Kurt Karl Doberer, “The Pfennig Was the Heart of the Currency” (retrospective account, 1980s)

Abstract

Kurt Karl Doberer’s (1904-1993) memories of childhood describe the daily life of a lower-middle class family solidly ensconced in the Social Democratic milieu and striving for self-improvement. One can see the growing educational opportunities for those living in the city as well as the growing sophistication of industrial life and technological innovation.

Source

My earliest memories come from the time when I was five years old, which would have been around 1909. We lived in Schweinauer Straße [Street], which ran parallel to the thoroughfare and then out of Nuremberg from Sankt Leonhard to Schweinau.

The high-wheel bicycle riders could perform on this road. It was there that I was able to see this unusual vehicle for probably the first and last time. But even normal bicycles were still regarded with great suspicion by the city administration. You had to have a real driver’s license, though it was issued upon payment of a fee, without a driving test. The license also listed the number of the bike. My father had such a driver’s license for his bike. The number was stamped out of sheet metal, just as it was for a car; it had to be attached prominently to the front and the back and had to be easily read by the police. I don’t know whether cars also had to have such plates at the time, because I can only remember a single car that once strayed onto our street.

Traffic on Schweinauer Straße consisted entirely of horse-drawn carts – in the shape of delivery carts, garbage carts that emptied the small garbage cans, and the sprinkler cart in the summer. The sprinkler cart, especially, delighted the children. With our pants rolled up and our skirts tucked in at the waist we ran after it, letting the water spray our bare legs and sometimes a little more.

On one such occasion I also had my first amorous adventure. A girl who lived on the other side of the street took me back to her house. Her parents had screwed a swing into the ceiling of a long hallway, and there we swung and swung.

My father was a socialist and the treasurer of the Ambulance Association. He ended up as a civil servant because he was dismissed by the Schuckert Company for stubbornly regarding May 1 as a holiday.

He was a functionary in the party, had a full bookcase, and worked on furthering his education in the Heine Club. He was studying history and English – the latter of which the whole family studied with him. I still remember very clearly my mother saying to me in English: “Drink good milk;” that is how easy this language was.

We lived on the fifth floor. The short widow of a civil servant lived on the fourth floor with two musical daughters and a boarder. At that time, when apartments were fairly large and wages rather small, many families had a boarder whose rent supplemented their income.

On the third floor – i.e., already on the fancier floors – lived the Hamburger family. Mrs. Hamburger occasionally gave me homemade matzah. Even though I have not eaten any since then, I still know to this day how it tastes and looks.

The first floor was home to the Geissler family. They had a metal shop in the building at the rear. Mrs. Geissler often took me along to her garden at the Ludwig Canal. She grew carnations whose scent remains with me after eighty years. She put carnations in all my buttonholes and on my Tyrolean hat, and thus adorned I proudly marched home. As you can see, I was spoiled by all the women of the house. It was a peaceful, friendly time.

My father steered me early on toward technology. At age five-and-a-half I owned a small steam engine and a train set, which was pulled by a real engine powered by ethyl alcohol.

The great dream for boys, small and adolescent boys, around 1910 was airplane building. Many were thinking of constructing an airplane, just as we did in the rear courtyard of Schweinauer Straße. Models were provided by the picture series that came with Liebig's Meat Extract. These were eagerly studied. You had to decide which type of airplane [to build], the Blériot or the Farman biplane. In the meantime, we built the cabin seat from half a barrel lid and various planks of wood that were lying about the yard. It was important that the cabin piece be nicely painted, now blue, then red again. We got the paint from the barrels of a paint store located in the courtyard.

The practical basis for this enthusiasm about flight was the aviation week held that summer on the parade-ground next to the Schweinau barracks. The light flying machines barely flew higher than the rooftops as they came in over our heads for landing. One name has stuck firmly in my memory: that of the pilot Hirth, who performed the long-distance flight from Munich to Berlin a year later.

The memory of that time is hidden as though in patches of fog. It is only here and there that fragments of recollection appear in my mind, often unconnected to a fixed time. It must have also been in the summer of 1910 that I was at the great fair on Ludwigsfeld with my father.

From a distance, we were already greeted by the noise of the carousel's organs and the swing boat, by the smell of fried herring, the festive meal of the ordinary man. At the entrance, we heard the yelling of the "Cheap Jack," who was offering something fabulous to anyone who would pay. A golden or almost golden watch, without the usual movement, to be sure, but still wonderful to look at, with an equally golden chain; in addition, cuff links for the refined gentlemen from the same precious metal and a golden necklace for the bride. All of this, wrapped in fine pink blotting paper, could be carried home by the lucky owner – not for ten marks, not for five marks, but for one mark.

That, however, was only the beginning of the marvels, the sight of which made you open your eyes and ears wide. There was a tent, as big as an entire house, in which for fifty pfennig (children and soldiers from staff sergeant on down paid half) you could see mermaids with fish tails, Siamese twins, giants, and dwarfs. A giant organ equipped with movable figures played to lure the gawkers inside.

You could admire the organ from the outside. I was not interested in giants, dwarfs, and mermaids with tails. I was more fascinated by a man who was holding lots of blue, red, and yellow balloons on a pole. I no longer remember whether I got such a balloon. But I still know that jokers, or people who thought they were jokers, were on the prowl. Armed with a pair of scissors, they would sneak up on the happy owner of a balloon and cut the string at just the right moment when people were not paying attention. Time and again you would see such a balloon float away above the heads of the visitors to the fair, rise into the sky, and finally, getting smaller and smaller on the warm current of the air, disappear, never to be seen again.

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