School Reform in Hesse

WHEN AMERICANS first came into Germany, educators and MG officers agreed that many reforms were necessary. Probably the greatest affront to freedom-loving Americans was the caste system so apparent upon first contact with German officials and citizens.

The reform, most Americans believed, must start with the youth, and to the youngsters must be given the essential lessons of basic, human equality. To see why the first American occupiers looked so strongly to the children, let us examine any elementary school classroom in Germany as it existed in 1945-46.

A bright, inquisitive little girl is sitting at her desk. She is the leader of her fourth-year class and the brightest pupil in her age in the city. She is 10 years old and she is facing the greatest decision in her life. She, however, does not make that decision; it is made for her by her father, owner of a small linen shop and a man of very moderate means. At the age of 10 her entire future life, her occupation, her friends, her social life, her future husband, probably, all hang on the decision her father makes as to whether she is allowed to take the examination for admittance to an academic high school.

Her father, ignoring the youngster’s talent and ability, feels that an academic and university education is unimportant for a girl. She is enrolled at the Volksschule (elementary school) and is to finish the eight-year course, where most of her time is to be spent studying German, arithmetic and religion. Once graduated from the Volksschule, she is to serve an apprenticeship in her father’s store and then take an examination as a salesgirl. She might have had a distinct talent for law, medicine or the arts, but at the age of 10 years she lost all chance of proving it.

Next to the little girl, in the fourth-year classroom, is a 10-year-old boy. He faces the same decision. His father, a minor civil servant, decides that his son also shall be a civil servant, so the young man is enrolled at the Mittelschule (middle school) where he spends a total of 10 years, and where, after the fourth year, his courses are entirely different from those of the little girl at Volksschule. At the end of his schooling, he decides he wants to go to the university to study engineering. In order to enter the university, he must make up two more years of school and also many of the subjects taught in the Gymnasium (higher school), which he did not have from the fourth to the 10th year.

IN THE SAME SCHOOLROOM there is another little boy also 10 years of age and also a very bright student. He faces no decision. The decision the universities would have already been filled.

In Hesse, almost 12,000 students are taking university training; before the war less than 5,000 students were enrolled in the universities of the state. Only a little over 1,700 may be admitted each year. Over 2,000 are graduated from high school each spring and more and more former soldiers are seeking to continue their studies interrupted by the war.

Actually, the young man would have much preferred to have gone to a trade school and studied mechanics for which he had a natural flair, but his academic training had not prepared him for a change. He had been destined for the university and a career in medicine when he was 10 years old. In the Gymnasium, he had devoted 28 percent of his time for nine years of the 12 year course to Latin and Greek, another seven percent to modern languages and 23 percent to German and mathematics. Less than 10 percent of his time was devoted to social studies.

Returning to the fourth-year class we find that only 10 percent of the (Continued on next page)

Dr. Newman, author of this article, at a conference with Lt. Gen. Clarence R. Huebner, now acting military governor, at the latter’s office in Frankfurt in April 1948. Attending the conference are: (left to right) Dr. Harry Wann, then director of the Education Division, OMGH; Dean William S. Russell of Columbia University, Dr. Newman and General Huebner.

(JUS Army photo)
youngsters will be permitted to go to the Gymnasium. First, their parents must be willing that they compete for the entrance examinations; and second, they must be able to pay the tuition fees, for only the Volksschule is free.

The children who stand highest on the competitive list and whose parents can afford the tuition are selected for matriculation. Yet, at the beginning of the occupation when these conditions existed, German educators stoutly asserted that all intelligent youngsters were being admitted to the higher schools.

MORE IMPORTANT, the die was cast in so far as social separation was concerned. The caste system was starting and developing. The little girl who continued in the Volksschule no longer was invited to the parties of the middle-school pupils, and the future civil servant no longer associated with the future medical student. The barrier had been erected.

To quote from an article in the "American School Board Journal," by Vaughan R. De Long, chief of education division, OMG Hesse, students "were trained in a school system that emphasized and deepened the (class) differences instead of lessening them, a school system which even in its academic training was entirely vocational with little or no training in the basic elements of social living or of international understanding and cooperation. From the time . . . children entered these different types of schools in their fifth school year, their ways became ever more divergent. Each course of study was different from the other."

The real purpose of the German school system was selection and elimination rather than education. This was borne out by the fact that the average Gymnasium had one teacher to every 30 pupils; the Volksschule had one teacher to every 60 pupils. This was justified by German educators on the ground that brighter pupils had earned such advantages. Yet recent studies under the American occupation show that the average ability of elementary school students was but slightly below that of gymnasium pupils, the supposedly highly-selected group.

Even the teachers in the various schools took different training. Elementary school teachers attended a special seminary for training elementary school teachers after completing the elementary course of study. The academic instructors, however, took specific training in the university in order to become high school teachers. The entire educational system tended to create an elite class of leaders from whom all others took their leadership. The five to 10 percent of the university-trained people became the "superior" class.

These were the school problems, then, that faced the MG educators. Before the solution could be found schools had to be located, troops moved out of them, the buildings repaired, teachers denazified and demilitarized, Nazi textbooks eliminated and new textbooks—often denazified by the use of scissors and glue—distributed, and paper, pencils and teaching aids procured and given out. These mechanics of education consumed most of the time in 1945 and 1946 and little active thought could be given to a school reform, as such, in Hesse.

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OMGUS, in January 1947, had established the 10 basic doctrines for rebuilding the German school system. It was a decision to teach democracy by example. It would have taken far less time to impose democratic education by decree, but the Germans would not have learned the actual practice of democracy if their schools had been reformed by MG order. Thus instead of ordering, committees of Hessian citizens were formed to study and recommend a new educational system. Every facet of life and every section of the state were represented on one or more of the working parties studying educational reform.

THIS GROUP received semi-official status when the Ministry of Education, in January 1948, appointed it the State School Advisory Board. Certain reforms were recommended and even tested in typical schools within Hesse. In order to bring the general public—especially the parents—in contact with the problem, special discussion groups were formed and meetings held. Student government was instituted in most schools and visiting education experts gave generously of time and advice, while German educators were sent abroad to see how education had advanced in other countries during the war. School reform was on the verge of becoming a reality.

The first break came in April 1947, when, by a Ministry of Education decree, tuition costs in high schools and universities were discontinued. In February 1949, the Hessian legis-

As there was no heat for schools in the early days of the occupation, a teacher and 5th grade pupils wear their hats and coats during class in a Frankfurt school in February 1946.

(US Army photo)
lature confirmed this ministerial decree and even provided free tuition in all schools of the state, free school books and free school materials. The first real breach in the age-old caste system had been made. Further progress was inevitable. A few days later, the same legislative body passed a law providing for standard curriculum in all schools. Opportunity for educational equality was an actuality. With legislative enactment the real fundamentals of school reform were implemented and teeth were put into Hessian school reform by the educators themselves.

Basically, the implementing regulations provide for three separate methods of insuring educational equality: first of all, a uniform objective test is given to all pupils in the fourth grade prior to selection of new pupils to the middle school and the high school. In February 1949, almost 61,000 young Hessian took this competitive examination which tests intelligence, knowledge, achievement and aptitude. Selections to higher study are now determined by ability rather than by social group, family tradition or ability to pay.

The second basic innovation is the uniform course of study for all fifth grade classes regardless of school. With the uniform course, the over-specialization and practical impossibility of changing courses of study in the future is eliminated. Freedom for the student to change his mind is a reality.

The third action by the Hessian educators is another objective test to be given at the end of the fifth school year in order again to bring objective influences into play to show that all of the best students are not in the Gymnasium, and to provide students desiring to change from Volksschule to Gymnasium the opportunity for an easy switch of program. It is expected that these achievement tests will be given at the end of each year for at least the first eight years of study.

Returning to the second directive, equalization of curriculum, I believe it well to point out that prior to this change a different history, a different geography, a different German and even a different course in mathematics were taught at the different schools. The plan now in operation in Hesse has all pupils of like grade learning same courses from the same books. In addition to the other courses, the gymnasion student starts his Latin studies in the fifth school year but a student changing from, say Volksschule to Gymnasium, can make up this course without undue burden. Thus the course of study will no longer be such a deciding influence in the youngster's life.

Free tuition plus common testing and common curriculum has led to an unexpected trend: greater interest on the part of the parent. In the short since the reform was instituted OMG Hesse education officials have noted an ever-increasing interest on the part of fathers and mothers. This in itself is far more significant than legislative enactment. For the first time tradition-bound parents are inquiring as to why their youngster has not been admitted to the Gymnasium and are interesting themselves in his studies and his extra-curricular activities.

Further, now that the grocer's son and the banker's son are really schoolmates and friends, the grocer and the banker are becoming better acquainted. The caste walls are beginning to crumble at the roots. With this awakening of parental interest, I predict that parents will become increasingly active in demanding greater equalities for their children—more facilities, better courses of study and eventually a chance for every youngster to go on to a free university.

The reform has also affected the school laws themselves. The Ministry of Education drafted a law for a school organization of six years of elementary school studies. In the draft, the ministry included a lengthy justification of the proposal. The draft was then circulated among the citizens and invited their comments and criticism. This is believed to be the first time in the history of Germany that such type legislation has been given to the people in an unofficial referendum before being presented to the legislature.

Also submitted for public consideration is the draft of a law which breaks sharply with German educational tradition. This draft, which has been agreed to by the educators of the state, provides that all new teacher training students must have completed high school and that all teacher trainees will have at least one full year of common training. Herefore, the elementary school teacher did not need a high school education and his teacher training was far differ-

ent from that of his colleague in the high school.

With school reform came a change in thinking and textbooks have been radically changed. A new English primer, called "It's Quite Easy," is a lively, illustrated text. It is now used in all fifth grade classes. New history texts which teach history never learned by members of the former Wehrmacht will soon be making an appearance in all schools. A new geography is being taught, and best of all, it is being taught to all pupils in the same grade regardless of school.

Since the start of the occupation, education in Hesse has been advanced by several years. It was accomplished not as a miracle, but by the determined effort on the part of a number of sincere educators who loved and believed in democracy. Educational reform was not realized by military order or occupational decree but was the work of the Hessian themselves guided by democratic example. School reform in Hesse is the result of practicing democracy, and it can be used as the example for further orientation to the cause of freedom and peace.

Officials of the nearly formed Federated Rod and Gun Clubs in Europe, an organization comprising all American fishing and hunting societies in EUCOM, are: (left to right standing) Mr. Homer Lyons of Augsburg, president; Lt. Col. Ward R. Betz of Wiesbaden, vice president; Mr. James K. Davis of Munich, secretary; (iron) T/Sgt. Patsy Fontana of Oberplattenhofen Air Base, treasurer; Major Henry C. Becker of Heidelberg, member at large. (US Army photo)