

Memories are history

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You have read some of Rinaldo Rust's memories in the last Helvetia; here is some more:

School discipline

I was told beforehand that I shouldn't be afraid of Miss Löpfe, as she had already taught my father some 40 years earlier and that she would be kindly disposed towards me as she had been towards my older siblings. You may guess that Miss Löpfe was an old spinster with built-in discipline. She also seemed to wear several pettycoats reaching to her ankles, as she showed unintentionally when lifting her dress to reach for the key to her apartment next to our school room.

Every now and again we happened to deserve some time of correction and had to sit in after school, under her supervision doing corrective work, like writing a short sentence along the line of "I must do my homework every day" 50 times.

The most memorable correction that came my way happened on the day Miss Löpfe grabbed me by my ankles and lifted me off the floor, hanging me upside-down exclaiming: "Look here everybody, this is how Rinaldo puts the letters of the alphabet on the writing staff!" - a somewhat harsh correction in today's terms, when you keep in mind that today's teachers are not allowed to even touch a pupil (as I had to learn the hard way when teaching 'Bible in Schools' some years ago here in Pirongia Primary School; but that's another story ...)

I remember how we pupils of primary school years had to shake the teacher's hand every morning when we came to school and every evening when we went home again. What do you think, was this a good or a bad rule? Did we learn respect for authority in this way? As it was befitting in those God-fearing days, we always started the first lesson of the day with the Lord's prayer.

Religious instructions consisted mainly in learning prayers and pious statements by heart from the catechism. These lessons were imparted by the elderly priest once a week. I remember some rather frightful interludes, since the priest expected full concentration on 'matters at hand', with little understanding for his subjects.

Most religious learning was under duress, and there was specific punishment for poor memory as well as poor effort. For boys it was advantageous to have a short hair style since it made it difficult for the teacher or the priest to admonish correction by pulling a snippet of hair upwards.

For extreme cases of misbehaviour the culprit had to kneel on the floor in a corner of the classroom for a lengthy time without sitting down on his (or her, but mostly his...) heels. Imagine today's students receiving such punishment for antisocial behaviour!

Unlike some of my more unruly school mates I never came into contact with the teacher's 'Stecken', the bottom part of a willow tree branch, but I well remember the day when the teacher of the upper-primary class went for his instrument of correction, kept on top of the library cupboard, and found that it had mysteriously disappeared. It never came to light who the criminal was that had done the magic deed...!

Wintertime

Winter was especially demanding on short legs with inadequate protective clothing against snow and ice. I shall never forget how hard it was to make tracks through unexpected and high snowdrifts on our way up and down from the mountainside to the village of Neu St.Johann to get to school. In those days we had no snow plough to clear the way. We had to reach home by

stomping across several meadows covered with many layers of snow. We had to traverse a small forest and cross a bridge across a mountain stream. Our parents' property 'Bergheimetli' had no access to the road. Sure it was beautiful looking down on to the snow-covered villages of Neu St.Johann and Nesslau, or the mountains circling the valley, but the hardship of having to walk everywhere in winter is hard to describe. Later in life I often asked myself why we never had gumboots to track through the snow. We had to make do with Wadenbinden (a kind of bandages) wrapped around our legs from our boots up to our knees. Invariably the bandages came loose and more often than not we entered the classroom with wet and cold feet.

But winter held lots of enjoyments as well. Maybe you remember the Schneeballschlachten (competitions throwing snow balls at each other), the evenings tramping further up the mountain and then sledging down to the village on icy paths or roads.

But since we had really hard winters in those days, it was no wonder that we children awaited spring anxiously to forget the harsh, long winter months.

This was also the time to prepare for Easter, with the prospect of some extras on the table, such as Easter eggs saved from the production of half a dozen hens, or some chocolate Easter bunnies sent by our dearly loved aunt in Basel.

Sometimes we were due for a new pair of Halbschuhe (dress shoes), a perfect Easter gift for us. The only criterion needed to show them off to our school friends was a countryside without snow. Can you imagine how difficult it can be to walk across sloping paddocks in dress shoes shortly after the snow had melted? One of the biggest worries for our parents were our summer and winter shoes. Of course we had to wear out any 'hand-me-downs' before we got a new pair.