

Middle school

Middle school was in Gifhorn, a town of about 5000, and about 4 miles away. Elementary school went through the eighth grade and dead ended there into some sort of apprenticeship program. However starting at the fifth grade about half the class branched off into middle school based on ability and the recommendation of the teacher. Those that did not make it had another chance the next year, but such transfer was rare. Many of my classmates did not make it. Even at that age it seemed strange and sad to me that someone would not or could not learn.

In the summer we would use our bicycles and take a shortcut through the woods and then by a trail on the side of the meandering local river that went by the name of Ise which came somewhere out of the large moor to the north of our village. When the meadows were intentionally flooded in the fall we would use the regular paved roads.

Where the Ise crossed the main road to Gifhorn there was a small inn where one could rent row boats and also one and two man canoes. The water moved slowly and was very clear and the banks were edged with various marsh type plants such as cattails and yellow water iris. As the trail approached Gifhorn it went by an old castle, then past two water mills, one on the river that went by the name of Aller, the other one on the river Ise. At each place there was a spillway constructed of boards that could be raised and lowered, with the water spilling down about six feet. There was a water wheel at both rivers but I never saw them used. At the Aller there was a small bakery that made bread and pastries and now and then we would buy some, so this must have been shortly after the war and the ration cards. But mainly we just went in and looked.

Then we would follow the main street through town, sometimes riding, but usually just pushing our bicycles to get a better look at the small stores on each side. I do not remember having problems with cars so there must not have been many. One scene that still stands out in my mind is how a small jeep type vehicle could drag a huge trailer behind it. But in general there were no cars.

The middle school was little more than a barracks type building, slightly elevated, with windows facing a very small athletic field more in the nature of a courtyard with an outhouse and bicycle racks in front of it. We had no locks on the bicycles and at the time I never knew there was such a thing as a lock for bicycles. Bicycles just did not get stolen. Seems like there were always enough kids around that nobody would dare steal one, and everybody knew which bicycle went with whom.

There were a few scattered trees and a few benches where some of the kids would eat a sandwich, but I do not remember bringing sandwiches. We certainly had no cafeteria, lunchroom, or vending machines, nor need for them as school only lasted to about noon, six days a week. There were only about four rooms or so, but we stayed put in one room and one room only, with different teachers coming in. I do not even remember having gone into any of the other rooms. Seems like we went in from the outside, and went out again the same way, and that was that.

The middle school would go to somewhere around the eleventh grade or so, but again somewhere around the ninth grades some of the students would branch off again to go into higher studies. However after having just started the seventh grade that was the end of my German schooling, with us going to Houston, Texas, in August 1950, never to return except for about a month in 1969 working for Texas Instruments in Dallas, Texas. I did rent a car and drive around the area we had lived, but made no attempt to talk to anybody and had no inclination to do so. America was home, period.

We did not have many subjects. There was of course German, just like English here, but I do not remember a thing about it. Math was different, and I really liked it and it was my best subject. It was really an introduction to algebra at the fifth grade. We had English as a required foreign language. We had no science of any kind even into the seventh grade, unlike American schools where the kids are required to memorize all sorts of stuff about atoms, molecules, compounds, geology, earth science, earthquakes, volcanoes and who knows what all else, only to forget it again each year, never really having any need for it, not at that age.

We did have some history, but nothing current. In looking back it seems like everybody wanted to talk about Charlemagne and his fathers and sons, but nothing either ancient or current, and I do not remember ever seeing any map of any kind, not local, not Germany, or the world. In retrospect, it was the period in which German history was being re-written by the Allies, after having been re-written the first time to suit Hitler. I do not remember hearing the name of a single German poet, philosopher, or statesman, nor any attempt to deal with World War II, either under Hitler, or after the collapse of Germany. Sort of like one of the sayings I heard about Russia, that it was harder to predict the past than the future. There is just no way to explain World War II, the madness of the century, to an eight or ten year old, one year after the war, when the past has not yet been decided.

Studies in religion was another matter, and we had classes in that each week. Northern Germany was almost entirely Lutheran, and the few Catholics would have separate class. I hated religion class with a passion, but it was required.

At the seventh grade we had just started with French and Latin in addition to English when I left Germany.