

BOOK REVIEW

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GESCHICHTE ERFAHRBAR

ZUR WIEDERENTDECKUNG DES ERZÄHLENDEN GESCHICHTSUNTERRICHTS
(THE RETURN OF STORY-TELLING HISTORY TEACHING)

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"Our cat wanted to kitten, she tried and . . . she succeeded!"

This sentence out of a schoolboy's essay stuck in my mind, when I had started to read Hering's book. For it looks forbidding: it is printed in very small letters on densely packed pages - 312 in all - and on grey, recycled paper (but then it costs only DM 19,50). Nevertheless "I wanted to read it, I tried and ... I succeeded". For once started I kept going, always interested, often captivated, sometimes even fascinated. This is not only because Hering's style is happily free from that horrifying sociological jargon many Germans (but not only they!) are excelling in. For although this is already a great asset, its real importance lies in the thesis it presents and in the way it is handled.

As we all know story-telling history teaching is coming back into its own again, we are all witnessing 'a rebirth of story-telling history' (the subtitle of Hering's book). Right in the beginning we find a quotation of the German romantic poet Novalis: "it seems to me that a historian must necessarily be a poet too, for only poets understand to connect events rightly". We should err badly, if we supposed that the author is pleading for the triumphal comeback of the story-telling teacher. The days of the so-called "epic" history teaching that consisted mainly of the stories the teacher told lie behind us, and we must not try to restore this outlived situation. I don't think we must allow ourselves to be misled by the praise so often lavished on the "good" history teacher: 'he was a fantastic story-teller'. For in my opinion this may mean too that the speaker is secretly glad that he has had nothing else to do than to listen to nice stories.

No, Hering wants to put story-telling history teaching on quite another footing. On page 224 we read a sentence (it has a very familiar ring for me!) which determines the character of this whole book: "Among the aims of story-telling history teaching may be operative this one that it enables the pupils to tell their own history" (underlining by the author). This does certainly not mean a solid training in story telling with the result that the pupils, once grown up, are able to tell entertaining stories about their own lives, for instance to enliven a little the usual conversation in doctors' waiting rooms! Not at all! What it means is that history teaching must enable the pupil to fit his individual history into the general context of regional, national and human history, without existential loss to both parties. The final result must be meaningful for the individual (the meaning of general history must not wipe out the meaning of his own existence) and enriching for general history (that is for mankind).

In his first chapter Hering traces how modern history teaching came into being. As we all know history as a school subject has not a long pedigree (but much longer than history as a scientific discipline). It started from very modest beginnings in the sixteenth century and grew only slowly in importance and scope. As far as history was taught in the eighteenth century - not all children went to the primary school, and only a few visited a secondary one - it consisted more of "stories" (with an exemplary or moralistic flavour) than of "history". The pattern of the world was still seen as organic and God-given, nobody thought of history as a means to change the world. History had to be useful, it served as "magistra vitae", of its moral and practical sides above all. What the stories taught were "exempla". That the world may be "makeable" is a notion that originated with the Enlightenment. This has been above all a pedagogical movement - in its wake we are all still living - which wanted to liberate people from their feudal bonds and to teach them to think for themselves.

It was no longer allowed to take the world as it is, and in that process history teaching became a very important instrument.

The modern teachers try to influence and to alter the mentality of the school children. The "exempla" with their stabilizing tendency were no longer considered sufficient; what was needed was a history teaching with a much more political and social character. In Germany - but I think in other countries the situation did not differ very much - patriotism has been a very important ingredient of the new historical education, but for the enlightened and progressive citizens this notion remained connected with the ideal of a liberal and democratic state. After the foundation of the Second German Empire in 1871 however this ideal had to make place for the veneration, even adoration of the Emperor, and more generally spoken, the adulation of all authorities. History teaching was certainly "story-telling" then, above all in the primary school, but these stories give us a bad taste in the mouth now. Hering provides a good many instances of them. The aim of history teaching had become to make people manageable, to adapt them to the existing (politico-social) situation. The difference with the pre-Enlightenment days is that then people were trained to take the world as it is (and nobody could help that!), but now they were trained to accept a historical, that is to say a man-made situation.

Hering is very critical of this kind of history teaching. His main point is that history is no longer "erfahrbar" (the title of his book), cannot be "experienced"; the pupils "undergo" it, it is a kind of massage of the mind, but it does not become what Thucydides called a "ktêma eis aei", a permanent personal possession. What the teacher needed was not so much a personal approach to history, so that he could help his pupils to find their own way too, but rather a good technique, a good method of transmittance. In this conception of history the state is the embodiment of everything that is good, and the pupil is the object of history teaching, with the end to educate

him in this idea. The role of the teacher is that of the mediator between the state and the pupil.

Nowadays every one of us scorns notions such as these of course. Patriotism has become an outmoded term, nationalism is put on a par with chauvinism, we do not want to be subservient to the powers that be. But which powers do we serve then? For I am very much afraid that we have not yet reached the situation in which history teaching serves only one master: Truth! The answer Hering gives will surely not make him popular with some of our colleagues, but anyhow, I admire his courage in discussing these things.

First of all he takes a close look at "Geschichtliche Weltkunde", the well-known history textbook by Wolfgang Hug c.s. This modern textbook presents itself as a problem-orientated method, it wants to teach children to question history, and therefore it aims at enabling the children to handle historical material independently. Hering's criticism is very incisive indeed, for in his opinion the result of this method is just the reverse of what the authors intend. They do not train the pupils to handle historical material independently, but on the contrary, they lead them, so Hering says, along a "Trampelpfad" (something like a "stumping path") along which real history gets lost. Hering has chosen this special book more or less at random, because it is a well-known and widespread textbook in the Federal Republic. He might however have picked any of a great number of others in- and outside Germany, for I am afraid his main points of criticism appertain also or perhaps even more to other textbooks. These points are the following. 1. An ample and sufficient treatment of whatsoever subject is impossible, since the book may not become too bulky. 2. The publishers wish to sell their books as widely as possible, this means that the schoolbooks are "nationalized", they do allow scope for regional history. 3. Writing schoolbooks is not a professional affair, but nearly always a leisure activity (I may add, even if professors write a schoolbook, it does not become

something professional in this way, I am afraid still less). With the near monopoly of the great publishing houses "alternative" schoolbooks stand no chance. 4. The schoolbook authors are writing under the pressure of official educational regulations, curricula and syllabuses, of didactical and methodical fashions, of the expectations of school inspectors, schoolboards, headmasters, colleagues, pupils and their parents (who have to pay for them), and especially of the teachers who form a team with them (and, may I add again, also of the four centuries old tradition of schoolbook writing).

The second object of Hering's critical reflexions is Annette Kuhn, the well-known exponent of the notion of "history teaching as emancipation". A historical (and political) education of this kind is only then feasible, if the teacher knows exactly what an emancipated grown-up looks like, and that is only then possible if he is a "liberated" person himself. For in that case he will be able to liberate his pupils from the feudal bonds they still live in and to educate them for an emancipated existence. This means that teaching must be carefully planned and structured. But the inescapable consequence of this planning is that it is no longer free; instead of creative it becomes dirigiste. It starts from the (axiomatic) premiss that all pupils have the same interest in their emancipation. If they are not interested, this means that they are still burdened by their shackles. The consequence of this view point is that all personal experiences of the pupils are ruled out in favour of a preconceived didactical and ideological system. The result is, in Hering's words, that personal experiences are destroyed by theory.

Having thus staked off his own territory against all others Hering then turns to the characteristics of stories. We need stories, all of us, we cannot live without stories, because we live in relationships, and that is what stories offer to us: cohesion, the connections of persons and things and events. What stories present to us is the cohesion of the space in which we live. The man who

describes his living-room is telling a story, but the same applies to a description of the cosmos! Stories present to us time as the cohesion of events, they say that events are connected with one another and that 'no man is an island'. And they show us too that all stories have an ethical dimension. Continuously they ask us: was this right, was this just, was this human? Mind, these questions are not those that are put by the teacher to his pupils, no, they are in the stories. Even the most simple story asks for a reaction varying from 'I do not like it' to 'what should I have done in this situation?'

To sum up, every story presents an experience, and every story asks us to enter into this experience. We become "ensnared" in them. I had better used the German word "verstrickt", because this immediately draws our attention to two extremely important books of Wilhelm Schapp. In *Geschichten verstrickt. Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* (Wiesbaden 1976², 1953¹), and *Philosophie der Geschichten* (Wiesbaden 1975², 1959¹, this last one not mentioned in Hering's reading list). These books are at the back of Hering's mind (he does not deny it, on the contrary), as they are on mine too since our fellow-member Erich Schwerdtfeger (to whom the book under review is dedicated) drew my attention to them. I can recommend them to every of us who can read German. History teaching, Hering concludes, which demands of the pupils an exposition of their attitudes, of their own view points, must tell stories.

Now everybody knows that modern historical science is not exactly mad on story-telling, and that even in history teaching it has suffered a bad decline. Story-telling, so the pundits say, is subjective, it gives the view point of only this special spokesman, it maims reality as it overvalues persons and undervalues structures, it plays into the hands of the often denounced personalization of history, but prevents a more theoretical and objective approach. It is of course quite true that these reproofs apply to a certain kind of story-telling which has been, it must be admitted, the usual practice in

history teaching more often than not, especially in primary education but also in secondary schools. But it must again be stated most emphatically that Hering is not pleading for the return of this kind of history teaching. His ideal is not that of the history lesson in which the teacher's task mainly consists in telling nice stories and the children's part is that of listening attentively. But he rebels against the scientist approach that has been threatening history teaching for a long time and is now slowly but certainly overwhelming it. This resistance has also been the main issue of the now extinct "exemplarische Bewegung". What I mean is that we now need very specialized, not to say sophisticated tools to discover what is the truth, the truth "behind the reality", 'to get at the bottom of it', as the expression goes ("dahintergekommen" in German and the same in Dutch), as if the truth is something deeply hidden, to be found out only by the trained eye of the historian.

Hering does not say either that "structures" and "theory" and similar things have to be kept out of history teaching. No, but what he is pleading for is a kind of history teaching that starts from the authentic sources; the pupils must learn to handle these stories independently. There has never been such an approach, he says, but I do not think this is quite right. This is a consequence of the fact that he has consulted only German literature. But there have been approaches like these - and very elaborate ones too - in the USA, in Spain and in the Netherlands.

I am afraid the last part, the chapter on method, is the weakest part of this important book - which contains a lot more than I can reproduce here. First of all, this chapter is too "impressionist", it is not "methodical" enough. I regret also that Hering does not make it sufficiently clear that it is certainly not always the teacher who must tell the stories; he could have said much more about the use of sources by the pupils. Perhaps this is a consequence of the fact that the author teaches in the German "Volks-

schule" and "Hauptschule", that is to say to the younger half of the school population. Perhaps it is also therefore that the examples he gives of his working-method are not very convincing to those of us who teach older pupils. It would have been much better if Hering had uncoupled this part of his book and made it into a separate, practical, methodical volume. Perhaps these defects are the outcome of our ineradicable superstition that at all events an educational book has to be "practical" too.

Each chapter has many notes, and there is a long reading list but no register. Hering's work is a dissertation at Dortmund University which yielded him the title of doctor. He must be congratulated on this final result of his academic studies but still more on this intelligent, forceful and original book. I should like to see it in the hands of many of our members.

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