

JOHANN GEORG WIRTH 1807-1851

The history of public infant education in Germany received important impulses by Samuel Wilderspin, whose work: "On the Importance of Educating the Infant Poor..." 1826 (2nd edition 1828) was translated into German. Starting in 1826, the development in Germany rapidly divided into three directions, presenting themselves under the names of "Nursery-School", "Infant School" and "Kindergarten". At first the infant schools being intensively promoted by protestant authors, like Fliedner and Ranke, stood for a strictly confessional (protestant and later also catholic) objective. The Kindergarten (since 1840) is based on Fröbel's over-confessional ideas.

Nursery-Schools are repeatedly described as early and programmatically imperfect predecessors of infant schools and kindergartens. This judgement is not right, for there is extensive literature for the purposes of nursery-schools, indicating a high standard of efficiency both in discussion and practical work. Johann Georg Wirth, in particular, being the head of the Augsburg nursery-school for many years, made a broad audience familiar with the tasks and objectives of nursery-schools by several extensive publications.

Johann Georg Wirth was born in 1807. After his teacher's examination at the Altdorf seminary in 1830 he became a teacher at the evangelical orphanage in Augsburg. Since 1832 he had taken part in the working out of the plans for the first municipal nursery-school in Augsburg, whose headmaster he became after its opening. The success of this institution led to the foundation of a second and a third nursery-school

in Augsburg already in 1835.

After several years of practice as a head master and teacher at these three nursery-schools Wirth published his considerations concerning the programme of the nursery-school in 1838 and 1840:

- 1) Über Kleinkinderbewahranstalten. Eine Anleitung zur Errichtung solcher Anstalten so wie zur Behandlung der in denselben vorkommenden Lehrgegenstände, Handarbeiten, Spiele und sonstigen Vorgänge. Im Anhang Mitteilungen über die Einführung der Bewahranstalten auf dem Lande und über Errichtung von Vorschulen für Kindsmägde, dann geschichtliche Notizen über die Kleinkinderbewahranstalten in Augsburg. Mit lithographierten Abbildungen. Augsburg 1838.

(On Nursery-Schools. A guide to the foundation of such institutions, as well as the treatment of the teaching subjects involved...)

- 2) Die Kinderstube, ein Buch für Mütter und Kindsmägde, besonders aber auch für Familienväter, Lehrer, Hofmeister, Gouvernantinnen, Kleinkinderbewahranstalten etc. Im Anhang Erzählungen für Kindsmägde. Mit lithographierten Abbildungen Augsburg, 1940.

(The Nursery at Home, a book for mothers and nursery maids, but also and in particular for the father of the family...)

- 3) Mitteilungen über Kleinkinderbewahranstalten und aus denselben, sowie über Kleinkinderschulen und Rettungsschulen für verwaiste Kinder. Im Anhang: Behandlung über darauf Bezug habenden "Literatur" und "Nachrichten über eine praktisch-technische Lehranstalt in München". Ein Handbuch für Vorsteher, Vorsteherinnen, Lehrer, Aufseher und Pflegerinnen solcher Anstalten, besonders aber auch für "Frauenvereine", dann für Freunde des Erziehungswesens überhaupt. Augsburg 1840.

(Some Information on Nursery-Schools and about life within them, as well as on infant schools...).

In "Mitteilungen" (Some Information), a book of 300 pages, Johann Georg Wirth presents a survey of all foundations of nursery-schools known to him by 1839/40. An analysis of contemporary criticism of public infant education is followed by an alphabetical list of more than 180 institutions in Europe, the U.S.A., Africa and New Zealand. Of course, reports about the southern part of Germany are predominant, most probably giving a complete survey of the existing institutions, beside more incidental news from far-away countries.

This publication is of great importance for the history

of public infant education. Being quite extensive in part, these reports on individual institutions contain statements of account, the yearly budget plans and the articles of associations for nursery-schools. As a source collection of similar extensivity was not published in Germany in the 19th century, this work is a treasury for the historian. The collection of material and data on the early development of public infant education in Germany given in "Mitteilungen" allows a comprehensive insight into the problems and possibilities of public infant education before Fröbel's kindergartens became known.

Because of this important collection Johann Georg Wirth can be called the first "historian" of public infant education in Germany.

Since 1836 Johann Georg Wirth had been trying to affiliate an institution for the training of the staff to the Augsburg nursery-school. After his plans had failed, due to the rejection by the Augsburg municipal administration, Wirth wrote "Kinderstube" (The Nursery at Home). In this book Wirth tried to make useful the positive experiences of public infant education for the improvement of the domestic education in the family.

Indications of the necessity of a careful linguistic and cognitive, emotional and social education, reflecting Pestalozzi's thoughts, are connected by Wirth with advice to parents for the instruction of young inexperienced nursery maids. In those days the insufficient training of nursery was a popular topic for numerous authors and, beside other factors, a reason for the call for nursery-schools.

The book "Über Kleinkinderbewahranstalten" (On Nursery-Schools), however, can doubtlessly be considered Johann Georg Wirth's pedagogical main work, in which he laid down the total of his pedagogical experience.

This work is an extensive book of reference, giving practical directions for the establishment of nursery-schools and their daily running. On the basis of his Augsburg

experiences and examined by them Johann Georg Wirth worked through and compiled systematically the entire literature on public infant education published up to then but unfortunately without mentioning the exact sources, as it was usual then.

This seeming deficiency of originality, this, at first sight, compilatory character, however, has an invaluable advantage for today's reader: with this Wirth presented a work surveying and summarizing the methodical consideration on public infant education, proven in practice up to the year of 1838. Until far into the second half of the nineteenth century there was not one work on public infant education within the area of German language comparable to this, concerning practical competence and theoretical differentiation, and offering a similarly exact insight into the practical tasks of public infant education.

In its first part the work contains a survey of the inner and outer equipment of nursery-schools (52 pages). Its second part (225 pages) deals with methodical questions, explained by the kinds of occupation for the children: lessons, handicraft and game. Its third part (23 pages) shows possibilities of integrating the public holidays (Easter, Whithun, Christmas), and the living situations of the child: birthday and Saint's day, but also disease and death of brothers or sisters, into the daily and yearly programme of the nursery-school.

The appendix (52 pages) makes proposals for the organization of nursery-schools in rural districts and contains a short history of the Augsburg nursery-school. 24 songs with their tunes and 4 tables showing furniture, working material, playing devices, and blackboard drawings complete the appendix.

Every topic dealt with, shows Johann Gerog Wirth's scrupulous endeavour to explain the particular tasks of a nursery-school and without anticipation of school teaching, to develop a catalogue of occupations, suitable for the age of the children. Thereby, he does not see the nursery-school as an isolated institution, but he tries to cautiously connect

the children's life in the nursery-school with the outside world of the adults. The nursery-school is the first phase in the life of the children, in which they live as children, and, without haste, can be prepared for further phases, e. g. for school or life in the community and in the circle of relatives and friends.

Johann Georg Wirth's further publications of the following years do not enlarge the systematic survey laid down in his first three works any more. His later scripts contain sporadic methodical examples, and frequently collections of songs and tales for the use in the nursery-school.

During the last years of his life Wirth dedicated himself to the general tasks of the poor-relief and public welfare and deserved well of the reorganization of the municipal poor-relief in Augsburg. In 1851 Johann Georg Wirth died of dropsy at the age of 44.

Johann Georg Wirth's work found great attention among his contemporaries, a fact reflected in the critiques of his publications in German magazines and in which the importance of his work and personality is compared with Samuel Wilderspin. Nevertheless, he was denied broad effectiveness, as in the following years the programmatic controversy between the infant school of strictly confessional character and Fröbel's kindergarten determined the public discussion.

The well-founded broadness and the comprehensive elaboration of Johann Georg Wirth's work, however, allow today's historian to put him on a par with better known great authors of German public infant education like Fliedner, Fölsing, Ranke and Fröbel: his work can be used as a standard of the quality of public infant education achievable in those days.

Ref.:

- Erning, Günter: - Die Gründung der Augsburger Kleinkinderbewahranstalt 1832 - 1834. In: Pädagogische Rundschau, Vol. 31/1977, p. 587 - 602.
- J. G. Wirth und die Gründung der Augsburger Bewahranstalten. Ein Beitrag zur Gründungsgeschichte vorschulischer Einrichtungen der Stadt Augsburg. In: Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Schwaben. Vol. 74/1980, p. 169 - 214.

A Reprint of J. G. Wirth's main work "On Nursery-Schools...", Augsburg 1838 is prepared by the author at Scientia-Verlag, Aalen, FRG, and available by subscription.

Günter Erning