine that the fox’s trap was set to catch me in it, so I went confidently with my four travelling companions to Erlenstege, a very unhappy place to me. Who would believe that parents could go about things in such a deceitful way, and that, considering I had acted so honestly toward everyone all of my life, they would trap me in such a contemptible manner? Without my knowledge, the table was set; we were served roast pigeons and baked fish, several bottles of wine as well. I was absolutely amazed, though I thought to myself, “when among wolves, better howl with the pack.” The whole thing went so far that wine made the heart jolly, and amidst this cheerfulness, I forgot myself, agreeing to use the familiar “du” over a drink and swearing that there was nothing I would rather do than become a maker of covers for God’s creatures, i.e. a tailor. Upon returning home, there was no mention of the occurrence at all and I went to bed. The next morning I got up with my new colleagues, and when my father came to the boutique, he asked me in a harsh tone what my business was there. I replied quite calmly, “you know quite well that I am abandoned by everyone and that I have no other choice but to take this step practically out of desperation.” “You can forget about that,” he replied, “what you feel inclined to do now is something you could have done two or three years ago, and I would have saved my money if you had.” (But this was merely pretence, for in circumstances of this nature one has to act in such a way, so that any suspicion ceases).

[...] “Now then in God’s name, let it be this way, but I will tell you one thing, I will have none of the blame, for my will is not in it.” Thus, I went to my assigned place and entered a new career, during which nothing interesting occurred. I spent most of my time at home, for two reasons: first, I was ashamed before my former classmates, believing they would greet me with mockery when seeing me; and secondly, money was very tight [...].

In the year of our Lord 1762. In spring, my father got into a battle of words with several journeymen, and this went so far that they handed in their notices to him. They discussed departing from Nuremberg the following Sunday, with me offering to join them as a travel companion; so it was agreed upon and also fixed; on the next morning, I told my parents about the plan which they were unable to thwart [...].

[After four years of travels, a letter from his parents reaches the author in Berlin, requesting that he return to Nuremberg, as they had chosen a bride for him. When Händler resists, the parents write that in the future he ought “not to expect the least bit of help” if a misfortune or illness were to befall him in distant parts. Upon this, he returns, though without agreeing to his parents’ marriage proposal. Even when meeting the chosen one in person, she does not appeal to him. For several months, he continues his delaying resistance.] [...]

[...] [My father] said to me [...], “Your big day is to be held on November 18, 1766, at the Golden Ox Inn, so take that as your cue.” I was thunderstruck, falling to my knees once more and begging in God’s name to grant my wish after all and not force me to marry, since he would see that nothing good could come of it. [...] Now I thought, “in this world you are entirely deserted, but if reward and punishment do take place, on that grand day, I intend to explain the experience I endured on earth.”

The wedding day came, and I went to the place of judgment like a poor sinner, and so I was led to the altar, as I understood not one word of what the priest at Saint Sebald Church made me repeat after him. For I was neither eyes nor ears, and many people who were eyewitnesses then felt sorry for me [...]. Thus, in the afternoon, the meal [...] took place at the Golden Ox Inn, I being more paralyzed than conscious, [...] feigned an indisposition, and as soon as the first coach arrived, I went home.

My readers will be surprised when I tell them that over the course of 14 years I fathered ten children with her; people will reply that if one has no fondness toward a person, it is quite incomprehensible how such a thing can be put into action. However, I have a ready answer to this. That I have never felt any fondness or affection toward my current wife is known to God and everyone. That I am not lying, that instead I have always acted honorably is something even my enemy must say about me. [...]

[Despite these events, relations between Händler and his parents do not break off at all [...]. Since his tailor's trade is not very lucrative and he wishes to "get away with decency from his irksome life at home," in November 1780 Händler accepts – after consultation with his parents and wife the post of a private secretary [...]. Only a few days afterward he is asked to come to a colonel who has brought along a letter from Nuremberg.]

Finally, the colonel handed me a letter sealed in black, though before I opened it, I wanted him to prepare me so that I might not be shocked so much [...]: I implored [the colonel] to tell me, whether possibly one of my parents had died; that I just could not comprehend since I had only departed from my hometown six days ago and left everyone in good health, and now nevertheless this letter with the black seal, which amazed me. [...] "What if, fellow countryman, it concerned an even closer companion than your parents, and if it even were the wife, whom God had suddenly taken from the world. How would one show oneself in that case, probably as a Christian?"

[...]

I was now in an awkward situation that could not have been worse for me. My late wife left me with two children, the youngest of whom was five years old. Therefore, I sat down right away and wrote to my parents that they should make sure that my children would be taken care of, and secondly that I would keep my current room and board, and thirdly that they should please tell me in detail in what way and for what reason my wife departed to suddenly from the world. I immediately received their return answer, stating that my parents had accommodated my daughter [14 years old] with them, while putting the boy in someone's care, for which I would have to pay 48 kreuzers a week.

[...]

[In May 1781, Händler returns to Nuremberg.]

[...] My circumstances in those days were really distressing and deplorable; and my good friends, who at the time knew the true nature of my situation, felt pity for me. [...] The other day, I went for a walk around the so-called Bleicherweiher, a pond, and the horrible thought crossed my mind that by a sudden jump into the water, I could remedy all suffering once and for all. However, my guardian angel instilled me with better thoughts, planting into my mind that I should not give up all hope, since I could, after all, still make my fortune with a second marriage, [...] My mood brightened up at this, I put such dark ideas completely out of my mind. Entering the city quite confidently by Spittel Gate, I visited my sister and luckily for me, met a relative there, whom I had not talked to in years. She commented to me that she had never seen me so sullen and melancholic. [...] Because of the length of time we spent together, we became increasingly serious in our discourse, and I took the liberty to ask whether she had a maiden inclined to get married. The answer was that she had indeed two maidens, though she did not know whether they were inclined to marry. The best advice she could give was to accompany her home that

evening so I could see both and thus had a choice [...].

At nine o'clock, I took the liberty of accompanying the abovementioned lady to her home, where I was not fortunate enough, however, to set eyes upon my future better half. [...] After dinner, we got a visit from the mother of my future wife, [...] Finally, I steered my discourse round to the main topic, asking her that since I felt a matrimonial inclination toward her daughter, her affable character gave me hopes of not receiving a negative reply. I concealed nothing, portrayed my circumstances in great detail, and said that during my stay away from home I had lost everything I owned. I continued that I hoped to God that all of it could be replaced again by thriftiness. I got the reply that though she did not find any fault with my person, the matter nonetheless needed consideration; the step that her daughter planned was important and in a number of days, she would let me know her answer. My bride and I were so firmly attached to one another that no one was capable of loosening this bond. Immediately, I got ready to take inventory, which really took up a lot of time; my fixed and movable goods and all remaining effects were in utmost order within a mere 20 minutes. I also arranged that my engagement was proclaimed on Sunday next, and that a fortnight after that [November 14, 1781], I was married and blessed by the priest's power to the respectable and honorably virtuous maiden Maria Magdalena, daughter of the respectable and quite learned Joh. Leonhard Wagner. [...]

My married state sweetened all of the tribulations I had suffered previously, and truthfully, I must confess that when I thought of my previous situation and then regarded the current one, I was beside myself with delight. By comparison, my second wife was the very opposite, and my marriage turned out to be one of the blessed ones.

[...]

[After ten years' wait, in 1785, Händler obtained the post of a 'wedding inviter' and 'funeral bidder'.]

[...] Thank God, my domestic affairs thus went quite satisfactorily, so that I could not thank God enough. However, just as misfortune had never been far off throughout my life, it was present now as well; my good, worthy, and honest wife was in the years when women for the most part become feeble and weak. God called my wife home.

I spent eleven years in happy marriage with my wife, fathering five children with her. Never had I been so overwhelmed with work than precisely at the time when my wife was bedridden. [...]

My situation was really sadder than it had ever been before, so what was I to do but to get married again. My gentle readers must not believe that lust induced me to do so. Not at all; my two underage children were the main motive forcing me to take this step. [...] I fervently called on God to guide my heart to a virtuous person. [...]

[On January 7, 1793, Händler married for the third time.]

Source: Johann Christoph Händler, *Biographie eines noch lebenden Schneiders von ihm selbst geschrieben*, 2 Vols, Nuremberg, 1798, Vol. I, pp. 1-160; Vol. II, pp. 48-50. Reprinted in Jürgen Schlumbohm, ed., *Kinderstuben, Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700-1850*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 259-68.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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