

Memories are history

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At various instances *Rinaldo Rust* told me snippets from his childhood in Toggenburg. I found them so interesting that I asked him to write them down for our readers - and he did so! Thank you, Rinaldo!

Primary School years and confessional divisions

In 1942 my schooling started with 'erste Klasse' in Neu St.Johann.

In Toggenburg, as part of Canton of St. Gallen, the law of the Education Department stated that all children who had reached the age of seven years before the beginning of the school year, the first school day after Easter, had to start Primary School on that day.

Within our rural area and the village communities (Gemeinden) of Nesslau/Neu St.Johann there were some 6 or 7 state funded primary schools and one secondary school situated in the village of Nesslau. If you are aware of the importance of religion in the canton of St. Gallen at that time, you will know that most if not all state schools were also part of a 'Kirchgemeinde' (locally administered community with religious affiliation). This meant that you either belonged to a Protestant or a Catholic school no matter how far from, or how close to one of the schools you lived.

In my and my siblings' case this was the convent school of Neu St.Johann to which we belonged. The irony of it all was that adjacent to my parents' little plot of 3.5 hectares of 'Berglandwirtschaft' (mountain-dairy-farming) there was a small primary school owned and run by the Protestant 'Kirch-und-Schulgemeinde' and therefore unavailable to us.. That is to say we had been welcome there (and it was permitted by the Catholic Church) to take part in Sunday

school lessons until the age of seven. Some of my fondest early childhood memories date back to those years, in spite of the fact that these were times of general worries and deprivations inflicted by World War II.

Poverty

Can you visualise a family of five children with parents and grandparents living off the revenue from 4 or 5 cows on 3.5 hectares of rolling farm land with some further 2 hectares leased from a neighbour in the harsh climate of Toggenburg? Especially during the war years there was widespread hunger among the population in the upper part of Toggenburg.

One day the local doctor visited our school and made us stand in line, and we were ordered to poke out our tongue. A friend of mine together with his brother were asked to see the doctor privately. After many inquisitive questions my friend told me that the doctor had detected severe undernourishment by looking at their tongue. My friend was informed by the doctor that some relief food would be sent to his parents. My friend's father was a 'Tagelöhner' with intermittent income only, and I well remember how sorry we felt for the whole family in distress.

Despite the glaring facts of malnutrition in those days, no one would freely admit to it, as it would have meant admitting to the stigma of failure.

There was little help from authorities during those years in Switzerland, with near total absence of any kind of 'welfare system'...! Today it is hard to make people understand why some Swiss emigrated from such a beautiful country as it was then and still is today...!

During the last years of World War II the undernourishment in our school became more pronounced and a few of us became infected with tuberculosis. I well

remember my sister and myself having to submit ourselves (in the interest of containing the infections) to a fortnightly examination with x-rays. Our infection was not very serious since we only had a 'shadow' on our lungs. But for a time we were ordered not to associate with one of our friends who was thought to be a carrier of the disease.

Special days

What a longing for 'days of extras' like Easter, Christmas and birthdays for children of the time. I can remember so many joyful occasions, like the long spring school holidays when the first flowers might appear after months of drudging through snow and inclement weather on the long way to and from school four times a day. The unexpected and intermittent days of 'Heuferien' (days when farmers' children were allowed to stay home to be able to help with hay-making). The fun we had picking 'Herdöpfelchäfer' (collecting beetles from potato plants on the plantation of the 'Bürgerheim') in order to earn some school funds for 'Schulreise', or the fun we had collecting old newspapers and cardboard for a similar purpose. The joy of giving and receiving at school on Christmas Eve! 10 cents had been collected all round to present the teacher with a suitable gift and in return we found a small candle burning on our desk with a small 'Biberli' (a form of ginger bread cookie without ginger). As a concession to the happiest day on the school calendar we were allowed to read from a library book and sing Christmas carols instead of doing 'real' school work. And of course there were annual excursions, the 'Schulreise,' mostly on restricted budgets. But I remember that we made it once to Lucerne and once even to Sachseln, subsidised by the Church, to help celebrate when 'Bruder Klaus' was declared a saint - the only Swiss saint at the time.