



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

The Son of a Non-Commissioned Prussian Officer Reflects on His Childhood and Youth in the Late 18th Century (Retrospective Account)

Born in Berlin in 1786, Karl Friedrich von Klöden rose through the ranks to become director of the Berlin School of Trades in 1825. A product of the educational reform movement, the school aimed to integrate the artisan trades with modern technology and science. These pages vividly and painfully recount his family's struggle with severe soldierly poverty, which was held at bay only through his mother's heroic labors. Though he aspired to higher education, Klöden initially had no choice but to accept an apprenticeship with his goldsmith uncle, an experience that exposed him to the pitiless world of the youthful artisanry. In 1806, his apprenticeship ended, and he entered the wage-earning workforce as a journeyman. Later, he managed to study and train himself as a teacher and historian. His memoirs are a testimony to the impact of his youthful reading and the importance of intellectual mentors.

Childhood Memories

Karl Friedrich von Klöden

[. . .]

From her earliest youth, my mother had to sit as if shackled, knitting or helping with the housekeeping and waiting on her brothers. In all of this, reproaches and beatings were never lacking. Apologies were rejected with the then popular "No arguments!" and made the trouble even worse. Thus, one day passed like all others in the most joyless youth, and only Christmas, a celebration upheld even here, cast upon the entire year a cheerful ray of sunshine in which my mother delighted her whole life.

The school lessons she had received had been short and inadequate, though nevertheless arousing and partly developed her excellent natural abilities. She was helped along in this by reading during knitting and contact with her brothers, whose lessons she learned simultaneously while reviewing with them. She was only allowed to read while knitting, and even then often only surreptitiously. [. . .]

[Around 1782, Christiane Dorothea Willmanns married the non-commissioned officer Klöden.]

[. . .] My mother was one of the most capable knitters of her day, an art that was much rarer and unknown in those days than today. In particular, knitted purses of green silk with holes and

metal rings on both ends were popular; she was exceedingly skilled at making these. With this work, she maintained the entire household during the first year; however, in the second year, she gave birth to a daughter, and care for the infant deprived her of much time, which she attempted to make up with night work. Her child was her only consolation, her only joy [. . .]. She was in urgent need of this consolation, for soon enough she came to recognize with a sense of horror the type of hell into which she had gotten herself, [. . .] and anyone familiar with the composition of the army at the time will be able to form an impression of life in a regimental barracks. Only one third of the armed forces consisted of native and levied recruits and citizens. The other parts were comprised of mercenaries, who often let themselves be recruited only to escape prison, taking the first opportunity to run away again; another part consisted of individuals who had proven to be notorious good-for-nothings, for whom there was practically no use, and who could not be prompted to order by any corrective measure with the exception of the most severe punishments.

[. . .]

Meanwhile, my father had tried to obtain a second job as well outside of his service periods. Those days had seen the introduction of a fad to decorate mirror frames, sofas, and other furniture with carvings and to cover these with imitated gold plating by applying a polished chalk priming and varnish. My father had sought the opportunity to learn this gilding method, and he began doing this work for money. He succeeded quite well in this, carrying out the work in his room at the barracks. Unfortunately, it was paid poorly, and there were often long breaks before more work came his way, since only a few master craftsmen employed him.

Sadly, my mother's first child died of convulsive teething after reaching one year of age. [. . .] She was knitting incessantly again and was happy to be recommended as a knitting teacher to a princess, I do not recall which, whom she taught for several months. Extra income was urgently needed, for my mother was awaiting her second birth.

On May 21, 1786, at 12 noon I was born. [. . .]

However, I must pass over this dark period of unconscious child's life until the year 1790, when my parents moved to the barracks in the broad Friedrichsstrasse No. 102 [. . .] into an apartment. Here my consciousness developed, and many different images from those days reemerge perfectly fresh in my mind.

[. . .]

During the day, the children played and romped about on the streets, the barrack square, the hallway or corridor, depending on what the season and the weather brought and permitted, for stricter attention was paid to this than to written laws. [. . .] The review of the soldiers on the barrack square, the beatings with a cane that occurred very frequently among the gunners and with the flat blade among the bombardiers, the gauntlet just there, the women "standing in the

shrew's fiddle“ [a type of pillory] in the corridors provided sensation-seeking with plenty of fuel and opportunity to kill time. During all of this, I developed a considerable natural inclination toward being a street urchin.

[. . .]

In the meantime, my mother worked as much as she possibly could. Unfortunately, there were not always enough orders, and when she worked only toward sales, she often had to sell the goods off so cheaply that she was unable to buy silk for new work. Nevertheless, things would perhaps have gone reasonably well, if my father unfortunately had not become a “*Freiwächter*.” This was also one of those dreadful institutions of that period, which could drive people into desperation. You see, the company commander was allowed to relieve part of his company, I believe one third, from duty for four months, while receiving the pay of this contingent for his private purse. [. . .] However, anyone whose home was in the barracks had to stay where he was, retained his apartment, and the non-commissioned officers for the most part were their boarders, whose supervision remained their obligation; but they would not receive one pfennig of pay for four months. This fate overtook my father as well; he became a *Freiwächter* and now had to go see whether he would be able to live on air. [. . .]

These were dreadful times; it was very difficult to eat one's fill. My mother had to maintain the entire household, and my father, whose gold-plating work had ended long ago, since the technique had gone out of fashion, had no choice but to help knit, even though the work was not particularly easy for him, despite my mother's good instructions.

[. . .]

At Easter 1793, we had to leave the barracks. My mother had rented a very modest apartment at Small Hamburgerstrasse, on the corner of Linienstrasse, for which we obviously had to pay now. There was no news at all from my father. Our lives became more impoverished all the time. In the summertime, I ran around barefoot; I had only linen pants, a shirt, and a vest. Very soon, my mother was reduced to owning no other pieces of clothing than the ones she was wearing. No matter how clean she kept and how often she mended them, eventually she could no longer show up at church on Sundays, and so she finally had to manage without the last enjoyment, the last consolation she had had until then. [. . .]

Such a thing is possible in the otherwise so charitable Berlin, when the poor person is ashamed of begging, and my mother could not bring herself to do that even in the most abject poverty. To her, the so-called ‘paupers’ supervisors’ were horrible people, and she would have died of shame if one had as much as touched her. [. . .]

Although I was already seven years old by then, I was not able to read yet. My mother obtained for me admission to a charity school; however, I could not attend it regularly, as I had to care for my siblings; moreover, I had little inclination for learning. [. . .] In the span of four weeks, I

attended school for about 14 days. I did not understand what we went through in class, and the “a, b, ab, b, a, ba” bored me incredibly. [. . .]

[In 1793, following his return from war, the author’s father became an “excise comptroller,” i.e. a minor tax official, [. . .]. That he began drinking turned into a strain for the whole family. [. . .] At the beginning of 1796, the father relocated with his family to the post of “gate collector” (also a minor tax official) in the small town of Friedland in the march of Brandenburg. There Karl Friedrich initially attended the private school of the second preacher, whom people called “chaplain.”]

[. . .]

My mother had expected that my father’s transfer to an entirely new sphere of activity, that tearing him from that dangerous environment would have a beneficial effect on him and put a stop to his ill-fated inclination to drinking. To this end, she had tried everything to tie him to the home and make his domestic life as comfortable as possible. However, it was too late. The habit had become a compelling need, and the terrible thing about this problem is that it weakens more and more any strength required to resist the temptation. [. . .]

In February 1797, I got the measles. At that time, the illness was dangerous, and I was running a high temperature. Nevertheless, I happily recovered from it under the diligent care of my mother, though I had to stay indoors for another six weeks, being so weak that I could only stagger when I came out in the open again for the first time. [. . .] In my case, the measles resulted in nothing less than a radical physical and mental change. [. . .]

Up to being ill, imagination and memory had been the only abilities that became evident to some extent. With the measles, that changed, with these talents improving at the same time. During the first few weeks after my illness, I was also not allowed to read or put a strain on my eyes. That caused me a lot of boredom, and I asked my mother to give me a book as soon as possible. This surprised her, for most of the time, one had had to push me to read. She had managed to obtain Campe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which she handed over to me. With ravenous hunger, I got my teeth into it. Never before had a book made such an impression on me. Every scene appeared to me vividly, I was floating on air, envying the children in the novel for having an educator like this, and soon they became such friends that they were like siblings. [. . .] I thus read the book eleven times in succession, without skipping a syllable, and I nearly knew it by heart. It was not that I had seized the guiding principles and maxims; rather, they had taken hold of me; all of the explanations were familiar to me, all of the scenes present; I had drawn juice from each word. Apart from the Bible, no other book had influenced me so powerfully; none had fostered me and extended my range of thought so essentially.

[. . .]

Sadly, however, my father's unfortunate tendency to drinking increased more and more. Mother attempted anything imaginable to counter it; he received reproaches from all sides; but it was to no avail. Even the patience of an angel can wear thin. When he came home drunk, my mother now flew into a rage, he no less, and harsh scenes took place in which we children came into dreadful situations. Already the entire town knew about my father's problem, pitying us. [. . .]

Toward the end of that year, my mother became bedridden. [. . .] We had a rather skillful doctor [. . .] Finally he announced to us that my mother had fallen ill so gravely that he had little hope of saving her. Her constitution up to that point had been cast-iron, and she had borne and endured far more than one could expect thousands of other women's bodies to sustain. These were difficult days for us, which we spent anxious between fear and hope; indeed, there was one day, when the doctor, just as all of us, expected her death with the highest probability. It turned out to be the turning point; she survived and began recovering. However, she remained bedridden in a highly ailing condition for four months, during which time I could not attend school; for my sister and I had no choice but to manage the entire household [. . .].

I had turned 14 years of age, and the difficult question arose as to which occupation I wished to choose. My inclination was firmly oriented to studying, and theology would have been my favorite choice [. . .], otherwise I would definitely have opted for mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, geography, and for the sciences in general. [. . .] However, I realized quite readily that university studies were out of the question for me. My father did not have the means to finance my upkeep at a grammar school and subsequently at university. [. . .]

Since I was entirely unfamiliar with nearly all living conditions, cut off from any opportunity to get to know other types of occupations, and excluded from most careers due to my poverty, after much reflection it seemed that the best thing and the thing most easily realized would be to go to Berlin to stay with my mother's brother, the goldsmith Willmanns, to learn the trade. Whether I would like the business was something I could not determine beforehand. I did not feel any inclination toward it; for I considered this work of little use and uninteresting; but I also was not able to propose something better. [. . .] After all, every year recruits were conscripted [. . .] I had grown quickly and I was already tall enough to be enlisted. [. . .] If I was called up, I had to take up my position. Being deferred as unfit was out of the question. In that case, however, all of my plans would be in vain and my fate a different one, in the view of my mother, a horrible one [. . .] To my mother and me, this prospect hanging over us like the sword of Damocles was very oppressive and frightful [. . .].

[. . .] Things were settled with my uncle, and he agreed to take me on. [. . .]

The farewell from everything I knew and held dear was rather difficult for me. I entered an unfamiliar, alien world that had as little heart for me as I had for it. I did not know what to expect of it, looking ahead as if toward a chaos, as if into a vague haze, uncertain whether a friendly figure would come toward me [. . .]

It was July 13, 1801, when I arrived in Berlin. [. . .] I would have expected my reception to be warmer; but it was no different from a stranger coming. [. . .]

My uncle had no journeymen; he worked alone; thus, it was only a small workshop. On the very first day, I got into my aunt's and her mother's bad books by speaking of the "trade of 'gold worker.'" I committed a real faux pas there! They flared up as if stung by a wasp. It was not a trade, they said, but an "art" or an "office." [. . .] Moreover, how could I use the expression "gold worker"? That was disparaging; to be sure, there was drudgery involved but no "gold working"; according to them, my statements were entirely rash. My uncle kept mostly quiet at this; I remained silent as well and had to keep my thoughts to myself. [. . .]

[1802/03] In addition to all this, new misfortune emerged. I had to gold-plate plenty of items; in doing so, not only was I forced to swallow the toxic mercury fumes, since no precaution to protect me had been taken at all, but I also had to submerge my hands, which had just been in the fire, into cold beer residues with the gold-plated pieces, and then expose them, while not fully dried, to the cold air and subsequently to the fire again. This constant alternation of heat, cold, dryness, and moisture could not be avoided. As early as November, all of my fingers on both hands were frostbitten, with the exception of the thumbs. I tried remedies against this; they did not help and could not help, since I could not go easy on my fingers and the same causes generated the same trouble again. All of the fingers opened and began festering under immense pain. [. . .]

[On December 31, 1806, Klöden is released from his articles and thus becomes a journeyman.]

Source: Karl Friedrich von Klöden, *Jugenderinnerungen* [*Childhood Memories*]. Edited by Max Jähns. Leipzig, 1874, excerpts, pp. 13-200.

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