

Secondary Schooling for Boys: Memories of a High School Student in the Upper Silesian Town of Gleiwitz on the Eve of the First World War (Retrospective Account)

Abstract

Gottfried Berman Fischer critically recounts his experiences at a small-town *Gymnasium*, a type of secondary school that self-consciously emphasized the academic disciplines of antiquity. This humanist education stressed ancient Greek and Latin, rather than living languages such as French or English. Upon successfully completing the *Gymnasium*, students were awarded the *Abitur* [a diploma], which was a prerequisite for study at a university.

Source

To call the town's high school "humanistic" must have been a misunderstanding, if one understood this to mean instruction with the goal of free and independent thinking and the attainment of a basic education. The "humanistic" element of this school consisted more or less in the instruction of Latin and Greek grammar. We hadn't the slightest clue of the vitality of these languages, of language as an expression of an intellectual attitude, its logic, its poetic power, and beauty. And so Ovid, Virgil, Cicero, and Homer were nothing more than bothersome schoolwork, sentence constructions that we had to prepare laboriously with a dictionary for the next day, and which passed over us without a trace. With modern languages the situation was quite pathetic. The teachers assigned to instruct them were incapable of speaking them themselves. Hardly any of these stiff, old gentlemen had ever seen France or England, not to mention having any knowledge of French or English literature, or being able to convey to us an image of our neighboring countries. Obviously, for this remote province of Upper Silesia, these teacher-caricatures, who contented themselves each day by covering the prescribed dosage of instruction and then rushing off to their patriotic discussions in the local pub, were just good enough. If we, a small group, moved by our natural, youthful urge towards knowledge, had not taken it upon ourselves to expand our own horizons, we would have grown up like barbarians. Certainly there were better schools elsewhere in Germany. What we heard about the French high school in Berlin, about high schools in Frankfurt, Breslau, and a few other cities, aroused our envy and admiration. But I am afraid that the majority of the schools in small towns, particularly those in the eastern provinces, were more or less like ours.

Nationalism was flourishing here. The house of the Hohenzollerns, Kaiser Wilhelm, the Prussian princes and generals were the admired, idealized figures. Their lack of intellectual education, their disdain for cultural values was almost an official program. [...]

For me it was a closed world unto itself. There was the house of my parents, my father, who lived for his patients and was there for them day and night – how many times the night buzzer sounded through the house, calling him to someone's aid; how many times it was just a few drunks who had beaten each other up; often it was a call to assist with a birth, far off in the country somewhere – , then there was my mother, who cared for everything with inexhaustible love and energy, and my brothers and sisters. In addition, there was of course also my band of friends, who almost daily descended upon my quarters, where, wrapped in clouds of cigarette and cigar smoke, we lost ourselves in the intricacies of foreign

language syntax or solved mathematical problems for the next day at school. And naturally one should not forget the girls from the high school for upper-class girls, whom we bored with our impertinence on our daily strolls down the main street, or whom we avoided because we were hopelessly in love with them. And so these early years of youth were spent in carefree succession, interrupted only rarely by a vacation to the Riesengebirge [mountains] along the Czech border, or short trips that went no farther than Hirschberg or Glatz. The income of a doctor in this region was not great. One had to economize if one wanted to send one's sons to the university in later years. It was a modest life without any pretentiousness regarding clothes and dining. An orange, a banana, or sometimes even a pineapple, were already luxuries that we afforded ourselves only on special occasions.

The circumference of our world was narrowly defined. Breslau at this time, because normal families did not yet have cars, had the allure of a faraway metropolis; I saw it for the first time at the end of the First World War. Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Munich seemed almost unreachable, as far away as Moscow or Beijing might seem today – or even farther. There was almost nothing from this faraway world that penetrated into our world, and we also had almost no interest in it. The fact that a social upheaval had begun to take place in Berlin, that a social-democratic party was struggling for universal suffrage and social equality, that modern literature and a confrontational theater were challenging the outmoded ideology of the ruling classes to create with youthful élan a new world of freedom and humanity – all of this simply did not enter into our world.

Source: Gottfried Bermann Fischer, *Bedroht – Bewahrt. Der Weg eines Verlegers* [Endangered – Protected. A Publisher's Path]. 2nd edition. Frankfurt am Main, 1967, p. 12f and 15f.

Original German text reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914* [Source Materials on Everyday Life in Germany 1871-1914]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 191-92.

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