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The Gothic Labyrinth:
Giessen's Other Schools

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

A couple of days ago a local school director leaned across his cluttered desk and remarked in a significant tone: "Giessen is sometimes known as 'the city of schools.'" Only a blind man would dispute the accuracy of this slogan. Within the city's downtown area alone - a square mile - there are no less than 20 schools.

For the past two weeks I have been wandering around in an educational labyrinth - one hesitates to call this amorphous set of institutions a "school system". Labyrinth it is, although no bloodthirsty Minotaur awaits the casual visitor; instead only a bunch of polite school directors who are delighted to contribute to your confusion.

There are 10 varieties of schools in Giessen in addition to the ordinary elementary and higher schools - almost enough to start a delicatessen. These come under the general classifications: "professional schools," "professional specialty schools," and specialty schools." At ages varying between 14 and 17, Giessen children enter these schools to be trained as shoemakers, mechanics, secretaries, kindergarten teachers, and engineers - plus everything else required by modern and medieval civilization. At least 10 years of school attendance are required by the State of Hesse and more than 70 per cent of Giessen's Volksschule and Mittelschule graduates finish off their educational obligations at one of these schools.

Despite the bewildering multiplicity of professional-specialty schools there is a stern aspect of formalism in this educational maze. For while the "old school tie" idea is hardly to be found among German schools, nevertheless the type of school one attends makes a definitive difference in one's career and status in later life. And it is almost impossible for the boy who starts out learning the craft of baking at the age of 14 to change his mind later and decide to become a lawyer. Only a small percentage of students manage to break out of the corporative scheme to cut their own trails. Yet the professional-specialty schools accomplish a lot. It's a good bet that masons and butchers trained in these schools are better craftsmen than their transatlantic colleagues. Training for other professions is also on a high par.

Still, it would not be unfair to call this school scheme "Gothic" - in the dictionary senses of Gothic: "lacking classical simplicity" or "...characterized by converging weights and strains at isolated points upon slender vertical piers..." The strains come from the demands of Giessen's ever-growing school population for places to study. The weights come from German industry and commerce - pressing the schools to turn out better-educated youngsters. The vertical piers (to strain the metaphor) are the schools themselves; they have almost no horizontal connection or co-ordination at the local level. All 'piers' rise to Wiesbaden where the State Ministry of Culture holds sway. And apparently a Giessen "board of education" is neither a thing of the past nor a thing of the future. Most of the directors of Giessen's 20 public schools have only a nodding acquaintance with each other.

First stop in the labyrinth is the Mädchen-Berufsschule (Girls Professional School). It is run by a charming 54-year-old woman, Fräulein Therese Kalbfleisch. She has white hair, black eyebrows, blue eyes, and a gracious manner. Direktorin Kalbfleisch is in charge of 1,000 Berufsschule students. The girls are divided into five professions: housework, tailoring, beauticians, baking, and factory workers. They come to school once a week for eight hours, over a period of three years. During the other five weekdays these girls work - in beautyshops, factories, and so on. The instruction they get at the school accompanies the practical experience they gain in their working hours. Thus a typical school day includes classes in social studies, religion, German, hygiene and math - plus four hours of Fachkunde (professional training) in sewing, baking, etc. Employers pay the girls between $9 and $12 a month for their 40-hour work-week, plus social insurance. The girls are about 17 when they finish this schooling. They are then tested by the craft guilds of their professions. Those who pass get regular working wages from then on. Fräulein Kalbfleisch points out that the girls are, in effect, paid to go to school. Considering the working hours they put in, their employers aren't exactly suffering. "It was a long hard battle to get the employers to agree to this," said the director.

Professional school instruction in the Fachkunde classes is largely theoretical. For instance, in Fräulein Erika Heims' beautician class the students were studying hair - roots, layers, scales, and the purpose of each. Using a cross-section model of hair, Fräulein Heims went on to discuss hair diseases, the effect of frequent application of cold water (dullness), and hair dressings. It was all very scientific. The class - 23 cute girls and four sheepish boys - was alert. The same class went into a slump during the next hour - religion with Frau König. This saccharine creature spent the hour in a dreary paraphrasing of a Bible passage. "She bores us like this every week," one of the students said later. Religion became part of the regular professional school class schedule in 1946. "It is still our problem child," says Director Kalbfleisch. "We haven't got enough teachers. I have tried to insist on quality in the instruction, not quantity. A person teaching this sort of material needs solid theological training." During the following hour the beautician class had social studies - again with Fräulein Heims. They took up the topic of work as a social duty. "Why do we work?" said the teacher. "Because we need money," answered a student. "What for?" asked the teacher. The class answered: "To fulfill our demands." The demands were then listed on the blackboard under the headings "natural," "cultural," and "luxury." Television, of course came under the luxury heading. It was nearly followed by iceboxes. The class also discussed credit buying. Said the teacher: "Buying luxury goods on credit is stupid because you might get sick and couldn't pay the installments." Another social studies class, that of Fräulein Ruth Pölenz, had a more challenging assignment. This was a third year class of factory workers. Fräulein Pölenz, a tall, attractive 30-year-old from Cuxhaven, showed them a copy of El Greco's Madonna. The girls were told to figure out when it was painted, what was depicted, and how the painter got his effect of patient sadness. The teacher did a good job of guiding the discussion. Later, she said: "The hardest thing for them is to think - to reflect - because they are just motors. The factory speeds up their lives. They always need new sensations. They like to come to school because it's a day off from work." Fräulein Pölenz smiled. "I feel I'm successful if I can teach some of them to think for themselves."

Sharing cramped quarters with the Mädchen-Berufsschule is the Haushaltungsschule (Home Economics School), also under the direction of Fräulein Kalbfleisch. It is a specialty school; that is a school where both practical and theoretical instruction are given. The 150 girls in this

include German, mathematics, social studies, cooking, sewing, and housework. About half the girls who graduate from this school go straight into factory work. They are gladly taken because employers get a full 48 hours of work out of them instead of the shorter period for the professional school students. Others go on into a children nursing class where they get additional courses in hygiene, education, handwork, children's literature, and biology. The latter is a steppingstone to a kindergarten seminar. Last week there were final exams in the sewing and cooking classes. The "final" was to sew an apron. Earlier the girls had sewed themselves a skirt, blouse, and dress. The exam in cooking required that each girl prepare three dishes. The faculty then sat down to a festive meal, dining on the exams. The menu was a dandy: three kinds of potato salad, soups, casserole, meat, and six desserts. We would have had fish too, except that a nervous candidate dropped the plate. "On exam days we only eat once," said the director.

Upstairs in the same hard-used building is the Gewerbliche Berufsschule (Professional Crafts School). Its 17 classrooms serve no less than 2,990 students. They are divided into 113 classes. The students, 97 per cent boys, get theoretical instruction in an incredible variety of skills: butcher, baker, auto mechanic, electrician, optician, steel mill, tin smith, mason, carpenter, cabinet maker, glazier, shoemaker, uphdsterer, typesetter, cooper, painter, engraver, and stonecutter - to mention the major ones. As in the girls school, they come once a week for eight hours of classes over a period of three years. Meanwhile, their employers keep them busy at the workbench 40 hours a week. During this time they earn between $10 and $20 a month. After graduating from school they are examined by the individual craft guilds. Those who pass get union scale wages. Classes in the crafts school are pitched on the individual trade. For instance carpenters have one hour in carpentry theory, an hour in mechanical drawing, an hour in business training, and an hour in accounting. The other crafts have similar class schedules - with emphasis in each hour on the application of the subject to the trade.

"Our job is to provide some kind of intellectual underpinning for their (students') practical work outside the school," said the school's director, Franz Burgey. The director is a tall, poker-faced 60-year-old native of Rheinpfalz - "where they have the good wines." Burgey recalls his own experience as a professional school pupil this way: "I had to work 72 hours a week and pay 40 marks a month extra for my schooling." While he admits that the present system is not perfect, he adds the schools have come a long way since then. I asked him about school spirit in his school. He admitted there wasn't much. How could there be with students coming only one day a week - each class taking quite different courses? Similarly, teachers don't get to know their pupils as well as in the other schools. There is no school council and no school newspaper. Burgey hopes to have a paper one day, when he gets printing equipment - and a new school. The director would also like to have his students come to school twice a week. "We would need twice as many teachers, of course," he said, "and I could use more right now. Better that we make up that deficit first before we try something new." Besides, he says, he will have a monstrous struggle on his hands trying to convince the craft guilds and the employers that a two-day school week is necessary.

The youngsters in Burgey's school get sound instruction. In the second year bakers' class the teacher spent a whole hour on the chemistry of yeast in rye bread baking. The teacher, a master baker himself, was 40-year-old Siegmund Richardt, a pint-sized bald man with a brow shriveled up like a prune, a few cherished front teeth, and the white jacket of his craft. Painted in bold letters on the wall was the motto: "God Bless

Honorable Handwork!" There were other slogans on other walls - done for practice by the sign-painting class: "The stupidest is not the one who asks questions!" and "Use Your Time!" In spite of limited quarters, the Professional Crafts School makes good use of three workrooms. Masons practice with miniature bricks, metalworkers with fullscale welding equipment and lathes, and carpenters with model houses.

It's plain to see that the professional craft schools, despite their newness in German educational history are rooted in the medieval guild tradition. This was the tradition that demanded that the apprentice be taught by the master craftsman, who held him in a kind of bondage for years. The foundations for the present professional schools were laid by enlightened pedagogues around the turn of the century (see Drei Generationen Berufsschularbeit, Otto Monsheimer, 487 pp. Beltz Verlag, Weinheim, 1955). They were developed in the face of rabid opposition by the guilds and businessmen. They are fettered by these hidebound forces even today. As for progressive trends it should be remembered that it was the professional schools who pioneered courses in social studies 30 years ago.

Another important section of the labyrinth is the Kaufmännische Berufsschule (Professional Commercial School). It seems less bound to the Middle Ages tradition than the crafts school, perhaps because the middle class professions which it supplies were not so strong and individualistic in olden times. However, in contrast to the other schools where the craft teachers are fulltime instructors, the commercial school draws its 17 special-subject teachers from regular practice. Thus dental assistants are taught by practicing dentists, insurance company employees by practicing insurance men, and so on.

The Commercial School is run by the ebullient Nikolaus Rück, a 63-year-old native of Metz, whose father was foreman in a champagne factory. One suspects that some of the bubbly stuff still runs in Rück's veins. He is a close-cropped white-haired man whose face bears slight resemblance to that of Chancellor Adenauer - except that Rück's is more animated. His 2,000 students are divided into 64 classes. Right now they are sharing a building with one of the high schools. - "I am allotted 10 classrooms," said Rück, "Ha, now you know why I stand on my head sometimes." Next month the Commercial School will move into a handsome new building. Classes in this school are divided into retail trade, wholesale trade, commerce and the professions - law, medicine, and civil service. The students go to school once a week - just as in the other professional schools. About 80 per cent come to this school straight from Volksschule - aged 14 - and spend three years here. In addition to individual specialty courses they have classes in math, business correspondence and management, accounting, social studies, and religion. Special courses in typing and stenography are also given. The other 20 per cent of the student body comes from the higher schools. They come here to brush up their skills after spending a couple of years at work - because they have to take "commercial exams" within their professions.

Last Saturday the dental assistants and druggists had their exams. Four professional dentists sat on the first examing board. On the board was a human skull named Anton, who also faced the students. The girls had to answer an assortment of questions about types of sterilization, annotations for different teeth, and dental equipment. The druggist assistants' exam was conducted by five druggists. They had one girl terrified. She fumbled a question on acids. One of the druggists, a huge, pie-faced man with a bullneck shouted at her: "Suppose you gave the customer

sulphuric acid instead of the right one? He'll ruin everything and you'll be responsible! This is unheard of!" Director Rück assured me she would get another chance at the exam if she flunked.

The equipment of the Commercial School is impressive. The typing room has 40 excellent machines. Merchandising classes work at a mockup counter replete with glassware, pens, textiles, cosmetics, and cooking utensils. "I wrote 200 begging letters to manufacturers to get this stuff," said Rück. "Then I had to write 200 thank-you letters." I asked Rück later about lack of co-ordination between local school directors. He said, "Each school has its own interests. One director has little time to do anything with the other. The only time we get together is on transferral questions." Rück then turned to another matter: "One trouble is that only the inferior students remain in the Volksschule. Then we get them. The Volksschule doesn't give the youngsters enough training to suit us. And you can't carve (a statue) of Mercury out of any old piece of wood. However, we don't want to go around nagging at the other directors." Rück is an advocate of the so-called 9th year Volksschule plan which would give the elementary school students an extra year of instruction.

One of the few Giessen schools already housed in a new building is the Wirtschaftsoberschule (Business High School). It is one of five such schools in Hesse and it is the second largest. As a high school, this is a privileged institution - that is only superior students are admitted. It is a 3-year school which begins with the Obersekunda (11th grade) class. About 70 per cent of the 250 students transfer here from other high schools. Another 20 per cent come from the Mittelschule. The remainder come from the 2-year Handelsschule (trade school) which is in the same building. More about that later. The Business High School differs from regular high schools mainly in the approach to subjects. For instance the emphasis in foreign language instruction is on business usage - letter writing and conversation rather than poetry and prose. Spanish replaces Latin. Chemistry is emphasized at the expense of physics. Additional classes in business management, economics, typing and shorthand are also given. Better than 60 per cent of this school's graduates go on to study at universities. The rest go into business. The girls in the latter group are eligible for jobs as translators and export-business secretaries.

The director of the Business High School is 49-year-old Hans Stein, a swarthy, merry-eyed man with a wide smile and a hoarse voice. A Giessener, he is a stumpy, energetic example of hometown boy makes good. One thing he resents about his school is the fact that graduates who go to universities are only allowed to study under the business and economics faculties. He is hoping the Ministry of Culture will loosen up on this rule in the near future.

Stein is also director of two other schools in the same building - the 2-year Trade School and the Upper Trade School. The former has the same technical commercial subjects as the high school plus one foreign language. The 350 students in the 2-year school are almost all from Volksschule. They are admitted to the trade school if their marks are good. Some 10 per cent of these 2-year students manage to go on to the Business High School. First, however, they must complete a preliminary semester at the business school.

The Upper Trade School is a 1-year proposition. It starts and finishes with 11th grade. The courses are about the same as in the 2-year school except they are a little more advanced. Shorthand and typing are

heavily stressed. About 80 per cent of the 120 students are girls. With a certificate from this school they can get good jobs as secretaries and stenographers. The boys go into business.

Stein's primary complaint at present is the demand put on his three schools. This year, he said, 140 students applied for entrance to the Business High School. He could only take 60. About 350 applied for the 2-year Trade School; he could take only 200. And 130 applied for the Upper Trade School where 100 were taken. Stein has only 24 teachers to take care of his 720 students. All three of these schools are so-called Berufsfachschulen or professional specialty schools. This means the students get both their practical and theoretical instruction in the school - in contrast to the professional schools. The students have a regular 6-day school week. I asked Director Stein what he thought of the proposed 5-day school week. "It's coming one day," he said, "to all schools." Then he told me in a confidential tone about a plan he is working on to utilize the 5-day week. Stein wants to introduce it in the 2-year Trade School next year. According to his scheme the students will spend the whole day at school instead of the usual half-day. They would take lunch at the school and study in the afternoon. The idea would be to weld this group into student body which would feel closer ties to the school than the present group. Moreover, 10 per cent of this group - the ones who are selected to go on to the Business High School - would be together in the school for five years. "Besides," said Stein, "it might save Papa from having to help with homework." Stein is the father of four school-age daughters.

In Giessen the distance between a modernistic school building and an ancient one is never more than a thousand yards. Thus it is not surprising to walk out of the 20th century Business High School, go several blocks and find yourself in the 16th century quarters of the Ingenieurschule (Engineering School). Ironically, this institution, also a specialty school, was begun after the last war. The only building available to it was the old Landgrave's castle, constructed of halftimbers about 500 years ago. However, bold plans are in the air, and the school may land itself in more compatible surroundings soon.

The Engineering School is a polytechnic institute. Three separate courses are given in electronics, building construction, and machine construction, It is one of seven such schools in Hesse. There are two ways of preparing for entrance to the school - either through the Volksschule or the high schools. The Volksschule graduate who wants to become an engineer must first study at a professional craft school, working in practice at the same time. Along with this he must take evening classes in mathematics, physics, and chemistry. On completion of his journeyman's exam he may take the entrance test for the Engineering School. If he is successful he must still take a so-called "preliminary semester" at this school before starting the regular course. Since this is outside the normal schedule, he must pay for this semester. About 50 per cent of the school's 576 students have followed this pattern. At present 102 of them are in the preliminary semester. The other half of the student body comes from the higher schools. Those who come from the Mittelsschule or from the 10th grade of high school must spend two years in construction or mechanical professions, take a journeyman's test, and the preliminary semester. Those who come here after completing the high school Abitur need not take the journeyman's test or the extra semester, but they must put in a couple of years in practical work. The average age of the student entering the regular engineering courses is 19. Up to now they put in five semesters of study here. The schedule was recently expanded to six because of the increase of material in all fields. Successful graduates earn the title

"engineer" and are qualified to go into construction and industry. Those desiring to do theoretical work in this field must continue their studies at a university. Meanwhile, a lot of learning is crammed into the Engineering School semesters. For example, a building construction student has the following courses in his three semesters: Algebra, physics, materials, stone and wood construction, design, and social studies. In the fourth and fifth semesters, courses in steel and concrete usage, steel construction, and statics are added. In the last semesters a course in structural acoustics is added. The faculty consists of architects and engineers - all of whom have graduate degrees. Most of them have been in practice as well. For instance, Rudolf Müller, whose specialty is a course in statics, worked for a large bridge-building concern in Essen until a couple of years ago. The company folded after constructing a bridge in Egypt. "We had too much capital tied up in foreign countries," he explained. Müller, a portly, well-kempt 36-year-old, smiled the smile of a well-fed man and added: "I don't regret coming here one bit - I'll probably live to a ripe old age." And Karl Heinz Ries, who teaches mathematics, is a veteran of wartime service in the Junkers Airplane Works at Dessau. He came here in 1953 from his East Zone home in Dresden after a friend tipped him off that the German Communist Security Police were after him. The 44-year-old Ries is also a gifted piano player. He gave several concerts in Dresden after the war. Now his ambition is to spend a year at an American engineering school.

The director of the Engineering School, Dr. Schnaubert, is out of town at present, taking a cure for "overwork". He left the school in the competent hands of his assistant, 50-year-old Ernst Hegel. The latter is a first-rate architect, a former student of the renowned Mies Van Der Rohe at the Bauhaus School during the late Twenties and early Thirties. Hegel, a native of nearby Wetzlar, has brown eyes, dark hair, and the face of a large friendly dog. In addition to his schoolwork he designs an occasional house. But the architectural project closest to his heart is a new building for the Engineering School. About a year ago he and Director Schnaubert put their heads together and came up with a daring plan: Build a big new school and get industry to help pay for it. As a come-on they conceived the idea of adding to the regular school building a "House of Young Engineers" which would be a combination dormitory, dining hall, and hall for extra lectures and programs to be given by industrial experts. They formed an association, won the enthusiastic support of a dozen industrial firms, and are now in the process of convincing the State and Federal governments that they should kick in 50 per cent of the estimated 6,000,000 mark cost. Hegel, who was "pessimistic at first", designed the proposed new buildings - åla Bauhaus. If this dream becomes a reality it will be a pretty one. Hegel and company have gotten permission from the City to build on a location facing Giessen's Swan Pond, one of the nicest spots in town. Says Hegel, "We might be able to begin construction this year."

The raison d'etre of the new school is apparent when Hegel starts talking about the tremendous squeeze being put on engineering schools. "At one end," he says, "we get three times as many eligible applicants as there are places for them in the school. At the other, industry is yelling for three times as many graduates as we can turn out. We're the bottleneck." A shortage of engineering students and schools sounds familiar.

Because the seven big rooms in the old castle do not provide adequate room for the school, a couple of wooden barracks are used for additional classroom space. A teacher described the effect of cold winter weather on instruction in the barracks as "a catastrophe." One of the barracks teachers is Dr. Heinrich Weber, a 47-year-old Westphalian who abandoned a law career to teach social studies here. Dr. Weber and his wife.

a teacher at the Home Economics School, did something almost unbelievable last year. Out of their meager salaries they had saved 7,000 marks. They used it to travel to New York where they took Greyhound buses all the way to the Grand Canyon and back - "just to see what America was like." I sat in on one of Dr. Weber's excellent classes in which he and his students discussed the history of the participation of Germany after World War II. Afterwards he told me this was the only subject in which engineering students were not examined. Two years ago teachers from Hesse's other engineering schools protested to the Ministry of Culture that they felt social studies exams were unfair because they, as engineers, did not feel qualified to test their students in this field. Weber is the only teacher in these schools whose specialty is social studies. So the Ministry decreed no exams. As a result the students can doze through this class if they want to. It seemed a pity that students who were already getting a highly concentrated schedule of technical studies should thus escape exposure to the world beyond engineering. I asked Weber about it. He agreed. Later, Hegel said exams may be reintroduced in a couple of years. Apparently the idea of general education hasn't struck deep roots everywhere.

The last two specialty schools in the labyrinth are the Landwirtschaftsschule (Agricultural School) and the Kindergärterinnenschule (Kindergarten Teachers School). I'm going to skip the former until a later report because it is run by the State Agricultural Ministry.

The Kindergarten Teachers School is directed by City School Superintendent Adam Scheurer. It has a 2-year course for its 51 students. Graduates are eligible to teach in one of Giessen's eight Kindergartens some of which are run by the City and some by churches. Girls entering this school are usually about 17. Their courses include social studies, biology, German, psychology, teaching, child welfare, music, gymnastics, drawing, and handicrafts. The students must put in two and a half days a week in a Kindergarten as a teaching assistant and six weeks in a children's home before receiving their teacher certificates.

There is still another school in Giessen which does not rightly fit under the professional-specialty headings. It is a Sonderschule (special school) for mentally retarded children called the Hilfsschule. It serves some 250 children whose disturbances range from meningitis to Mongolism. Hesse has had Hilfsschule for the past century, but the one in Giessen was begun only 10 years ago. Before the war mentally retarded children in this area had special classes in the Volksschule.

The only thing wrong with the Hilfsschule is its quarters. As a stepchild of the local schools it was placed in a miserable wooden barracks containing five small rooms. The walls, barn-red on the outside and whitewashed inside, are rotting. In a stiff winter, a teacher said, the temperature inside the building goes down to 10 degrees. The ink freezes, and half the teachers get rheumatism. This situation will not last much longer - largely because of the Hilfsschule director, Dr. Fritz Siebel, a fast-talking 36-year-old Hessian, who is a Social Democratic alderman and a friend of Bürgermeister Osswald, a Social Democrat. As a result of Dr. Siebel's energetic pleas in behalf of his school and the Mayor's sympathetic interest, the Hilfsschule is going to move into a gleaming, 700,000 mark, 1957-model building this fall. It is to be named after Albert Schweitzer.

Despite its present uncomfortable physical establishment, the Hilfsschule makes a fine impression. The teachers, most of them in their

thirties, have had experience instructing in Volksschule as well as extra training in psychology and sociology. Without exception they appeared to be gifted and imaginative. There was Frau Iren Fruck, a husky, gentle-faced teacher who has one of the roughest classes - the 9-year-olds. She was teaching them the alphabet with the Koch "finger-reading" method. Later the class worked on numbers. "I'm eager to see who can count up to 20," said Frau Fruck. Ingeborg, a Mongoloid who also has trouble seeing, was the first to raise her hand. Her counting was perfect. The teacher asked who Schweitzer was. Hans, a youngster whose motor impulses are slow, shouted: "Schweitzer was a wise man who went to the jungle in an airplane!" I talked to Ingeborg's mother after class. "I'm very thankful for all they've done for her here," said Frau Jung. "Ingeborg is happy here at school. She like it."

There was Fräulein Ruth Bresina, a slender woman who likes to smile. Her 6th graders do a lot of drawing and modeling in spite of a miserly supply of materials. (Dr. Siebel gets $100 a year for school supplies) Her class was good in reading, geography, and arithmetic. One pupil, Heinrich, has motor difficulties, and can't draw. His classmates aid him in that subject. Said Fräulein Bresina: "When the children see that another has a disability worse than theirs then they help him." And there was Frau Elli Lipp, a handsome woman of 45. She started teaching in a Sonderschule in 1935. "I learned the hard way," she says. Her third graders were working on words beginning with "v". One came up with Volk (people or nation). "What is a Volk?" asked Frau Lipp. "It's a whole lot of people," said one girl. Finally they got to the idea of a nation. Asked to name a Volk, a boy answered, "The French." The teacher asked where they lived. "In French," replied the boy.

About 60 per cent of the Hilfsschule pupils come from slum families - a lot of them from the so-called Gummi-Insel (Rubber Island) area across the tracks. They are referred to this school through an elaborate process which includes investigation by two teachers, a doctor, and a school committee. Once here they learn basic skills; reading, writing, and arithmetic over a period of six years. If the pupil advances enough he becomes eligible for further instruction at a professional school. Dr. Siebel says 90 per cent of the Hilfsschule graduates obtain factory jobs later. Nearly all the rest go into some kind of apprentice work. That's quite a record for retarded children.

Dr. Siebel is one of Giessen's more controversial figures. His friends admire his energy and drive. His critics call him "slightly fanatic" and "a greenhorn". Another critic notes that although Siebel has a doctor's degree in sociology, he lacks a sound pedagogical training. One of the Hilfsschule teachers remarked in a mild tone: "He strains everything through the sieve of politics." Political or no, the curly-headed, brown-eyed Siebel has gotten the Hilfsschule a decent building.

Two things stick in my craw as I turn away from Giessen's school maze. The first is the radical division of 10-year-old pupils in the 4th school year on the basis of mental ability. This is the crucial year in the life of every German school child (and parent) and it seems unjustly premature. A comment on this split is provided by the title of a book published this month. " Hints for Exam Parents" is a volume in which a young mother tells how she coached her four children into passing the awful tests with enough success to ascend to the higher schools.

The second thing that sticks is the lack of co-ordination between school authorities at the local level. I asked Dr. Scheurer how he felt about it. He said of the other directors: "We hardly know each other. I thought this might change in the period of 'reform' around 1950, but

then the old ways came back." He stroked his chin. "You have everything under one hat - the board of education. Our schools can only be explained historically. The upper schools are the older ones. Most of them have a tradition going back to the Middle Ages. The Volksschule came only when the State made lower schools obligatory and started training the teachers. The first seminar for teachers was begun around 1800. These different sets of schools grew separately."

They certainly did.

David Binder

David Binder

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