



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Secondary School for Girls: Catholic and Protestant Girls' Schooling (late 1880s-90s)

Else Strack recounts her childhood experiences at both Catholic and Protestant schools. Class played a great role, as did gender, in determining her educational experiences, which she criticizes here.

At the age of six, I started school at the Catholic city school on Sankt-Apern-Straße, close to home. It was a big, dark brick building; the schoolyard was enclosed by high walls. Dark brown school desks, grumpy old teachers, no gymnastics or sports whatsoever – everything was bleak. From my youth, the memory I still have of both home and school is of an exaggerated fear for our health. We children had to have cotton wool in our ears to prevent colds. If we fell just once, we were not supposed to run or jump anymore. A throat infection got me banned from swimming at the Deutz swimming pool, which I loved.

During the first years of school, I was full of enthusiasm to socialize with my female companions. This often ended in disappointment. Moreover, my father forbade any contact with the children of artisans and lower middle-class families – in my opinion this was an overestimation of his own family's status. Thus I remained isolated at this school. Realizing that companions were an essential need in my life, my good mother enrolled me at the Protestant school on Antoniterstraße after a few years. In this place, a friendly atmosphere prevailed, full of *joie de vivre*. We were allowed to play and climb around in the bright open schoolyard. The way to school was farther, though. I always hurried but was still late most of the time. The means of public transport in those days, a horse-drawn trolley*, only covered a semi-circular course through the city. The poor horse! Anyone wanting to get on simply waved. The horse had to stop and pull hard to get moving again. In case the trolley got caught in a snowstorm, the horse was unyoked and taken to the stable. The passengers trudged home through the snow with great effort, and there was snow and ice, much more often in Cologne than today.

[. . .] What I learned in my school years [at the girls' upper school] was minimal, even though I was considered one of the best pupils. "Spatial theory is the theory of space" – that's how each and every physics class started out. [. . .] In history class, I learned and experienced only two periods: the ancient Greeks and, in later grades, the era of Frederick the Great. We acquired no picture of the world or of culture whatsoever. Similarly, I only learned some geography later on in life, at the side of my educated husband, through travels with him. In German class, we had to write essays on "The Apple Tree" and "The Grape Harvest" – I can still see the childlike images before me that were put up in front of our class. In the upper grades, dissecting

* A carriage drawn by horses and running on rails; it was the first means of local public transport, replaced in the 1890s by electric trolleys with fixed stops. [Secondary commentary provided in Flemming, Saul, and Witt, eds. (1997) See citation at end of document.]

Schiller's dramas was a requirement. The only thing I retained was some knowledge in German and French grammar.

Source: Else Strack, *Ein Leben aus der Erinnerung erzählt für Familie und Freunde* [A Life Recounted from Memories for Family and Friends]. Printed manuscript. Cologne, 1959, pp. 6-8.

Excerpt reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914* [Source Materials on Everyday Life in Germany 1871-1914]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 190-91.

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