

Meine Kinderjahre

Autobiographischer Roman

Th. Fontane

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Fontane wrote his memories of his childhood days late in life, during a period of sickness and depression, and the exercise supposedly cured him. Born at the very end of 1819 in Neuruppin, he left with his parents and siblings that city at the age of seven to settle down in Swinemünde (Swinouscie nowadays) a provisional yet eminently cosmopolitan seaport at the outlet of the Oder. His young father, the son of a draughtsman with a courtly employment and later raised to the position of Kabinettssekretär, had a penchant for gambling and was forced to sell his 'Apotheke' in the city in order to cover his debts, and after some time of searching all over Prussia, was finally able to take over another one from a widow, recently bereaved. The stage of the reminiscences is that of the true 'Kinderjahre', namely those between seven and thirteen, and the setting the town of Swinemünde. The years before seven apparently do not emerge very strongly in the authors memory, and this is not unusual¹, and the years after did not partake of the particular glow which is the hallmark of a happy childhood.

When Fontane came to Swinemünde in the middle of the 1820's, it was a small, rural town, its architecture dominated by 'gable' houses, i.e. houses with steep roofs, under which there were very many floors. The house into which they moved was huge and unwieldy, and with many levels of attic. The setting was almost rural, with wild gardens, haylofts and one surmises sandy dirt-roads leading into the town. The arrival of the mother was delayed some months, as she was spending time at a clinic for the so called nervous in Berlin, on other words suffering from a mild psychiatric disorder. It came upon the father to fix everything up in anticipation of the reunion.

Fontane goes about the business systematically. The town was small, which meant that there were only a handful families with whom to socially associate, no more than twenty perhaps. From this we conclude that the family was rather wealthy, in spite of the financial problems the father caused, or at least socially elevated. Fontane spends quite a lot of time in describing the various families of renown residing in the town, before he gets around to give an account of the daily life, especially as regards the differences between summer and winter. The festivities at home, including Christmas and Sylvester, the Schröder who acted as maid, each get their own chapters as does the special character of the city and its harbor. Fontane is especially explicit when it comes to the character of his father, as opposed to his mother, to whom he seems to have had a more distant relationship. The two parents would eventually get divorced, apparently on the initiative of the mother, but that would be in the future. What he admires in his father is his

¹ It is interesting while some people seem to have vivid and continuous memories from the age of three, others do not really enter consciously remembered life until the age of seven or so

bon hommie, in spite of difficulties and setbacks, his rich store of anecdotes in general and about Napoleon and his generals in particular. Fontane grew up in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, and the collective memory of the continental blockade is still very much in the air. His father also had an encyclopedic knowledge of different cities and their populations, on which he was continually drawing in his conversation. Both parents were Huguenots stemming from southern France, and they both apparently mixed in a fair amount of French phrases in their conversations. The French connection also explains to some extent the father's affinity for Napoleon and his exploits, regardless of the fact that in his youth he was drafted to fight them. His tender fondness of his father manifests itself that at the end of the book he allows himself a digression of forty years later, describing his last meeting with him. By that time the father was divorced and living by himself and a dimwitted maid, to whom he was reduced to address his habitual soliloquys.

How was he brought up, and how was his schooling? Being brought up properly is a matter of being given good examples, and here he has little to blame his parents. As to the regular punishment, often of a corporal kind, be it mostly perfunctory, he makes a distinction between the cases when his father acted on his own accord, or merely on the promptings of his mother. Of the two, the first is acceptable, the second definitely not. In such matters punishment should always be meted out by the party who is privy to its ostensible cause and affected by it. The idea of bringing up, as opposed to education, is that the former moulds character as opposed to mere knowledge. Thus he claims that schooling can never fully replace the roles traditionally filled by the parents. As to schooling he was first brought to a general school, but soon his mother found out that it was no good, and instead he was to join some private instruction. For the first teacher he has nothing but praise, for the subsequent mainly indifference. As to the standard pedagogical techniques at the time, such as rote learning by heart, he has some appreciation, notwithstanding their counterintuitive nature. How many pupils have not resented such seemingly arid exercises, only later in life reaping their benefits. Much learning is of course done outside school. Once one knows how to read a universe of learning opens up to you, provided you have the right curiosity. Fontane took an interest in the daily papers and the events, political or otherwise, which were unveiled through their perusals. As noted the aftermath of Napoleon still set the stage, but there were also other exciting events of the contemporary sort, such as the insurrection among the Poles. In those matters Fontane admits to mixed feelings, on one hand he feels a certain sentimental attraction to the heroism of downtrodden people, on the other hand his sympathies tend to those who stand for law and order.

The most central chapters, and those written with the most amount of detail, in fact too much detail for the taste of the erstwhile prospective publisher, concern his pranks. He admittedly wrote down his memories as a therapeutic exercise, and that might go a long way to explaining his wish to explore as much as possible of his memories, not as a literary one², and thus be forgiven his ambitions.

Boys are boys, and Fontane is a healthy strong buy with a lot of physical energy. He loves to climb trees, once he even falls from a huge chestnut tree in the garden and falling

² The fact that he subtitles 'Autobiographischer Roman' is to cover his tracks. If he at times is not exactly accurate, because his memory may fail him, better to think of it as fiction, rather than having to be responsible for every sundry fact.

on the hard stone ground, he momentarily loses consciousness, but luckily the fall being hampered by a succession of breaking twigs, it is not serious enough to do him in. He also loves to play hide and seek on the steep roof, or to jump around the boats in the harbor, climbing tall masts, a game which once almost leads to the drowning in ice-cold water of a younger play-mate. Fontane turns out to be oldest boy in his gang, and by dint of his strength, agility and intrepidity, their undisputed leader. This invariably leads to confrontations with other boys and gangs, and eventually he will have to admit defeat, but that is at the end of his youthful tenure in the city. It is noteworthy that the kind of life he leads with their youthful boyish pranks, brought out by an excess of energy and curiosity, often undertaken at the edge of disaster (but as Fontane remarks, all children need and have guardian angels), seem more or less identical with what you would have encountered a hundred years later, maybe well into the 50's and 60's. Since then there has been a change. Individual initiative has been submerged to more supervised games, where the adults set the agenda. Furthermore the games of the past were usually quite simple as to the requirements for implements, unlike those of today. But mostly it was the case of physical games, involving muscles and imagination alike, before the advent of the electronic gadgets, which now dominate the lives of the young, and one can only wonder at what impediment to their overall development.

One picks up a few obscure words, as that for throwing a stone obliquely at water, making it skim several times before it eventually sinks. This game is called 'kasta smörgås' in Swedish, the English for it I have never so far had occasion to acquire. In German it is 'Butterstullenwerfen'³. In the book it is brought up in connection with a cannon-ball ricocheting along the water, making a huge fountain the first time, and then subsequent smaller ones, before finally dropping to the bottom.

Fontane returns to his childhood town some thirty years later and hardly recognize anything. So much, apparently, had the town changed in the interim. This goes to show that the 19th century brought about momentous changes, some of them more drastic and extensive, than we are used to in our own modern one. The town he encountered in his childhood, was probably not that different from what it might have been in the 18th century, but a few decades into the 19th, and we have another world. A world in which we to a large extent still dwell.

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³ One may also, like in Swedish, speak about 'Butterbrotwerfen'. In English it supposedly is referred to as 'make ducks and drakes'