

Excerpts from the Memoirs
of
Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”
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Childhood & Schooling in Fähr / Lobbendorf

After this long excursion into the area of child-rearing in the schools it is once again time to get back children's life in Aumund.

In addition to the educational methods and adult role models, there were many other influences streaming to us, such as the children's political organizations. I was a member of the “Kinderfreunden” [*Child Friends*] which was the children's arm of the Social Democratic Party. At a certain age I automatically transitioned to the “Roten Falken”, the Red Falcons youth group. My mother encouraged this because she thought it would be a good outlet for me and I would be in good hands even if they were all Socialists. In my class we already had Nazi kids, members of the “Jungvolk,” the Young People. There were also a few Communists! Already in childhood there were certain political contrasts that lead to the politicization of children. At that time, at a very early age, we were already being infected with politics, while all around us so many often unpleasant political creeds were being preached. Quite deliberately, we moved into this world and took part in the spirit of our times.

We were very politically minded and that meant that our political inclinations were trotted out in public through many large rallies held in huge halls or in city squares. There were also many marches by all of the organizations through

the city streets. Everyone marched, the Sozis [*Socialists*], the Reichsbanner [*Supporters of the Weimar Republic*], the Communists, the Red Front Fighters Union, the NSDAP [*Nazi Party*] with the SA and other sympathizers, the Stahlhelm along with the Stahlhelm Youth. They marched just like all of the other political groups who wanted to show themselves in the streets. All of this fascinated us kids. It had a magical effect, causing us to stop and stare. It was not a



The Reichsbanner in 1928

uniquely passive pastime. The time would come when we would spring into action and get into street battles with the Hitler Youth. We, too, wanted to make our presence known in the streets and march with the 'Grownups' in the Reichsbanner and the SPD [*German Socialist Party*].

I myself was subject to another influence as I informed myself in my own special way about the happenings in the world while I sat in the outhouse and read the handy pre-cut newspaper pages. I sat just as the legislature sat in the Reichstages and studied the published speeches of the legislators. This gave me a profound insight into politics which I expounded upon in school and other places. This is a classic example of the outhouse as an institution of higher education.

“God is on Our Side,” this was imprinted on the belt buckles of the German soldiers, even in the “Greater-German Army” of the Third Reich. That was also the firm belief of the people in Germany, that the dear Lord, originally the Jewish God Jehovah who also got along well with the Germans, eventually in the mists of time became the God of the Germans. God was on the side of Germany, even though He did not always grant us victory, still remained for the Germans, “Our Dear Lord,” and was accorded all military honors just as he is today in the “Grand Tattoo.” The belief in the God of the Germans was shared by all of the responsible adults we knew in the schools, the churches, the government and in our homes.



"Gott mit Uns" God is on our side belt buckle pre-1933



The same motto appropriated by the Nazis

In this way we were raised to be nationalistic and god-fearing men and above all, German men. We learned that the German people were the best people in the world. Just being German made you exceptional. Germans were good, honorable and clean, clean in body and spirit, thoroughly decent, characterized by high morality and ethics in every respect.

The high morality was noted in our class especially in the behavior of one of our teachers, the nationalistic Herr Lambrecht in regard to the well-developed girls who had something going for themselves.

It was Helma Hoyer and Wilma Segelken. There were the times when he lightly stroked their arms so very off-handedly. Or the times when his gaze lingered a little too long on their ample bosoms. There was also his unselfish offer of tutoring at no charge. This was done immediately after school was over for the day because it was so practical for the girls to simply stay there in the classroom. This undisturbed instruction might take place even when the door to the classroom had been inadvertently left closed. This all did not go entirely unnoticed, and not only by us kids. Also the adults got wind of it and almost reached the point of becoming a major scandal, but then a two-sided 'understanding' was arranged and there were no further consequences. We got back to work and order was restored in the world. After all, a teacher was an upstanding and respectable personage. Everything went back to 'normal.'

What would this prim teacher have done if his daughter, who went to the lyceum in Vegesack, had been subject to the same attentions? She was a girl we all knew, not without charms, and very well proportioned. But she came from better circumstances and wasn't a working-class kid. That made a big difference.

Working-class girls came from circumstances that 'everyone' knew as a milieu of low morals. These girls learned very early on not to be stingy with their newly developed charms and indecent behavior. It was almost a tradition.

Such beliefs were normal and widespread and not only in the 'best circles.' Herr Lambrecht had no reason to reproach himself, he was and remained an honorable man who was enticed by the immoral demeanor of these proletariat brats. He, the nationalistic German gentleman.

A laudable exception among the teachers was the vice-principal, Stelljes. He was very nationalistic and in 1933 he wore his party pin on his lapel, but he was very different from the majority of his colleagues. This man was always willing to debate political questions with his students, not only before 1933, but afterward also. These issues were often very controversial, but he had no problem with open discussions in spite of the dawning Nazi Era. Naturally, his goal was to bring us closer to National Socialism, but he not only valued our opposing opinions, he accepted them and our right to have those opinions. Herr Stelljes was much loved by us. It was he who read my not very good report from Italy during the war to the class. He got it from my mother who was very proud of her son's report. Because they knew each other she gave him my letter to read and he returned it to her unharmed. In the hands of another teacher things could have gone very badly and I could have fallen flat on my face, but not in the hands of Herr Stelljes in 1942! He was in every way a very 'correct' man who was not one-sided in thought or deed. He was one of the good sort. Beginning in 1933 he taught a new course, social studies, that was taught in the Third Reich.

Even in the time before 1933 there prevailed a sort of military drill that was a school tradition. It included having the students line up in rank and file in the school courtyard before we marched into our classrooms. We performed this ritual not only in the mornings, but after recess also. Once in the classroom the students had to stand by their desks straight and orderly until the teacher barked out the order, "Be seated!" If a student was called upon by the teacher to answer a question, he had to slip sideways off the bench and stand straight with hands at the side before giving the answer. A relaxed posture was forbidden and a repeat offense would earn a swat with the cane or a bad mark in the grade book.

Another punishment was staying after school. The student would have to remain in his seat for a full hour after school was over. There were plenty of effective measures to make sure that unruly children were raised properly. The schools had for a very long time been very innovative in that regard.

During recess it was expected that everything would remain neat and tidy and the teachers were given responsibility to oversee it. The teachers could also designate students to act as playground monitors who would help make sure that all school rules were observed. This did not always work out well for the students selected to be monitors. The other students would give them a hard time. They would be victimized in subtle ways that the teachers would not see, or, more likely, didn't want to see. Maintaining security and order on the schoolyard using students was a very difficult task, because we were always a little smarter than they were, at least in retrospect. Add to this the fact that these 'deputy sheriffs' had a habit of melting into the crowd when something was up.



Gymnastics in 1930

The gymnastics class was always conducted in a military manner as a kind of pre-military training straight from the teachings of Friedrich Jahn.

The so-called military ground exercises weren't done until we were in the Jungvolk or the Hitler Youth. We did very well with that since there we would be marching in full uniform.

On the much-beloved field trip days the class would march in-step in three neat rows with a cheerful song on our lips. Almost always the songs were old army songs. The songs were already well known to us when later we were in uniform during our wonderful time as soldiers!

We learned a lot, we were taught a great deal about the German character, German law and order, but we learned almost nothing about the essence of good a Democracy. In 1933 when we had to be converted, it was only a small step to switch over. It happened very quickly, even for the children of the “Reds!”

Naturally, it is not easy to wrangle a herd of 30 or more children, who are by no means docile choirboys. Yet, why couldn't other methods be found that did not resort to plain brutality or a military drill system? But these were the time-worn methods used to raise children, no only in the school but in the family home. We grew up in a nation that, as a Republic, wanted to be Democratic and humane, or should have wanted to. But in the rearing of children, at least in Public School, as well as the surrounding milieu that I grew up in, the State had very little to do with us.

Obedience was not only every citizen's duty, like it had already been in Prussia for a very long time, it was also the unconditional and absolute duty of all children. They learned this lesson in their earliest childhood. With the help of this upbringing they were already in the 'right' frame of mind to be equally obedient later on the army parade grounds. The sweet young girls also learned that obedience was an indispensable and necessary need that they could and should pass on to their children. Obedience was not just a duty of citizens, it was a duty for all Germans. Obedience was the hallmark of an upstanding German, even if the obedience had its roots in the Prussian-German tradition of blind obedience. There was no discussion, the people responded with absolute obedience, and did so with enthusiasm in the Third Reich. Obedience led to the reestablishment of law and order under the Reich and was truly a joyful duty for every German. There was no longer any talk about Democracy particularly with the observation that Democracy was a repugnant, totally non-German product, replete with Jewish influences and, thus, totally useless for good German character. The last Kaiser, Wilhelm II, had said as much in many of his speeches. If he had this attitude toward Democracy and Parliamentarianism, how could there be any other opinion around, especially given the hard realities of the Republic which just served to strengthen the negative attitudes.

The concept of Democracy as a benefit to the people was being viewed as less so as time went on. It was being seen evermore as a negative concept and not an ideal that was worth Germany striving for. The talk about ideal Prussian virtues was once again becoming dominant. Democracy was no longer being seen as the solution, it was no longer a valued concept. It was more like a foreign body in Prussian-German thought. It was totally unnecessary for the descendants of the Germanic tribes, even though the Socialists and a few other groups still wrote and talked about the necessity of maintaining the Democracy. The popular agreement with the Enabling Act of 1933 was evidence that Democracy

no longer had any meaning for the vast majority of Germans.

My school years that played out in the Weimar Republic and the beginning of the Third Reich embodied the spirit and the events of those times.

I experienced up close everything which the tumult of men engendered in politics, in daily life and in the misery and want that eventually engulfed us. I also experienced the powerful national delirium after January 30, 1933 that affected the whole population, even though a few tried at first to resist it.

There was no revolution, no uprising against Hitler and his Party, there were only good German sympathizers who no longer had any thoughts about Democracy. Hitler did not have to destroy Democracy, it was already ruined in the democratic Republic, by the camp on the right as well as by the camp on the left. The good bourgeois 'forces' were no less hostile to Democracy than the Communist Party. The will to preserve Democracy no longer existed in the Socialist Party or other similar groups. Hitler had an easy job of it and full support from the bourgeois camp. They were happy to be done with the Communists, as well as with the Socialists. It was also good not to have to listen to a lot of drivel about Democracy, tolerance and humanitarianism. The Revolution of 1918 was soon just an unpleasant memory that no one cried over. Finally we had a Reich, a Nation, once again with a new national spirit were there would be no more non-German thoughts like those of Democracy and Internationalism. Democracy sank quietly into the grave that had been painstakingly prepared for it a long time ago.

The Day of Potsdam [*March 21, 1933 when Hitler paid his humble respects to President von Hindenburg*] was proof positive of the victory of the right which was now, finally, freed from the stink of the November Revolution. The Day of Potsdam provided a visual image of the Spirit of Potsdam, manifested by the aging Marshal von Hindenburg and his newly appointed chancellor, Hitler, bowing deeply before this great Prussian. The German right-wing celebrated, full of thankfulness for the new Führer of a new Germany. The church bells rang once again as they had rung before in celebration of proud military victories.



Hitler bows deeply to von Hindenburg on the Day of Potsdam

My school years were a reflection of the events of those times, not only in the daily school life, but also in the day to day surroundings where my childhood in Aumund played out.

I saw the ever growing lines of the unemployed queuing up at the unemployment office at Lobbenforfer Pohl. I saw the growing desperation of the men who had to go there every day to be 'stamped.' They returned on Friday to receive an ever-diminishing dole that no longer stretched far

enough to support their families. I saw the groups that would engage in heated arguments egged on by the Communists and later the NSDAP. I saw the many demonstrations, rallies and militant marches not only from the Nazis, but also the Reichsbanner and the Red Front Fighters Union. There I also saw the street fights that all sides indulged in and the police units that weighed in not only with rubber truncheons, but also with loaded guns. I saw the onset of forced evictions from apartments where the occupants were forced out by bailiffs who were backed up by the police because they could no longer pay the rent. The evicted families went to so-called “emergency areas” and their furniture, if not seized, went along with them to the camp where it would soon be auctioned off. I saw how there were more and more suicides because men could not live and didn't want to live. The unbounded poverty drove these people to this state of misery. Often they would take their lives by turning on the gas valve, using the last little bit of gas in the line before the gasworks shut off the service.

I saw despairing mothers and fathers who no longer knew how to afford to feed their children. I saw in school the hungry kids who no longer had a slice of bread to bring to lunch recess, nor any money to buy milk in the school cafeteria.

All of this belongs to the reflection of my life as a child. It did not merely influence me, it took root in me as a life-lesson that things could not be worse. It was part of the childhood of us working-class kids, boys and girls, and we grew up in this environment to become good people, good Germans. But in spite of the hardships, we were not bums, not criminals and not low-class. Perhaps it was because of our experiences that we became upstanding men and women. Then as now I can stand in front of the mirror and be filled with pride at what we became today.

My schooling ended on March 29, 1935. We were already nearly two years into the new Reich. Now I was able to move into my new life and learn a profession. I was looking forward to it. The new time in my life and the new beginning no longer had anything to do with my time as a child in the Kinderfreunden [*Socialist Children's Club*] or the Red Falcons. The Socialist spirit at this time was dead. The only 'spirit' out there was the National Socialist spirit and I was fully infected with it. I was so infected that I went to my confirmation in the uniform of the Jungvolks [*Young People: The junior version of the Hitler Youth.*]. I was the only boy who came in uniform, but I was not entirely alone in my choice of apparel. The strapping Helma Hoyer, who was also a strapping maiden in the BDM organization [*Bund Deutscher Mädel: German Girl's Union was equivalent to the Hitler Youth for Boys.*], also came to the confirmation service in her BDM outfit.

The erstwhile Socialist kid was now an enthusiastic pimpf [*A term used for boys in the Jungvolks meaning something like 'small fry.'*] in the Deutsches Jungvolks and I greeted everyone with a loud “Heil Hitler!” My great joys were hiking, marching and camping. One day I was even awarded the red and white cord lanyard that distinguished me as a Jungenschafts-Führer [*Boy Leader*]. At the end of the lanyard was a black whistle that rested in the left breast pocket of my uniform shirt. I used it to give loud, shrill commands when I was 'on duty' on the schoolyard at the Lobbendorfer School. On the same place where not too long before where I had fought to protect the Jewish boy, Heinz Herz. And now? Now I had become a little Nazi and wanted nothing more to do with Jews.

All of how that came about will be described later along with the description of my life outside school before and after 1933.

The time in school was just one side of a child's life in Aumund. The other side was much more diverse, but not always a very good side. There were a lot of unpleasant things and experiences that gave my mother a great deal of grief. These were the very intense years of adolescence where I was

not always the dutiful son, but more often an adolescent brat.

Whether the 'good son' or the 'adolescent brat' was more prevalent in this time is an open question that I still cannot answer. In any case there were times when my good side showed and my mother could again be proud of her 'little rascal.'

Kirchhofstraße 1

Our life in the Vulkan Housing at Vulkanstraße 20 would not last too much longer. We moved again just a few houses away to another house in the Vulkan Housing development at Kirchhofstraße 1. This was a corner house at the intersection of Vulkanstraße and Kirchhofstraße. We were on the left side just like at Vulkanstraße. Two houses farther down came Heinrich-Meier-Straße that ran parallel to Vulkanstraße where there were also Vulkan Houses. The whole complex was a large open rectangle that extended over these three streets.

The move of only about 200 meters was totally unnecessary except for the single-minded thick-headedness of my mother. She never felt quite right in the house at Vulkanstraße 20. She did not get a warm feeling there. She did not like the ambiance. For her it was "...a little too proletarian.' She did not find any friends there who were sympathetic to her ambitions. The 'ex-bureaucrats' daughter and thereafter 'ex-innkeeper's' daughter did not feel comfortable in that environment.

In the search for more sympathetic ears for her ambition, she met a highly educated woman with a trained singing voice, Frau Graubohm, who had once appeared in public as a singer. A close friendship grew between the two women, even though Frau Graubohm was married to one of the 'better' salaried employees at the Vulkan and my mother was married to a mere metalworker. However, my father was a foreman and would soon be a 'master' before becoming the leader of all the metalworks. This is the way my mother planned the career path of her husband. She was right to do so because everything was already planned and worked out in advance with my father being the obvious successor of Master Prochnow.

Frau Graubohm lived in the house at Krichhofstraße 1 on the top floor in a very comfortable little apartment that was more than sufficient for the childless couple. She told my mother when the apartment on the lower left became available and both women thought it would be great to live in the same building.

My my mother convinced my father that the move was an absolute necessity, once again yielding to my mother's 'gentle' pressure. The day came and we again rented a large handcart for the move. Friends and coworkers were willing to help and the move was accomplished very quickly.

My mother was very pleased with the new ambiance, no only because of Frau Graubohm, but also because of the Garrels family and also the Lankenau family. We all got on well with one another, even the children. Here I met Heinz Garrels and Helmut Lankenau. At first I sorely missed my playmates in the Scheffel family, but our 'separation' of only a couple hundred meters was quickly overcome and our friendship survived.

The floor plan and size of the new place was the same, cellar, garden laundry room and outhouse were all here just like we were used to.

What the Vulkan director, Heinrich Meier, put together at that time was exemplary. The Vulkan Houses were a remarkable feat of social improvement. It was not just this development, either, there were other developments like Nawatzkistraße, Bertholdstraße and elsewhere. All of these homes were good construction that met the needs of the renters and the rents were much more favorable than elsewhere.

The most important room for all of the renters was the large kitchen where daily life played out and where the family spent the greater part of the day. In the kitchen stood a big stove. In winter it gave out a pleasant warmth, though that could be a little uncomfortable in Summer, but the stove was a cooking stove and cooking with this kind of stove was cheaper than using gas.

On Sunday evening the kitchen also became the bathing room. That was the big day for full baths for the entire family and it took place in the kitchen. We had no bathroom, that would have been an unknown luxury. The kitchen stove provided the warm water and the kitchen itself would be at a warm bathing temperature. On the floor would be the zinc tub that we used for clothes washing and now would be used for regular bathing. These zinc tubs were versatile and used for many things besides laundry.

The first invitee for bathing on Sunday evening would be the son who would be thoroughly washed by his mother. This was the practice until the son reached a surprising older age. Next, father would take his bath. The water level would be increased by adding more hot water from the stove. Then it would be mother's turn to luxuriate in her weekly bath in the same water but refreshed with the addition of some more hot water.

The tub would not be emptied until all of the family had bathed. We felt clean, healthy and fit. It was true and we felt good about it. Managing the water was not easy. We did not have a water faucet that would fill the tub for use with a simple turn of the handle. The water pump was in the laundry room on the ground floor and the water had to be brought upstairs in buckets. This was not an easy job and my father had to schlep water up the stairs until there was enough to fill the tub.

In the kitchen was a wooden rack that we built to hold two water buckets for our daily use. If there wasn't enough then my mother would have to haul more up from below. This was a job that fell more and more to me. I was not built for this kind of work but I couldn't get out of it. I would use my smaller bucket to make the 'water schlepping' easier.

By the way our morning 'bird baths' were always done with cold water! It never hurt any of us!

Following our Sunday bath we could, should and would put on our clean clothes that we would wear for the coming week. We would wear them for the entire week. It would take a very unusual circumstance to cause us to put on a change of clothes. When I started my apprenticeship I had to change my clothes twice a week, on Sunday and on Wednesday!

That didn't hurt us either. We did not get bugs, smell bad or feel unclean. Perhaps that was due to the good old "Sunlicht" soap we used. It was good for the body and for the laundry. This soap, made from vegetable oils, was the daily soap used by the whole family, with the exception of



Sunshine Soap

my mother who, on special occasions, made frugal use of the soap she would get as a Christmas present, "Tosca Soap."



After our baths in the kitchen came dinner in the kitchen. In addition to the good Rama or Sanella Margarine would be gray bread or black bread and wurst. Most of the time it would be the inexpensive liverwurst or bloodwurst. The meal would be topped off with Kathrein's Malzkaffee [*'coffee' made with barley malt*] and from time to time some fried potatoes.

So that was the peaceful family life of those days, no hectic hustle and bustle and no television! There was radio, of course, but that was out of the question for us we did not have the extra money for something like that. Since we had never had a radio, we did not miss it in the least. All of this took place in our comfortable kitchen under our electric lights, no more gaslight.

We lived as simple folk in our simple world, modestly, but content. We (still) had food and drink on the table and we gathered around the

table for conversation. We were still in a situation where we were doing well and we felt happy and fortunate in our little family.

That outside of our little world there should be another world where people had things much better than we did was considered normal. It was God's will. It was always made clear to the ordinary folks that were differences. Men were not equal, nor could they be. Yes the Communists had another opinion as did the Socialists. There was some talk of the equality of Mankind, but standing against it was the teachings of the Christian religion, particularly on the part of the evangelicals. They spoke of god-given authority of rulers and god-fearing duties of their subjects. Martin Luther had already made this very clear and in doing so improved the well being of many worldly princes. His teachings were also a bulwark of the rulers of the Prussian Kingdom, the Hohenzollerns. They took these teachings of god-given authority and subjugation with them into the Empire after 1871. There they thought of themselves as rulers answering God's calling.

These concepts were part of people like the air they breathed. Even when many of the leftists in the Republic preached equality, they were still imbued with the old spirit that for the most part predominated.

The world was the way it was and we were happy with our simple life, even though we did wish for things to perhaps be just a little better. My mother was filled with hope for better times, she believed that they would come when my father finally became a 'Master' at the Vulkan. Our spirits were shaken to the core when these simple hopes and wishes were dashed and a great wave of poverty washed over us.

When our evenings together were not interrupted by my father's absence due to his duties in the sports club, conversation would often turn to local or national politics. I would listen very carefully to these discussions and they only increased my thirst for more knowledge. The result was that I gained a much more comprehensive knowledge about these topics than normally found among the other kids. When my father was absent, it was my mother who would share things with me that brought me to a much more advanced level than my playmates. Also, my mother would often have me read aloud in the

kitchen. My mother was something of an aesthete and she is the one who made me appreciate beauty and spirituality. Often she would ask me to read from the Bible, but often as not I would read from other sources too. I was then and remain a bit of a hooligan who was not given to pleasing God. I was also not an obedient boy and the consequences were often very unpleasant when parental love turned into physical hands-on educational techniques that were often quite painful.

Even though we were a small family there was still a great deal of work to be done and it required a lot of physical effort every day to get it done. It was the same for all wives and mothers in our milieu. They all had it damned hard. Their life in and for the family was very different from the way it is today. Then there was no infrastructure or tools to lighten their tasks. They had to physically work hard every day. There were no automobiles to help make a simple purchase at the supermarket quick and easy and then transport it back to the house. The needs for the day had to be purchased daily and then laboriously carried back home regardless of how heavy the loads were. This work was taken as a given by the housewives who day after day had to do this hard work with their own hands. There wasn't any kind of assistance available to the majority of housewives and mothers.

It was always a big job just to keep the house clean because of the need to keep the kitchen oven hot using charcoal, coal and also wood. The outhouse also required constant cleaning above all the seats, glass and the toilet lids.

The Working-Class Household: Wives and Mothers

One of the normal household tasks was emptying the 'night bucket' or in other words, the chamber pot. In the evening it would be placed in the front hall ready to receive all sorts of wastes of the inhabitants of the home during the night. In the morning someone would have to take the pot in hand and march down the stairs, through the laundry room and out to the outhouse where it would be dumped. Periodically as the outhouse pit filled, it would have to be dug out. The material excavated from the outhouse pit would be used to fertilize the family vegetable garden. This was a normal recycling that no one thought much about. Just like they gave little thought to the need to carry full chamber pots through the laundry room where there was almost always someone present doing their washing. When the bucket was emptied on the return trip through the laundry area one would almost always stop with empty chamber pot in hand to chat with the neighbor doing laundry. It was completely normal, no one wrinkled their nose over this, it was just a part of normal life.

Without doubt the hardest workday for women was laundry day. Every family in our building had a set, scheduled day to use the laundry room. One could not deviate from the schedule. If you missed your assigned day you had to make do with whatever clothes you had until your day came around again. Every washday had its routine that involved all of the family members. Early in the morning before father went to work, he had the job of building a fire under the wash kettle so that mother would have the right temperature to cook the clothes! They would actually be cooked in the soapsuds with the help of Sunshine Soap. There was another brand called Persil, but in our house we used good old Sunshine Soap because it was cheaper. While the clothes were cooking in the



kettle, mother would stand by with a big wooden paddle and move them around in the basin. At the end of the cooking cycle each item of clothing would be lifted from the hot water using the wooden paddle. They would be placed in a zinc washtub, the same one we used for taking baths. Now came the really grueling, hard work. The woman would bend over the washtub with the washboard sitting in the tub propped against her stomach, that is to say with the wooden frame of the zinc washboard pressing into her abdomen. This would be quite painful after a while, but it was necessary if you wanted your clothes to be immaculately clean. Most women developed abdominal problems over time from this practice. My mother started having serious pains in her stomach when she was 48 years old and died from it when she was only 50 years old. I think it was due to the arduous work of all of those wash days. The laborious work with the washboard pressing into the stomach and the cruel pain it caused made wash day a living hell for women, especially if they had a large family.



Using a Washboard

Each item of clothing would have to be rubbed vigorously against the washboard. At the end of each washday the women would be totally exhausted. After rubbing each garment against the washboard, each item would have to be wrung out by hand, one after another after another. Most pieces would need a second rinse and another wringing out. Now the clothes would have to be hung out on the clotheslines to dry which took even more heavy physical effort. It was taken for granted that women had to work this hard, it was simply part of the life of a married woman. Bride, wife and mother were the only worthy goals for every young unmarried girl. Only housewives and mothers were respected and admired, that was it! That was the time-honored custom that women had to live up to. That and to give to her husband, and by extension to the Nation, children.

Women had to expend a great deal of physical effort. There were no appliances or machines to make their work lighter or do their work for them. The pain they had to endure year in and year out was just considered to be the natural burden of women and they simply had to deal with it. It made them old

before their time, robbed them of their health, spoiled their beauty and destroyed their charms. After their attractiveness was gone they became a means to an end, a sort of utensil for men to use to meet their sexual drives. All of this belonged to the normal everyday life of the broadest levels of society, particularly in the working-class.

Among the severe afflictions that women suffered was back pain that was due to the type of heavy work they had to do. The concept of spinal disk degeneration was not in use at the time nor was there any talk of a possible medical cure. The doctors then couldn't have cured in anyway. The multiple back complaints of elderly women had their origins in the wash tub and there were many women who professed to be proud of their back pain because it was a sign of how much they had sacrificed for the well-being of their families. Rheumatism was another widespread illness of women. It had its origin in the damp air of the laundry room and from standing for long hours on wet floors. The drafts in the

room didn't help since the window was always wide open to vent the heat, haze, smoke and moisture.

When the clothes were finally hung on the clothesline to dry, the work began to clean the laundry room. It had to be made impeccably clean for the next person to use it. This entailed cleaning the wash kettle inside and out. The ashes and cinders had to be swept out of the heating chamber. House rules required that the room be in pristine condition for the next person.

Washday began at 7:00 AM and ended after 7 or 8 hours of hard labor. We did not get a normal dinner on these days. Dinner consisted of whatever could be easily reheated. When the housewife was finally able to take a break late in the afternoon, she would reward herself by sitting down to enjoy a cup of real coffee that might be made from real coffee beans secretly saved from brewing on holidays. Perhaps also some butter cookies, but ones made with margarine.

This is how the housewife might reward herself for all of the backbreaking work on washday. She was now exhausted and ready to drop in her tracks, but her day was not over yet. Her husband would be coming home from work soon and would have to be cared for. Then there was always the kid, or kids, who would have to be fed, watched over and put to bed. Who knew what sort of trouble the kids would have gotten into that needed sorting out. You just couldn't rely on those rascals!

Mother would already be thinking about the next day when all of the dry, clean clothes had to be ironed. That was another really hard job, especially the large items like sheets and such. The clothes also had to be folded and put away. Sometimes father helped with that. All of this was hard manual labor which was done without complaint, although there might be some cursing under her breath as the sweat and pain built up. This was part of the normal everyday life of a wife and mother. She did it all for the love of her family who all too often did not show their gratitude.

It should be mentioned that often there was some help on washday from the neighbors. Sometimes the neighbors would watch the kids, feed them and see that the homework got done, and they would do this in their own home. They would help as much as they could and then they would get the same help when they were busy on their washday.

All of this is almost unimaginable nowadays especially for the young families of today. We now live in a time when things are totally different. Life is easier, more comfortable and more convenient. It is normal that the world of today is no longer bound to the world of yesterday. Nevertheless, it would be nice if young people today would give some thought and reflection on what came before, but that is not the case. Only we old folks still think on those hard times, which we would not wish on our kids. Still, it would be nice if they showed some knowledge and respect for how difficult life was then, or so I believe at least. It has been so many years since then and many generations have lived their lives in many different ways. Whether they have done so in peace and happiness is another question when you look back at earlier times. Today relationships between people are much colder, even within families. It will not get any better. This estrangement will continue to grow. That is too bad, but it is the spirit of our time. The spirit of each new age has its own rationale, even if sometimes it is irrational.

As a final word on wash day it should be noted that the reality was in total contradiction to the 'cheerful washerwoman' which was a popular image shown even in our school textbooks. That was a disgraceful fantasy of the writers who dreamed up something that did not exist. However, these images of the cheerful mothers, housewives, washerwomen, farmer's wives and other good, caring women would prepare the young girls for their roles in society as housewives and mothers. Their role encompassed the three concepts of "Church, Kitchen and Children."

There was no financial support from the government in those days to help with the expenses of raising what were often large families like there is today. Having children was a given, so was the expectation that the mother would take on this task without complaint even when they were 'over-blessed' with numerous offspring. The so-called "Golden Twenty Years" were for the great majority of people not very golden. For most people these were years full of toil and burdens. Nevertheless, as the young girls matured they had no more ardent wish than to marry, have a husband, start a family and have children. The not-so-good examples they might have known in their own home did not frighten them off. They always believed that their own marriage would be different. It would lift them out of misery and give them a better life than their parents, at least better than their own mother's lot in life. The young people rushed into marriage. The young girls did so to 'get on with it' since it was their destiny anyway and the young men surrendered unconditionally giving in to their own drives. This would come about through the beautiful concept of True Love which usually had a very short run before giving away to habit and to all of the unpleasant effects of the ordinary. The newlyweds often didn't even know where they were going to live and many would end up living with one or the others family. Of course that would accelerate the coming problems, fanned by the meddling of the mother-in-law.

The big problems with the young couple's living arrangements were exacerbated by the mass unemployment of the late 1920's and early 30's. The poverty hit the young couples especially hard because they could see no hope for a better future and utter despair was rife.

In families with children their problems were proportional to the number of children they had, particularly the girls. When they already had too many children, in spite of the bountiful blessings from God, the girls were considered to be a greater burden. Girls were just extra mouths to feed. Boys, on the other hand could soon be put to work earning money. If they were sent out as unskilled labor they could bring money home much sooner than those doing a skilled apprenticeship. Girls had almost no opportunities for apprenticeship and the prospects were not very good either to find jobs as unskilled labor, even for slave wages. Many mothers thought that the smartest thing would be to marry the girls off as soon as possible and split them out of the immediate family to the extent they could. In spite of the misery, mothers still believed that their daughters would have a better life than they had. The sweet, caring mothers, in spite of the adversities in her life, couldn't wait to become a mother-in-law and a joyful grandmother. To be a grandma seemed to be the greatest possible joy, even in the midst of grinding poverty.

Girls and women did not have an easy time of it in the Weimar Republic, even though they had just been granted the vote. Invariably on election day they would routinely cast the same vote as their husband or friend. Getting the vote had not yet led to free political choices for women, they were still dependent upon their husbands. Women had no sense of themselves as women. Unfortunately, they also had little recognition of themselves as housewife and mother, in spite to the burdens they bore. At that time there was no question of full acceptance and equal rights for women. A woman's first duty was to serve her family, above all her husband. This was her duty throughout the ages and she was continually reminded of that fact, particularly by the pastors in church.

They constantly preached to women about their role to serve the needs of the family and that extended to every aspect of man and woman's life together. It was God's will. It was as simple as that and would brook no contradiction. Women conformed to this expectation and accepted a life of conformity. Very slowly did a change take place that was resisted by the majority of women. The necessary self-awareness had to be awakened, women had to learn how to emancipate themselves even though they would always be seen in a bad light for trying to do so, and not only by the priests.

It was first in the Third Reich and, unfortunately, foremost in the war years, that women and girls began to be independent as they took on expanding roles. These roles led to a greater self-awareness that changed them eventually into the modern women of today with an equal stake in all aspects of society. Though it may seem unlikely, the fact is that it was the Third Reich and the war that fostered that change. A great deal has been written after 1945 about the role of women in the Third Reich and a great deal of it is contrary to the truth. That being said, I am not trying to glorify the Nazi era. It was in no way a good time. Nevertheless, this era contributed to the independence of women in Germany, even though the reasons and basis for this can be debated. And, obviously, war can not be seen as a good means to attaining this end. Still, women were forced to be more independent and as a result became more aware of themselves as individuals.

This wasn't due solely to the issue of the Nazi Mother's Cross, although that did help, it was that women with lots of children were now widely honored. Their hard work as mother and housewife were now seen as having a value both in the family and in the community also. This was something new. Suddenly they were not just a being born for servitude. That this was just a propaganda trick of the Nazi regime, as has been written about again and again, that the regime instigated for its own purposes, is open to question. The fact is that under the Third Reich, women first began to feel honored and respected and it felt damned good. They were proud of the attention and respect. It was also during this time that young girls, daughters, were able in many cases to free themselves from the smothering clutches of their mothers, many of whom were greatly displeased by the happenstance. It must also be said that the BDM and the Young Womens' Troop [*Jungmädelchar*] played a role in all this which the young women embraced. I know that it does not sit well with current opinion when one says something like that. We want to present a different picture to the world, but that image contradicts the reality. It is time now for a true and fair view of those times. That is not likely to happen because any reassessment of those times is immediately shot down by allegations of glorifying of the Nazi era. It is impossible to get around it. The truth is that not everything they did was criminal, not every little thing was touched by the devil. The young girls in the BDM were not "Blonde Beasts" as they are so often made out to be, especially by the cheap B movies in the USA.



The Mother's Cross

A topic of a special sort for growing girls was sexuality. There were no explanations. It was frowned upon as being indecent and immoral. The result was that young women stumbled blindly into their new lives as grown women, and often immediately became mothers and all too often unmarried mothers at that. The 'blessing of having children' was cursed, in spite of the Christian upbringing. There was no talk of contraception certainly not among the men who simply followed their instincts whenever the opportunity presented itself. If the girl became pregnant, then she had no one to blame but herself, she should have been more careful. So said the men after they had satisfied their lust and left the girl to figure out what to do on her own. If the girl was 'lucky' the guy might marry her, but that did not necessarily mean that she would be happy ever after. If the girl was unlucky and remained unmarried then she was considered to be a bad girl who had given herself away and therefore did not deserve our sympathy. She could have held back and kept herself pure! It was really bad when such a girl gave herself over to a back-street abortionist because she had rather do that than bring a child into the world to live in shame. This awful practice could lead to sickness and to death. These abortionist belonged to the lowest levels of society, but many a dear mother knew the address of one and might send her daughter to them if the cause arose. The dear mother may have even used their services herself, perhaps while she was married because she did not know how she could feed and clothe yet another brat. It was only the dear, loving husband who did not change his behavior and even in

marriage pushed all blame to his own wife because the 'stupid cow' did not watch out.

Love was a very hard business, but everyone talked about Love, even though it rarely ever led to a happy life experience. The reality in real life in those days was just the beginning and quick flare-up of true love which was quickly extinguished by the toil and burdens of daily life and left the couple with just its memory. That stormy beginning of burgeoning Love had to last them for a lifetime. This sounds very hard I know, but that was the truth as I knew it from my childhood on in my social circle.

It was unfortunate that the daily problems and difficulties facing a lower-class young couple in those days were so big that they were insurmountable. The possibility of finding help was very limited, often nearly impossible. There was just more and more anxiety, cares and tears. These were the treacherous everyday companions of the young couple who entered their life together full of energy and courage, but then had to endure many, many disappointments.

There were many ways that the SPD [Socialist Party] and the KPD [Communist Party] offered to provide people with a better quality of life, but they could not offer material assistance. Where would they get it from? Still, it was good that especially the SPD was able to sponsor many groups like the Workers Cultural Club, Workers Choral Society, Workers Gymnastic and Sports Club. There were women's clubs and children's groups. The worker's unions tried to help its members particularly in the area of education or training. By these means many members were able to avoid being crushed by the misery of their lives. These devices helped build a hunger for more education and it also assured that the people did not become intellectually stunted. The education did not always consist of a party-specific or Marxist curriculum. They ranged over a wide spectrum of topics covering a good general education and more. In the realm of music for example there were several mandolin and guitar clubs, not only in the SPD but also in the KPD. The so-called German Folk and Culture club was well represented in the camp of the left wing. Many working men made their first intensive contact with cultural activities since their first introduction to them in school. Here it was not a matter of required learning, but of the love of learning.

We children in the Socialist youth organizations were not raised to be bloodthirsty revolutionaries, but rather with the ideals of Humanism and tolerance. That we were class-conscious was not altogether a bad thing. It meant that we were aware of the low level of our class and made us want to climb up and take a respected place in society. We wanted to finally be on an equal footing with all of the other people in our nation. After all, we were a part of it, too.

Socialism

The class-consciousness of the workers which later came to be so frowned upon, was not so much about enmity against employers and business owners driving toward bloody conflict, but rather this class-consciousness was more about the worker pushing toward finally being free men and not just seen as a member of the underclass. They did not want to be just a means for the upper class to further enrich themselves and they wanted a living wage and better treatment. They wanted their portion of the profits that they helped create instead of it all going to the business owners. Class-consciousness was a powerful weapon that started them on the way to improving their lot in life. It was not about balled fists and loud threats. Not the least of their demands were for a level of education that would open opportunities to advance in society. These ideas were more in accord with the Social Democrats as opposed to the Communists who were much more willing push class warfare into a bloody conflict

with the ultimate goal of a worldwide armed revolution led by the Soviet Union. That was the primary difference between the two political parties.



Alfred Hugenberg

Unfortunately, it was the case that the flow of information to the workers left much to be desired. The party newspapers were very one-sided, totally centered on the strict party-line. Outside of the party newspapers around Vegesack there was the daily newspaper, the North German People's Newspaper, published by Rohr Publishers in the Rohrstraße in Vegesack. The newspaper did a good job of being thorough and objective in covering local events, but for political news they relied on reporting bureaus. These news bureaus were to a large part owned by the Hugenberg Organization. The organization had a distinct German Nationalist leaning and controlled nearly all of the major newspapers in the Weimar Republic. Herr Hugenberg [*Alfred Hugenberg 1865-1951*] had built an empire that reflected his opinions, his 'correct' view of the world. His influence reached into the smallest newspapers and right into each tiny corner of the Republic. Among his holdings was the largest

film production company, UFA. The Universum Film AG [*Universal Film Co.*] was founded toward the end of World War I at the behest of von Ludendorff as a propaganda tool. He wanted to use it to spread German propaganda in the neutral nations. The company really did not do very much in this department at the time, but the company survived and was eventually bought by Mr. Hugenberg who incorporated it into his media empire.

These sources of information were not likely to give workers a true picture of the real world much less a true picture of the political situation in the Republic. But there were no other sources of information, the radio was not very widespread, especially not among the working-class. There was nothing for the workers but the party newspaper and the daily newspaper. There was a great lack of the much needed objective news reporting. The bourgeois press was very subjective in its reporting and full of attacks on all opposing viewpoints.

After the First World War in the working-class there was a true hunger for information. Where there were no newspapers there would be intense, lively debates within groups or in public with people of opposing opinions. These discussions didn't take place only as public events, but also in the factories. During the time of high unemployment they would take place in front of the unemployment office and often degenerated into scuffles that no longer had anything to do with the hunger for information.

There was a hunger for information outside of the usual sources of mass information. Much use was made of lending libraries maintained by the parties and the unions. There was less and less of this once the great waves of poverty washed over us. People lost their interest in literature, not only because of their own grinding poverty, but because they developed an unhealthy taste for the inflammatory speeches you could hear everywhere in public.

I was a member of the Social Democratic Young Peoples Organization, first in the group for the little kids, the Kinderfreunde [*Child Friends*]. As I said before, my mother encouraged me to join, not so much out of Socialist zeal, but more to put me somewhere that might serve to bridle my wild tendencies. At any rate it turned out to be a very different organization than I was expecting. I was pleased with it even when the Child Friends seemed a little to childish to me. When I moved on to the Red Falcons all of that changed. I felt very comfortable there and that began my first feeling of belonging to the Social Democrats. This was due in great part to the efforts of the Paulenz family from

Aumund. The whole family, father, mother and children, were enthusiastic and active in caring for the children in this youth group. I struck up a close friendship with the daughter and her brother, Karl Paulenz. Their older brother was a leader in the SAJ [*Sozialistische Arbeiter-Jugend: Socialist Worker Young Peoples Club*]. The Red Falcons were part of that larger organization.

I have written about ordinary life in our family in all of its fine detail. I described our family during a period when things were relatively good and peaceful not only for us but also in our surroundings. Unfortunately, a very unpleasant situation developed for the family that was very stressful for everyone. I will describe that now even though it is still difficult for me to talk about it. However, it belongs to the truth and I have resolved to speak the whole truth in these writings.

The fairly normal lives of the working population in Bremen and Vegesack, especially the AG Weser shipyard workers and the Bremer Vulkan continued on until 1929. Then came endless misery and an ever-increasing unemployment.

The people were about to fall into a bad situation of such a huge magnitude as they could never have imagined. It is true that the 1920's were hard years, but business conditions were good even if the workers were not getting a fair wage at the time. Nevertheless, everyone had hope that they could better their circumstances with just a little more effort. One reason for the hopeful outlook was the apparently decent business in the shipyards including the construction of two cruise ships designed to be the biggest and best of their class on the high seas. They were two ships of similar design. One was the "Europa" being built in Hamburg by Blohm & Voss. The other was the "Bremen" under construction in the AG Weser in Bremen.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-09397
Foto: o. Ang. | März 1930

The Europa and The Bremen in March of 1930