

Liselotte Funcke, Opportunities for Young Women (retrospective account, 1990)

Abstract

Liselotte Funcke (1918–2012) served as a prominent West German politician with the Free Democratic Party (FDP, in its German acronym) and rose to the position of Vice President of the Bundestag from 1969 to 1979. Born in Hagen in 1918, she experienced most of the Weimar Republic as a young girl, the fourth of five children growing up in a wealthy manufacturing family. Her father and uncle ran a family-owned enterprise that produced screws and bolts.

In these passages, Liselotte Funcke reflected on the opportunities and expectations for young middle-class women in the Weimar Republic when it came to education, political engagement, and careers. She noted, too, the difference between her situation and that of the young working-class women who worked in her family's household as domestic servants. Although Funcke was too young at the time to recall much about the hyperinflation in 1923, and likely too cushioned by her class position as well, she recalled how the experience had given rise to a song that her sisters and brother taught her. During the economic crisis of the 1930s, Funcke was old enough to understand both the dangers that it posed to her father's firm and to German democracy, with the rise of the Nazi Party.

Source

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We had staff at home. Their wages at the time were extremely low. If I remember correctly, a "housemaid" received 20 Reichsmark in cash per month in addition to room, board and insurance. There were also occasional extra payments, for example for spring cleaning or at Christmas. There were no fixed working hours. They followed the demands of the large household with the sometimes irregular dining hours of father or schoolchildren.

Despite these outward conditions it was not difficult to find household staff, since girls in those days had only limited employment opportunities. Particularly for those who left school at fourteen, the only options for vocational training were in tailoring, hairdressing—with very restricted numbers—or clerical occupations. At best most girls had the choice of becoming a salesclerk, a domestic servant (then known as a housemaid) or a factory worker. Many hesitated to work in a factory, however, since the tone in those days was very crude, especially towards women and girls, and as a consequence female factory workers risked their reputations.

Most young girls had to earn a living, however, especially to help out their parents, all the more so if they came from those social strata that had lost their financial moorings through the inflation, but also to collect the trousseau for their future wedding, since it was common in those days for men to bring their steady wages into the marriage and women to supply the household goods.

My mother was frugal, and she had to be. For as a personally liable partner my father was responsible for all of the company's liabilities with all of his own assets. This became a daunting problem during the economic crisis after 1929, since nobody could know whether the company could be saved. I recall my mother slapping me when I requested new shoes for my constantly growing feet but she didn't want to spend the money.

I can scarcely remember the inflation before 1923, but we sang along with the song heard everywhere in those days, which our older siblings taught us:

“Dollars and marks
floated on the lake,
The mark bill sank,
And up the dollar rose.
Along came a great shark,
and ate the dollar bill,
And now the dollar’s rise
Continues unabated.”

At the beginning of 1923, when I was four and a half years old, my older sister Wilma and I were sent to a nearby nursery school. For me, this experiment ended that same day, since I declared that I didn’t like it there as they didn’t sing Christmas songs. As little sense as this argument made in January, my decision to stay home was accepted. Perhaps because they were familiar with my stubbornness about what I did and didn’t want, though it is more likely that my mother was quite pleased that my younger sister was not left alone at home. Later, when my sister returned from nursery school with all sorts of craft projects, I probably regretted having given up so quickly, but I did not alter my decision.

At the age of five and three-quarters, like my siblings before me, I was sent to a private preschool (elementary school) where my parents had already learned their multiplication tables. It offered boys the chance to change to a Gymnasium after only three years if they did well enough in school and received a specific kind of support. Clearly girls were considered less gifted, for there was no such agreement with the lyceum.

School was not a fundamentally new experience for me, since my siblings’ stories had taught me not just the names of the teachers, but also their educational methods and the content of their classes. Thus when we played “school” at home, I was supposed to be the teacher because I could already list the questions and arithmetic problems without knowing the answers and results. Of course I realized from my siblings’ reactions whether they were correct or wrong and could praise or reproach them accordingly.

At the beginning of my school days I heard of strikes (Streik) for the first time. The teachers at the public schools were striking, and the private school teachers could not stand on the sidelines. At first, I thought that I had heard wrong, since I only knew the word “Streit” (dispute). It took some effort for me to understand what “strike” meant.

We heard little of politics otherwise. There was a rule at home not to speak of money or politics at table. My mother also had little interest in politics and if he was there, my father generally kept silent.

But there were sidelights. I recall that my grandmother dragged us children away from the window when a column of communists marched down the street to music. I was also greatly moved by the fate of the unemployed in the early 1930s, so that at the age of twelve I won my first literary prize with a Christmas story in the newspaper in which an unemployed man found work on Christmas Eve. I was awarded a pair of ice skates, but the social question continued to preoccupy me, and I chose it as my topic for the Abitur exam in the elective subject history.

In the early 1930s my father gave up his many economic policy offices and functions. It was unclear whether the company would survive the crisis. And since businessmen believe it dishonorable to resort to insolvency judges, he did not wish to burden the commercial associations. For us children this meant that Father was home more often, but worried and taciturn, especially when political events moved in

the direction of Hitler's appointment as Reich chancellor.

In 1932, we engaged in lively discussions about politics in history class. Our teacher, who probably voted SPD, kept his opinions to himself. The modest ammunition that we fifth-year secondary students deployed was whatever arguments we had learned at home or from the newspapers: German nationalist, liberal, National Socialist. The arguments did nothing to diminish our friendships, but it did enhance our enjoyment of debate. In any case, at fourteen you always feel you are in the right.

I was in the ninth grade when the Weimar era came to an end. I was certain I would take the Abitur exam. My parents did not differentiate between boys and girls when it came to education and vocational training, although they—like we sisters—assumed that we would marry and be housewives. Thus we were free to choose our future professions.

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Source of original German text: Liselotte Funcke, „‘Dollar und Markschein schwammen auf dem See...‘ Über Geld und Politik wurde nicht gesprochen – Leitsätze einer großbürgerlichen Familie“, in *Alltag in der Weimarer Republik: Erinnerungen an eine unruhige Zeit*, ed. Rudolf Pörtner. Düsseldorf: ECON Verlag, 1990, pp. 574–77.

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