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No More Nationalism:
Giessen's Primary Schools

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Giessen, Germany
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Six years ago a U.S. State Department education team wrote a report on German schools. It summarized the problems of American Zone occupation officials who were trying to reshape the German school system with these words:

"For generations the schools and universities of Germany have been a breeding ground of nationalism....Despite the reforms enacted in the days of the Weimar Republic and since the fall of Hitler, nationalism, authoritarianism, and traditionalism pervade the German school system.... Thus far, German politicians, educators, and others with influence in the field of education have been able to resist basic school reforms...."

These remarks are quoted at the beginning of a lengthy and rather alarming article entitled "Education - For What?" It appeared under a pseudonym, Robert Lewison, in This Is Germany, (New York, William Sloane Associates, 1950). The author visited a number of schools and several teacher training schools before adding his own conclusions to those of the occupation officials. Briefly, Lewison sums his impressions of post-war German schools this way: Youngsters are being taught German nationalism, hatred for the Allies, and the old Nazi theme about Lebensraum Teachers, at least 60 per cent of them former Nazis, are instructing students that Nazism was "a good idea badly carried out." Germany's present difficulties are held to be the fault of other countries - not Germany.

Two weeks ago I began visiting Giessen's four elementary schools to see what was going on at this level of German education and to find out whether Lewison's views had substance here.

First I met City School Superintendent Adam Scheurer, a short, skinny man in his fifties, with a long nose, big ears, and eyebrows that point at each other. He was no Nazi. The Gestapo saw to it that he was kicked out of his teaching job here in 1937 - because his wife was Jewish. Later, Mrs. Scheurer was snatched by the Nazis and put in concentration camps. She was one of the lucky few who survived the war. Dr. Scheurer, meanwhile spent World War II working at a bench in a Frankfurt factory. Of the Nazis he says: "They took my wife, my job, my house, and left me only my life." In 1945, Scheurer was made superintendent here. He inherited three totally destroyed schools and one damaged school.

Dr Scheurer introduced me to the director and assistant director of the Schiller School, Heinrich Frank and Karl Häuser. Both are 62. Both fought in the trenches during World War I. Both are beloved by teachers and students alike. Frank has the face of an intellectual. In 1942 he wrote a novel about the Nazi regime that was suppressed by the Gestapo. Asked about the Third Reich, he quoted the German playwright, Dietrich Grabbe: "First we must smash ourselves to pieces before we know what we are capable of."

The Schiller School was among the three Giessen elementary schools pulverized by bombs in the cataclysmic 1944 air raid. Gradually rebuilt, it is practically a brand new school today. Like all Giessen schools it is jammed.... 1,200 students in 20 classrooms. Its 30 teachers have classes as large as 50. Few teachers have less than 40 pupils. This institution combines two types of schools - the Volkschule and the Mittelschule. The combination is rare at present in Germany. Only two cities in the State of Hesse are practicing it - Giessen and Darmstadt. The Volksschule has classes from first through eighth grade. The Mittelschule has classes from fifth through tenth grade. During the German schoolchild's fourth grade year he takes a series of exams lasting eight days. These exams decide on the basis of ability whether the pupil will remain in the Volksschule, go on to the more advanced Mittelschule, or change to one of the "upper" schools which pave the way to the universities. There is a lot of controversy about the virtues and faults of this splitting up of students at the age of 10. Some say the system is archaic and undemocratic. Others defend it as the best way to educate according to ability. Back in 1950, Lewison described the system as medieval. He said it furthers the "caste" system and strengthens the Middle Ages concept of stratification of society. At first glance, I am inclined to agree. But there are strong arguments for the system. More about that later.

Lewison found other ominous elements in post-war German schools. Among these were: lack of individuality in students, "teaching the subject instead of the child," excessively strict discipline (whipping in some cases), and lack of student initiative. I looked in vain for these in Giessen's elementary schools. Here are some classroom impressions from the Schillerschule and the Pestalozzischule:

Raimund Domogalle is a 35-year-old fourth grade teacher. A native of Breslau, he is an expellee from territory now belonging to Poland. He and his wife, an expellee from Sudetenland, have one child. A fine-featured gentle-mannered person, Domogalle is a veteran of the Russian campaigns. When school is out he directs amateur theatre productions, writes poetry (some published), and short stories. He is working on a psychological novel. Among the nine subjects he teaches to his 10-year-olds is local (Hessian) history and geography. At one point during the hour he asked the class, "What lies east of Hesse?" The answers came quickly - "The Iron Curtain," "The Russian Zone," "The East Zone." Domogalle explained: "This is part of our homeland, but it belongs to another world...." In the following hour, German, the teacher worked at the blackboard. Once he dropped a piece of chalk. Three boys rushed to pick it up for him. Another brushed some chalk dust off Domogalle's jacket. It wasn't hard to tell they liked him immensely and regarded him as their friend. I asked him about this later. "Yes," he said, "in the old days, if a teacher slipped on the floor or dropped something, the whole class would burst out laughing. We have overcome that. Now they jump up to help." Domogalle has one of the smaller classes - 38 pupils. He showed how he had

arranged the schooldesks in a semicircle "rather than in military ranks... that way I am closer to them." He added: "We're still in the experimental stage with progressive methods. We don't whip children as before; we don't insult them as teachers used to do. We try to teach the child to think for himself. We try to work in groups as much as possible. The teacher should be an adviser, a helper. Before, it was a matter of strained relations between teacher and pupil."

Erwin Lich has the rosy face of cherub and the tousled hair of a mad composer. He is 31, and commutes daily to Giessen from his native Londorf, a village about 15 miles from here. He fought in Finland during the last year of the war. After a year as a prisoner of war he studied at the Institute for International Educational Research in Frankfurt. In his spare time he is working up a paper on "kindergarten education as a social influence on children," for one of the Institute seminars. His main interests are psychology and music. His third graders were reading one of the Grimm fairy tales during their lesson in German. The story was the one about the elves who help the poor shoemaker become prosperous. Lich had three of his pupils stand up before the class and tell the contents of the story. He told them to act out part of it. They did. Then we all moved into the Schiller School's diminutive auditorium. Lich picked nine other pupils to make a play out of the story: three elves, the shoemaker and wife, a narrator, and three light technicians. Lich sat down at the piano and played background music. "It was dawn," began the narrator. The stage lights suddenly switched to red. Lich played "waking-up music". For the night scenes, the "technicians" switched on a dim green light. Lich played "elf music" and the three elves came running out in a crouch. They leaped on stage and performed shoemaking motions. The rest of the class was enchanted. So was I. This was a masterpiece of improvisation; and it seemed like the best sort of teaching. After class, Lich said: "I think it's much more comfortable to teach this way than in the old authoritarian manner in which I was taught."

From his wild gestures, vivid expressions, and enthusiasm, you might take Nikolaus Weidenbörner for a Latin. He has a wide smile, irongray hair, and warts. When his Mittelschule-6 (tenth grade) class is lagging he cries: "Faites Attention!" or "Toute de suite," or "Avanti!" A native Hessian, Weidenbörner is 45. He says his Latin mannerisms stem from a student trip to Italy in 1935 and combat duty in France during the war. Before World War II he taught electronics at a professional school. He was not a Party member. Weidenbörner teaches algebra, literature, social studies, and history with equal skill and energy. He and the class take five or 10 minute pauses before tearing into a new subject. During the history hour, Weidenbörner asked various members of the class for definitions - of Europe, in political and geographic senses, of dialectical materialism, of culture, and of Weltanschauung. The answers were prompt and original. Students were not afraid to contradict each other or Weidenbörner. In a discussion of communism, the teacher asked what cultural significance the Russian Revolution had. A student answered: "Russia de-Europeanized herself and turned her face to the East." Weidenbörner asked what

defences the West has against communism "besides economic strength and religion." A 17-year-old boy said: "Freedom and self-reliance." Weidenbörner commented, "You're all ready for a globetrot." Later, in the German literature hour, the class discussed "Maria Stuart", the masterpiece written by the namesake of the school, Friedrich Schiller. Weidenbörner said he thought the relationship in the play between Maria and Mortimer was "strange." "Why strange," said Helga, a pert 16-year-old. "He loved her and she didn't love him," she said indignantly. What is Weidenbörner's greatest concern as a teacher? "Character building - to make citizens out of my pupils. That is what is wanting in us Germans. We don't make up our own minds enough in politics and economics. Before the war we were always ordered what to think. The (pre-war) German school system failed to prepare more than one generation adequately. We didn't know what a dictator was. I try to teach my students now to have respect for plants, animals, human beings, and God."

Fräulein Katherine Hotz has the Mittelschule-5 (ninth grade) class at the Pestalozzi School. She is a plump, pleasant-faced Hessian of 53. Eleven years after she began teaching in Hesse, Hitler came to power. The Nazis demanded that she join the Party. She said no. So the Party decided to teach her a lesson. They moved her away from Pestalozzischule. They moved her five times in the next 12 years - to successively smaller towns. "I ended up in Vogelsberg" (the sticks), she says today. After the war the State moved her back to the Pestalozzi School. At the time, the school was "a rock quarry", according to one observer. Now it is rebuilt - spanking new. Fraulien Hotz teaches English and French with finesse. During the English hour her students asked me questions about America. Their diction and grammar were excellent. They wanted to hear about jazz and the Negro problem in the South. Later, I asked them about what they wanted to do after graduation. Most of the girls want to become secretaries, one a stewardess, and one a watchmaker. They want to marry when they are 21 to 25. The boys expect to go into engineering, machine tooling, and aviation. They will marry when they are about 25 - with girls two or three years younger. I asked why. One tall youth said: "If she's younger she'll last longer." How do they feel about serving in the new German Army? All but one looks forward to serving. This was in contrast to what German youths were saying three years ago. Their reasons: "The army is good for discipline," and "We need soldiers for defense."

At the same school is 54-year-old Otto Strauch; son of a forester, former school principal, former member of the Nazi Sturm Abteilung (the brownshirts or storm troopers), and wounded while defending Hitler's Festung Europa in 1944. Strauch says he joined the S.A. because his school superintendent at the time (not in Giessen) recommended it to him. The superintendent was a District Leader of the party. "I had been out or work," said the bald, moon-faced Strauch. "I thought this was the party of the future. I didn't know what it was leading to. When Hitler attacked Poland I said to my wife, 'That's the end of National Socialism.'" Strauch was a Nazi. He is also a good teacher. His Mittelschule-1 (fifth grade) class was having its first year of drawing and painting. Strauch gives them a theme such as: "Happy New Year," or "Skating," or "Fastnacht" (Shrove Tuesday - the big pre-lenten holiday in this area). The children paint what occurs to them in water colors.

When they are finished the class criticizes each work. Some of the drawing was rather flat and unimaginative, but other paintings were quite good. Says Strauch: "They must do it all for themselves - they find their own subjects and develop them."

One of the things that bothered Lewison in German schools was a rigid obedience enforced on pupils - a sort of barracks-type discipline. He argues for individuality such as American students possess - even to the extent of throwing spitballs. No spitballs were thrown in Giessen's schools this week, but one sixth grader spread some sneezing power around in Herr Otto Bork's classroom. After half a dozen sneezes from pupils, Bork stopped the lesson to say: "It doesn't bother me - my nose got dried out by the desert when I was with Rommel in Africa. Now who did it? Be honest." A darkhaired girl timidly raised her hand. Bork continued the lesson. After class he gave her a short, firm lecture. That was the sternest discipline I saw meted out.

Here are some more fleeting impressions from the schools: short prayers at the beginning and end of each school day; slacks and sweaters on most of the girls; shorts on only the younger boys; a good current events newspaper distributed free to students; classes in carpentry, sewing, cooking, typing, and singing; an excellent school chamber orchestra; dramatic productions done by each class teacher; sports competition between schools; aptitude testing for graduating classes and professional advisory services, and a psychology clinic for pupils with family and schoolwork problems.

The question of German textbooks was a matter of special concern to Allied education authorities during the occupation. Nazi books were ground into pulp. New books were written, published, and distributed. Did the schools use them? Lewison says yes. But he adds that nationalistic teachers "sabotaged" the new history books - among others - by making up their own lecture material from banned Nazi-era books.

This is what students are reading and discussing in Giessen's elementary schools - without sabotage: (from a fifth grade social science book) "Wherever we look, we see the distress of people who were bombed out and of refugees, the distress of the unemployed and the war-wounded, the homeless, the widows, the orphans, poverty and sickness - distress which is our own fault....Peaceful community life demands that everyone respect others and have tolerance for others.... What happens to a decent people when they are intolerant is clear to us when we reflect on the experiences of 1933-45. We read of terrible cruelties to innocent human beings of all ages. In unconscionable ways, many of our fellow citizens were killed in the gaschambers of concentration camps and executed by other horrible means. Through mass crimes which are incomprehensible to us today, thousands of families were cast into unspeakable misery, and the name of Germany was brought to shame." The essay goes on to describe the bestial handling of Jews by the Nazis

and other aspects of terror in the Third Reich. The companion volume to this book, entitled "In Service of the Community" is for seventh graders. It is an excellent text on community life - from family to republic. It has such essay questions as "Why must nationalism be overcome?" and "What are my rights as a citizen?" As for history, tenth graders work with a text called "Man in Changing Times." It is a general education-type survey of modern history. The book has factual, clearly written essays on the Reichstag Fire, the invasion of Poland, the London Blitz, Stalingrad, the mass murders of Jews and Slavs, and the collapse of Hitler's Reich. Even the ugliest incidents in recent German history are not skipped. These essays make it clear, however, that there were Germans who were Nazis and Germans who were not. Social science, by the way, is a new thing in German education. Before the war only a few professional schools gave "civics" courses. In Hessian schools social science is part of the core of the post-war education plan.

The one point in elementary education where Giessen's teachers and school officials seem to disagree is the separation of pupils at the end of the fourth Volksschule year. As a rule the older teachers seem to prefer the present system, while the younger ones would like a change. Following are some opinions on both sides: Erwin Lich, "From an intellectual point of view the split comes too late - from a social point of view it's too early." Raimund Domogalle, "It's too early to be able to judge the abilities of the children. The system is medieval; it maintains class consciousness." Nikolaus Weidenbörner, "You can train them better with this early division." Adam Scheurer, "It is good this way - we keep an eye on the 'late developers' and transfer them to higher schools if they can handle it."

Superintendent Scheurer also pointed out that there is a certain amount of flexibility in the Hessian school system. He cites the so-called "second-way" by which a Volksschule graduate may eventually go to a university via professional and trade schools. Since the war the State has encouraged this with scholarships, aid to needy families who have "second-way" students, and free tuition. Also being considered is a ninth school year for Volksschule pupils.

One area where Giessen's schools can improve is in relations with parents, according to Dr. Scheurer. "Before the war," he says, "parents thought that because the state ordered children to attend school the state had all the responsibility for their education. That was a time when it was said our schools educated 'subjects'. We tried to interest parents more in the schools after 1918. But we didn't do enough. Many parents even today deliver their children to the schools like parcels to the postoffice....Before the war we had no Elternabende (parent evenings - like P.-T.A. meetings). But it is getting better now."

I went to one Elternabend at the Schiller School. About 50 parents came to hear Herr Domogalle give a talk entitled: "Are Today's Schoolchildren Overworked?" He made some interesting points. Overcrowded classrooms are hard on teacher and pupil, he said. "With 40 or 50 pupils you just throw the stuff at them and hope they catch it." Teachers

are overloaded with extras - time-consuming administrative work and "too many commemorative days" such as Arbor Day, Constitution Day, Unity Day, and Safety Day. Civilization is more and more demanding on children, said Domogalle. Films, radio, traffic, television - everything is speeded up. The student is taught by these media to grasp things quickly - superficially. "It is harder for them to concentrate," he said, "if you take too long on one subject they go into a dream-stare." Is junior getting too much homework? No, says Domogalle. "Students who can't do an hour's homework in an hour are usually the ones who study with the radio on." I didn't tell Domogalle that some American school-children study by television.

There was more than an hour of discussion after the lecture. One parent, a vigorous baldheaded man in a windbreaker had this to say: "One thing I think we ought to keep in mind - the child is going to become an adult. We should not isolate children in separate rooms. They should belong in the family rooms. We must draw the child into the adult world."

Yesterday I asked Dr. Scheurer what his main problems were and what he anticipated for the future in Hessian schools. He said: "We will of course be developing the use of films, radio, and television (local schools already use radio, school films, and tape recorders quite a lot.) It is a question of money. We can't hold back television either, but we must strive to find the best sort of visual materials. The future? The most important question is the development of teachers. We must try to win more gifted young people to the profession. Too many of our young people have been going into industry during this so-called Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle) - for money. The school question is always a question of human beings. We must attract the best. Right now my only worry is about having enough room. We are still short 20 classrooms in Giessen, and two gymnasiums. (Both the Pestalozzi and Schiller schools share their gyms with three other schools.) We are aiming at a goal of 30 pupils per teacher."

Shortage of classrooms sounds familiar to the American ear. The United States is supposed to be short 150,000 classrooms right now. West Germany is short 40,000. Compare the populations - 160,000,000 and 60,000,000 - and the percentage is about even. Anybody for federal aid?

Cordially yours,

David Binder

David Binder

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