

Description of An Average Life.*

Heinrich Blücher

*Note: This short autobiographical sketch, which Elisabeth Young-Bruehl used in drawing her wonderful portrait of Blücher [*Hannah Arendt, For Love of the World*, footnote 11 to Chapter 4, pp 507], was recently rediscovered among Hannah Arendt's private papers.

[Translated from the German by Kathrin Nussbaumer]

Even an average biography can become of interest every now and then, if it fulfils the following two criteria: first, it must depict a life consciously lived as average, in the sense that it was driven by a never-ending curiosity in average living conditions, people and circumstances, a curiosity in its time and its country; second, it must coincide with a time period during which the conditions of average citizens' daily lives were affected by major changes.

I was born in Berlin on January 29 in 1899. I come from an old Potsdam family whose last descendants fled rural impoverishment for the anonymity of the big city. Due to my father's death from a fatal accident several months before I was born, a family relation who had managed to maintain his wealth, allowed me to partially spend my childhood at his country estate. Therefore, my youth was marked by the contrast between the big city, Berlin, and the flat countryside. Until the outbreak of the First World War, Berlin underwent a period of tremendously growing power consciousness, while the rural areas watched the excessive bureaucracy of the Reich with increasing hatred. The frivolousness of the nouveaux riche in the Berlin of the Wilhelminian Era on the one hand, and the dismal suspicion and ignorance of the rural population on the other hand,

made for childhood impressions strong enough to force me to take an early interest in the views and lives of various sections of the population and stirred in me a social curiosity that has never ceased to exist.

My participation in all areas of peasant life eventually earned the city boy the peasants' trust. When I was 12 and 13 years old, they already entrusted me with minor calculations of their small property, and so I became acquainted with all representatives of rural life: teachers, priests, Prussian land owners, mayors, farmers and peasants, as well as day laborers - a world of tedious, but essential relations.

The elementary school I frequented in the city had high pedagogical and technological standards at that time, as upper-middle class children and working class children alike spent the first years of their education there. The school thus truly represented the demographics of the population of Berlin. The fact that we poor children maintained a relationship characterized by animosity with those wealthier children who received secondary education, paired with the extensive Berlin street life provided fertile soil for my growing eagerness to meet new and various people.

At last, a scholarship for gifted students enabled me also to graduate to a secondary school. Predetermined by my mother, our relatives and other advisors to a career as an elementary school teacher, I received a sound general education at a teacher preparatory school in Striegau, Silesia. But in history, the subject I took the keenest interest in, I was greatly disappointed on account of the *Prussian-German history legend*. As a kind of protest, I dedicated every free minute to my own study of history. The limited time we were allowed to spend

outside the boarding school were enough to feed a curious spirit with information about the affairs of a small town like Striegau.

The transition from finals at the preparatory school to the beginning of my pedagogical seminar was marked by a move to yet another small town in Germany. The teacher training was even better than the preliminary schooling I had received, with the exception of history, where the *Prussian-German history legend* was presented in an even more dull form.

At the end of the year 1917, I was drafted from the classroom to war, after passing a so-called “*Kriegs-Not-Abgangsprüfung*” [war induction physical]. Short stays in barracks and hospitals and frequent switches between battalions, as were common towards the end of the war, provided me with a comprehensive picture of the worries, needs and feelings shared by military men across all social classes. Then everybody was getting ready for the great disbandment. On account of a brief training as radio telegraphist, I found myself being pushed towards communication, a field which had already begun to be one of my passions.

I was a front-row spectator of the disintegration of the army, the overthrow of the empire and the listless inauguration of a republic in a country without a democratic tradition. All of those events took place during the peak of the confusions in the Berlin Movements of that time. The exceptionally bad situation of new teachers made it easy for me to turn my back on that profession and enabled me to dedicate myself completely to my interest in social matters in a revolutionary time. I was offered to obtain a kind of substitute high school degree and the opportunity to study History at the University of Berlin. When I did not have the financial means to continue my studies, I decided to become a

journalist because I hoped to gain professional insights into the people's public life.

After a short, but beneficial employment as assistant editor, I was asked to participate in organizing a new news agency and eventually I was promoted to be chief editor of the same enterprise. The obligations that came with parliamentary news coverage gave me access to the political circles of the republic. Courtroom and local reports brought me eye-to-eye with the people's daily lives; theater, art and film reviews were my bridge to the intellectuals, whose lives in Berlin were tumultuous enough to mirror all aspects of that epoch.

The takeover of the news agency by the much bigger agency *Mirbach'sche Telegraphen-Büro* secured me a position as editor and beyond that gave me the chance to extend my activities beyond what I had done that far. Exchanging articles and reports throughout the whole country conveyed insights into the Republic of Germany's social, political and cultural affairs.

The personal, social and professional contacts I acquired during my employment with *Mirbach* eventually made it possible for me to take the risk of becoming a free-lancer and become independent. Occasional assignments for documentaries of all kinds in addition to historical articles, which I was able to sell through my former agencies, were the basis for my independent existence. Having made connections with the film industry, I could afford to abandon those projects after a while and work on more profitable film manuscripts, songs, dramatic adaptations and article series.

Despite my relatively apolitical occupation during those years, I always remained in close contact with life and the people of the republic and the

development of democracy in Germany. Therefore, I greeted the upcoming Nazi (*National Socialist*) movement with utmost animosity, a fact that cannot have gone unnoticed by the Nazis. With Hitler's takeover of power, which ruined the existence of thousands of my colleagues on account of racial reasons, I too ceased to work; any kind of continuation of my job would have seemed to me as a betrayal of my friends and colleagues. I stayed in Germany until the end of 1933 to assist the victims as much as I could, which was possible for me as a non-Jewish person.

In January of 1934 I went via Prague to Paris, where I lived until 1940. For me, a German citizen who had never found a true foundation for democracy in the country of his birth, the importance and wealth of information gained from being surrounded by the democratic atmosphere in France was all the justification I needed for a life in Paris. Good connections allowed me to make a modest living by giving courses in history, art history and philosophy. I even had enough time to spare to carry out intensive studies of French History and its connections with German and European History and thus meld the worldview of a republican and that of a democrat. Seven years also sufficed to get in touch with French people of various social classes and to watch the imminent symptoms of the downfall of the Third Republic.

After the German defeat I lived in the South of France, in a small town called Montauban. Many refugees had ended up in Montauban on account of its obvious and strong Huguenot tradition.

These are the average experiences of an average intellectual life in Europe during times of revolution. I took those experiences to America with me. In the

democratic atmosphere of the United States I quickly found opportunities to make use of some of my experiences. I used to emphasize military sciences in my studies of history, as the German military has always provided the key to insights into the country's condition. Because of my expertise I was able to contribute as an expert and commentator to a resource book about the German army, called *The Axis Grand Strategy*, which was published by the Committee for National Morale. The excellent review the book received in the *Infantry Journal* for its military section earned me an assignment to outline and conduct a larger-scale research project about the German army. After finishing that project I would be glad to encounter more opportunities to put my experience to use.