

Triangel

Triangel was a sleepy little village of about 200 clustered around a small old school and an old "Guut" (landed estate), both of which looked like they had been there forever. There was a small inn that served as the post office and a very small building at the train stop. Most of the time it was a shuttle train which was no more than some sort of powered lead car and maybe two cars at the most. Now and then a real puffing train would come to pick up the insulating boards from the small factory that could be seen way in the distance. There was also a rail spur to the factory on which a small shuttle locomotive would go back and forth now and then. On the other side of the village past the school were the shanties of the workers at the "Guut", and also a small store that was part of a dwelling. They would have a few dry goods and milk, and also repaired bicycles. The factory had a small truck that would only rarely be used. That was the totality of the motorized vehicles.

We were the last house on the narrow cobblestone road as it went out to the north, with the long straight drainage ditch always next to it. About half a mile away started the village of Platendorf, literally translated as "flat" Dorf (village), and it was truly flat and long. Via the wonders of the internet I have since found out that Platendorf is noted as the longest, straightest village in all of Germany, a full nine miles long end to end, and with only a single street, and that it was a result of having harvested peat for a century and going ever further into the moor and having turned the land into productive soil.

Farmsteads extended like rungs on a ladder on either side. Each bordered directly on the road, with an enclosed dirt floored barn that also served as the entrance to each attached house that looked like it had been looking like that for the last couple of hundred years. When I made a short detour to the area in 1969 while on field service for Texas Instruments in southern Germany, things looked exactly as they had in 1950 when we left, except that distances had shrunk. Oh how much smaller the world looked from the car than it had looked from a bicycle or on foot. Each farmstead had only about ten acres or so directly behind it.

Platendorf sprouted a butcher shop, a tailor, a Lutheran Church, and a railroad stop on the far end, and nothing else. I do not remember a barber in that village and there certainly was none in Triangel, and I do not remember who cut our hair. I guess my parents did. There were no telephones although there was electricity. There also was no doctor or dentist in Triangel or Platendorf. Healthcare was home based, and I still have a copy of the big book with remedies titled "The woman as house doctor", all in German of course.

In the other direction the road went to the town of Gifhorn, about four miles away, where I would be going to middle school starting with the fifth grade, and where I had just started the seventh grade when we left for Houston. Along the road on both sides were massive linden trees that we were told were planted by the French general Napoleon. I now know that Napoleon did not plant them himself, but they nevertheless must have been planted sometime around 1800 when Napoleon was the scourge of Europe, having come to power shortly after the French revolution. Across the street from our house were

fields usually planted in beets used as animal feeds, with a state forest planted in pines in the distance.

I remember the daily run of the milk wagon as it came by the house. It was a flatbed wagon, with rubber tires, being pulled by horses. On the back were the metal canisters of milk being taken from the farms to Gifhorn. These were some of the few horses, as all the farmers were using milk cows for their draft animals, and their wagons had wooded wheels with steel rims.

Right in front of our house branched another cobblestone road going to the elementary school and the heart of the village. There was another drainage ditch beside it that went by the German equivalent of "stinky ditch", and was an open sewer covered by duckweed. I do remember somehow winding up in it, bicycle or tricycle and all. It was more embarrassment than real danger. I do not have any memory of how I got cleaned up so there must have been some elder to get me out of my smear.

About a half mile down this road one would cross the "stinky ditch" and be at the village school, the first building on "main street", which was nothing more than a narrow dirt alley with small wooden shanties bordering "stinky ditch" on the back.

Right across the street from the schoolhouse was the outhouse. There was a very small courtyard right next to the schoolroom windows, with a hand pump for drawing drinking water. The schoolroom was simplicity itself, with a blackboard against the wall, with a table in front of it. The benches can best be described as the equivalent of wooden church pews, except there was a small shelf in front for writing. There was a single aisle down the middle of the room with maybe five students on either side. The aisles totaled maybe six, although I don't think we had more than about twenty-five students total.

At the front of the class, and one step up, was the door to the part of the schoolhouse where the teacher lived. He would be teaching grades 1 through 8 at the same time. That was as high as the basic education went. How He managed, I still wonder, but I do remember he had a "whacking stick", and he did use it, though mainly to make loud noises. There was really no way for a kid to get out of line. He was boxed in by the windows on one side, by a wall on the other side of the room by the students next to him, and the teacher walking up and down the single aisle. Anyhow I do not remember there ever being any disruption in class. The teacher was in total control.

School was six days a week, but only for half a day. We had no need for a lunch room and all the other necessities of modern education. Sports was on an empty field between "main street" and the railroad tracks that connected the sheet rock mill with the main railroad line. We did have two goal posts and a track around the field, but school was strictly a low overhead operation.

I do not remember having any textbooks and certainly none were issued to take home. We would do our homework on the front and back of a slate on which we scratched with a scribe. There was of course no way for us to turn our homework "in". I also do not

remember ever receiving a grade on anything, including a report card, to be taken back to our parents.

The fourth grade marked a transition in the German school system, although I did not fully recognize it at the time. Sometime during the fourth year, and depending on the recommendation of a teacher, students would be sent to take a test to see if they would be accepted by what was called a middle school. I remember going to take the test and also remember many of my fourth grade classmates not making it. They would have another chance at the end of the fifth year, but most of them did not make it either, and leave school with only an eighth grade education. And of course the kids in the lower grades at the elementary school would know that the older kids at the back of the class were the ones who had not made it in the previous years. What a way to put pressure on a kid to make him study by letting him see daily what could happen if one did not apply oneself.

I do not remember much about the subjects in elementary school, except that there must have been the three R's, except that they were in German. What I do remember is the heavy emphasis on local history, that is what was around us. I guess that is all kids at that age can really comprehend anyway. There is not much use in explaining World War II to an eight year old right in the middle of it.

I do know that the whole class went out into the potato fields looking for "English beetles". Something about the English dropping them from airplanes on the potato fields, but we never found one. "English beetle" was the Colorado potato beetle. Polio went by the name of "the English disease", other ailments were the "French disease", etc. No wonder that after the war they threw away whatever text or song books there may have been around.

Other than the workers at the "Guut" there were a few independent small farmers around, with a little land around their farm, and a few more fields that they owned scattered here and there where they were growing mainly beets for feeding the animals in the winter. . There were no fences, and of course no herds of cattle. It is simply too cold for too long during the winter, and the few milk cows would spend most of their lives in the barn. I do, however, remember going visiting and helping to take cows out for grazing on the back roads. There were of course no cars and no accidents. In fact I do not remember anybody ever getting hurt, or robbed, or anything getting stolen, even with the village having no police. Life was simple.