Elisabeth Flitner, “A Candle Was Burning on the Lectern Early in the Morning” (retrospective account, 1980s)

Abstract

Elisabeth Flitner’s (1894-1988) description of her childhood captures the world of a solid, upper middle-class German family at the turn of the century. In addition to underscoring the importance of extended family networks, the account provides a glimpse into the economy of bakers, butchers, and housekeepers that surrounded Flitner’s family, as well as the institutions of church, school, and state.

Source

I spent my childhood and youth as the fifth of eight siblings in my parents’ house in Jena. My parents built the house after I was born, because their lease on the apartment where they lived after they got married had been terminated on account of the “unreasonable” number of children.

The house had large, bright rooms, and, in keeping with the most modern technology at the time, central heating, gas for the stove, a hot-water heater and lights, cold running water in the kitchen, bathroom, and hallway, double windows with enchanting frost flowers in the winter, and a manually operated elevator from the kitchen to the bedrooms on the upper floor, which was very useful, especially when someone was sick.

We children did not have rooms of our own, but slept two or three together, the youngest in the large children’s room. Painted on the ceiling of the latter was a blue sky, complete with swallows, robins, and wrens, among which each of us had his or her favorite.

I was never alone during my early childhood; there were always lots of people around me, relatives and strangers. On Sundays there were always twelve to fourteen people around the extended dining table. Public and social life took place for us in the kitchen and the workroom.

The milkman came every day with his rattling cans, the baker’s apprentice in his white smock with loaves of bread (he had already hung the rolls on the garden gate early in the morning), and the strong butcher’s lad with a large wooden trough on his shoulder, from which he handed each household the piece of meat it had ordered. The chicken lady showed up every week; she called us “my little doves,” as she probably knew no living things other than fowl. The ironing lady was busy with either a hot iron bolt, which was alternately attached to the handgrip, or a large instrument that was heated with charcoal.

A seamstress came, who mended the clothes and the house laundry, and a dressmaker; all of our dresses and suits were made at home. When the chimney sweep came, he never failed to make our faces black. At our request, “Leitermann,” who came from the mountains bringing wooden spoons and stools, carved a whorl from the top of a pine tree.

The washerwoman came every morning. We children chatted with her through the basement window and watched as she placed wood under the copper wash kettle in the back of the cellar and then inserted the heavy, iron laundry poles into the holes in the garden and stretched the line. In the morning we handed her clothespins for the white wash, in the afternoon for the colored wash. We sat with her when she drank her coffee in the kitchen and ate a slice of bread thickly slathered with drippings. When she left, she always said: “Many thanks, then.” Once mother asked her what she was saying thank you for, to which she responded: “. . . for having work for yet another day.”

Already as children we were often sent to the shopkeeper, the grocer. The store looked exactly like the doll houses that are in museums today. The wall behind the counter consisted of large drawers with labels like rice, coffee, flour; you could see pickles and herring in barrels, potatoes in sacks, honey, lard, and stewed plums in pots. All the goods were weighed on the scale, including salt, butter, oil, and honey. You could buy raisins for five pfennig, sauerkraut for ten, even a small paper cone filled with candies for one or two pfennig.

One person was always there: Aenne, the nanny. She got us dressed and put us to bed. She patiently brushed our tangled hair and poured cold water over us in the evening, which I endured shivering and freezing, my more robust younger sister snorting and laughing. She bandaged our bloody knees, pressed a spoon against our forehead if we had fallen to keep the bump down, made throat compresses for us, took us on walks, and tirelessly told us stories of poor girls and lost princesses. She prayed with us and slept with us. Aenne had come into the family when I was born, and she stayed until I entered school. She then went to take care of a lawyer's children, was given an unheated garret, got sick and died of tuberculosis.

We followed the hustle and bustle in the house and the kitchen with curiosity. But that is only the backdrop I have for the picture of my parents that stands before my eyes. In terms of background, nature, and education they were very much opposites.

[…]

School was already something of a dream-goal early in my youth. I can still hear a little ditty: "Easter – Easter – one year later – I will go to school," which the nanny probably used to bridge the time between my entry into school and that of my sister, who was three years older. There is no time in my childhood for which I have such clear memories as my first year in school. My experiences are suited to showing the differences to today.

The doctor had diagnosed me as "anemic" and had recommended a stay in the mountains. And so my parents took me along to Neuhaus am Renstied during vacation. It was my first trip on a train. During meals at the great *Table d'hôte* there were about twenty adults, but no other child. There were also no children playing in the streets. Through small windows in the small, black, slate-covered houses, however, I was astonished to see children my own age doing out work: they were sitting at large tables and threading white and pink pearls into necklaces.

I also still have a very vivid memory of the first time I went to church, where there was a sermon about a man who tried to swim in a lake full of creepers and became entangled and died.

Once – the only time in my childhood – I was in a pastry shop with my mother, sitting at a round marble table, with a curvy, gold-rimmed cup of hot chocolate with whipped cream in front of me. The next day I came down with scarlet fever, was isolated at home, and cared for by a nurse in uniform. When I was feeling better and my brother came into my room sick himself, he taught me to read from Anderson's fairy tales.

On my sixth birthday I was given a short-sleeved dress made of checkered calico, which I was supposed to wear summer and winter – but only to school –, a sleeveless black school pinafore, high black button-boots, and a leather school satchel with a primer, pencil-box, and a slate writing tablet to which were tied a sponge and a small cloth that hung out of the satchel.

During the first few days I was emphatically warned about three dangers on my way to and from school – I must not cross our bridge if a horse-drawn cart was on it, for, if horses got spooked by a train rolling by far below, they might bolt; I should avoid the boys from the iron store, because they would lie in wait for the "silly" girls and were out to beat them up; above all, however, I had to be careful not to get run over

by the electric streetcar, because it could not stop suddenly or avoid a collision.

The city had received an electrical power plant only a short time before. It took quite some time before electricity, at first only for lighting, was run into the homes. All the household appliances that are indispensable today – vacuum cleaner, washing machine, refrigerator, electrical iron, and much more – were unknown in my childhood. There was no need to warn me of cars. The first – and for many years only – car in Jena did not appear until 1905.

We attended the private Higher Girl's School that was housed in an old building. It had neither central heating nor lighting. Near the iron stoves it was burning hot, by the window we'd be shivering. When it was still dark in the morning, a candle would burn on the lectern. The children sat four to a bench. We had to sit with our hands folded and stand when called on. For recess we had to line up single file and eat our lunch sandwiches while walking in a circle in the gravel-covered schoolyard; during the short breaks we were allowed to play until we went back up, grouped by class.

On the birthday of the lady principal there was a celebration with theater performances, living tableaux, dancing, and food. The emperor's birthday was celebrated only by the *Gymnasium* [secondary school] – with the "Emperor's Ball." The young students were dressed like elegant gentlemen and had to behave like adults. The "ladies" had dancing cards where the gentlemen signed up for the various dances. The whole thing was exceptionally conventional. I attended such a ball only once, at the age of fifteen, and later joined the youth movement, whose social occasions were completely different in style.

I had run-ins with the school on a number of occasions, because I was used to more freedom from home and took more freedom than the school wished to give me; I would like to list a few examples.

After a morning service, a teacher asked me for a talk "in private" following the last period. In class we puzzled over whether that meant the director, the school inspector [*Schulrat*], or both, and I was relieved when she [the teacher] received me alone. She reproached me for allegedly laughing during the service and demanded that I apologize. "I am sorry if . . . ," I began. "That," she interrupted me. I repeated the word "if" and quickly added: "I was not aware of it." I was dismissed without a word. The teacher was clearly disappointed at having missed the opportunity to humiliate a ten year-old girl.

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