FLIRTING ON THE ICE

German-Baltic Memoirs About Ice-Skating in the 19th and Early 20th Century

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Photo credit: Ice skates around 1900. Mindener Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

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By the 19th century, ice skating had developed into a fashionable pastime for the upper classes. The skating rink became an important public space, where social hierarchies, moral values and notions of gender manifested themselves. In the Baltic states too, skating was an integral part of the lives of the German population, as numerous memoirs attest. But why did it play such an important role for people during their years of childhood and coming-of-age to the extent that it would later feature so prominently in their memoirs?

Ice skating is an invention and tradition of Northern Europe. Starting out as a purely utilitarian activity, it developed over the course of history into a leisure and sporting pursuit. By the 19th century, it had become a fashionable past time among the upper classes – wherever the winters were frosty and ice surfaces formed. The poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock contributed to the spread of this emerging fashion in German-speaking countries with his ode to ice skating from 1767, in which he equated the sport with dancing on ice:

> *...Immortal is my name one day! / I still invent the slipping steel / Its dance! With a lighter swing it flies, / Circling around, more beautiful to see. / ...*[1]

Winter delights no. 17. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek, CC0 1.0

We also find evidence of an enthusiasm for ice skating in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire. Numerous writers of autobiographical texts recount their experiences on the ice with almost rapturous fervor.

From the large number of such writings available, nine published memoirs are presented below – seven by men and two by women. In each, the author describes his or her winter experiences. The descriptions of ice-skating span from the first third of the 19th century into

the 20th century and are predominantly retrospective accounts of the authors' own school and student days in Reval, Dorpat, Mitau and Riga.

Our intention is to present a range of voices from the German minority, so we have included observations by men and women of both 'bourgeois' and aristocratic origin. The available sources only give us insights into “upper class” perspectives. The social dominance of the German upper class becomes clear in the following hegemonic interethnic attributions, and in the authors’ descriptions of their segregation from neighboring Estonians and Latvians.

Ice skating scenes from childhood, adolescence and early adulthood shine with a particular brightness in these people’s memories. The attractiveness of the ice rink is reflected above all in descriptions of encounters with the 'opposite sex'. It appears to have offered a space for incidental encounters and a mode of communication that was less regimented than elsewhere in society. The writers of these memoir and diary entries often compare the skating rink with the dance floor, which was, in contrast, a closed space for predetermined, socially controlled exchange between boys and girls or men and women.

The positive connotations of skating can also be gleaned from the words of regret expressed by those who never learnt the skill. Like the aristocrat Alexander Archibald Igelström, born in 1807, they speak openly in adulthood of this missed opportunity as a kind of personal loss. Igelström reflects on the 1820s:

> *Growing up by the water in the countryside, none of us [children] knew how to swim or skate – it was just not allowed, probably because there was nobody to provide supervision or guidance.*[2]

On the ice rink. Anna Russ / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek, Free access - no reuse

Skating. Hy Sandham / Library of Congress, Free access - no reuse

For the generations of young people that followed, however, skating seems to have become an integral part of the educational canon. Children were expected to attend school in the city, and skating soon became part of the teaching syllabus. This is reported by Eduard von Dellingshausen, who was born 30 years later than Igelström. Unlike Igelström, von Dellingshausen received a school education. He attended the Domschule in Reval, a grammar school for boys of the Estonian nobility, where skating was seen as the traditional winter activity for pupils:

“The Domschule had had a **skating rink** every winter for as long as anyone could remember. It was in the moat that runs along the Domberge hill to the north.”[3]

Later on, he adds:

“Spruce trees adorned the ice rink. There were also a few shelters [...] and a space set aside for music – that was all, and yet this skating rink meant so much to us pupils.”[4]

A few lines later, the author explains what exactly was so important to the pupils about the ice rink. According to him, it was not only a venue for sporting activities, but it was also a social hub and a place to socialize with young women. Every Sunday, a band played in the frosty grounds of the grammar school. And people heeded its call and turned up every week

in winter to dance, either in ice skates or rubber-soled shoes. This semi-public event gave

"...the pupils the opportunity to practice conversing with ladies."[5]

The fact that the young men felt at home on the skating rink increased the attraction of these dance parties. After all, it was they – the students of the Reval Domschule – who maintained the facility and organized its use:

"[W]e felt like landlords and were able to treat the guests to our chivalrousservices."[6]

As casual as it may sound, however, the atmosphere at the rink was far from informal. The phrase "chivalrous services" gives a glimpse of a regimented social code that underpinned life in Estonian aristocratic society. On the one hand, there were clear ethnic and social guidelines that determined who was allowed on the ice at all, and on the other hand, there were rules for dealing and communicating with the guests – the young women. At that time, in the middle of the 19th century, the grammar school was run by the Estonian Knighthood, an institution that played a dominant role in local administration, justice, politics and culture and provided social guidance and guidelines. It is therefore not surprising that this social canon was also reflected hierarchically in the school and on the ice.[7] There were also firmly formulated hierarchical administrative structures that regulated the use of the skating rink.

Von Dellingshausen reports on this in such detail because in his final year at school he became the "skating rink manager" elected by his classmates. One of his tasks was to organize festivities on the ice during the time of the parliament elections [Landtag], when the nobility gathered in Reval. This task gave him an important social responsibility, as it involved responding to the demands of the entire Estonian nobility of the province, while at the same time representing his own school in a worthy manner.

Around 40 years later, Leonhard von Krusenstjern, born in 1873, also spent his school years in Reval. His memories of the "Eisbahn"[8] (ice rink) date from his second-to-last year of grammar school.

"For us older pupils, it was a matter of honor to always be at the ice rink in winter whenever you had time."[9]

In his reminiscences, von Krusenstjern also emphasized his encounters with young women. Like von Dellingshausen before him, he mentions the role of the pupils as hosts. What is new in this account, however, is that the students of the Domschule have physical contact with the young women, helping them to put on and take off their shoes. The fact that there was a clear intention behind this is also mentioned for the first time.

> *People came to the skating rink to look after the wellbeing of the young ladies, to help them put on and take off their skates, to pair skate with them and, of course, to flirt.*[10]

In practice, however, “flirting” required some strategic skill, as the social rules of communication between (young) men and (young) women still existed at the end of the 19th century and had to be adhered to:
"It was essential in those days, for the sake of propriety, for at least one mother to be present and freezing. Of course, we would also approach the mothers and talk to them so that they wouldn't get bored. And when one boy thought he had done enough, he would inconspicuously wave a fellow pupil over, who would then take over this duty of entertaining the mother."[11]

The first skating-lesson. The New York Public Library, Free access - no reuse

Young women thus had a much more guarded experience on the ice and were limited in what they could say or do compared to the young men, who were free to act and flirt as they pleased, albeit within the framework of a fixed code of behavioral rules. This corresponded to prevailing notions of gender bipolarity, which saw women as passive and men as active. The idea that passivity was intrinsic to a woman’s “nature”, which prevailed in the 19th century, was also heavily based on a woman’s legal status and the requirement that she have male guardians throughout her life – be it a father, husband or an uncle or brother.

Like many of his contemporaries, von Krusenstjern directly links his mention of the ice rink to descriptions of dances. The similarities between the ice rink and the dance floor often come up in memoirs and diaries, where the observation is made that these were the only spaces in

which an exchange between the sexes was possible.

Otto Freiherr von Taube, born in 1879, was also an enthusiastic ice skater. He, too, associated the past time with socializing and enjoyment, despite the fact that he described himself as a bad skater. Of all the authors, he is the only one who mentions physical limitations and the consequences of the cold in the form of chilblains (though neither of these setbacks prevented him from skating!) Von Taube's experiences complement Dellingshausen's descriptions. Both speak from the perspective of a grammar school pupil in Reval and both come to the conclusion that life at the local secondary schools revolved around skating in winter.

“In Reval, every secondary school had its own skating rink, where the students sometimes held parties in the evenings under the glow of torchlight, colorful lamps and fireworks.”[12]

Von Taube himself never had the pleasure of taking part in such an event due to his young age, but skated instead at the public ice rink. Here he would meet up with boys his own age and set about antagonizing other groups such as “the Russian boys” with a mocking rhyme they had come up with themselves:

“Mongols and Tartars / Were always an abomination to us. / Tartars and Mongols, / Let the devil take them.”[13]

This is von Taube’s first mention of contact with other ethnicities. Interactions with girls was not as interesting to him – presumably because he was still too young – as the sense of segregation from other children at the skating rink based on ethnic or national difference.

The reflections of another ice skater, Wolfgang Wachtsmuth, prove that ice skating had a similar importance across all Baltic provinces. Born in 1876, he describes the winter past time as a key part of his school days in Mitau and also writes about it from his perspective as a teacher – how, for his pupils, various duties and activities revolved around the ice rink. For example, he highlights the how student body took on the management of the skating rink themselves:

“In winter, the skating rink on the Drixe [the local river] was a focal point ofinterest.”[14]

Wachtsmuth provides a brief insight into the management of school skating rinks. For example, in addition to the “skating rink director”, there were so-called marshals, all of whom wore ribbons and were easily recognizable. All functions were carried out by pupils. It is unclear whether they were elected or chosen in some other way. In any case, all those involved were “highly respected”.[15] Outside of school hours, during the vacations, the posts were taken over by the student association “Curonia” (a German-Baltic association of young

men from Courland).

> *They wore a distinctive green, blue and white cap on their heads and high 'snow galoshes' on their feet. The very finest sported an 'imperial coat' with a wide collar draped around his shoulders – this is how the stylish student would walk up and down the rink with a measured gait, pushing the chosen female guest, who would be seated in a light sledge, along the ice in front of him.*[16]

The skating rink of the secondary schools in the town of Mitau ("La glissoire des écoles moyennes de la ville Mitau"), postcard from the 1910s. National Library of Latvia: Digitālajā bibliotēkā / Europeana, CC BY 4.0

The skating rink at the Jelgava State School („Landesschule Mitau"), postcard from the 1910s. National Library of Latvia: Digitālajā bibliotēkā / Europeana, CC BY 4.0

Two authorities – both belonging to the German population group – were thus jointly responsible for the running of the Mitau ice rink: The German-speaking boys' grammar school and the German-Baltic student association. Both organizations were made up exclusively of males. And both the younger boys and the slightly older youths used the venue for meetings with girls or young women. However, unlike the abovementioned scenarios, these students and their female partners do not appear to have used skates with blades. Instead, the men wore a kind of overshoe to give themselves traction on the ice, while the women had a more passive role and would be pushed sitting down. According to Wachtsmuth, there was also a

group of skaters, but

“Only the artistic skaters, who were there to be seen, would wear actual strap-on skates during the busy season.”[17]

Perhaps it was inappropriate for the students to have rendezvous with young women on the ice in skates as it contradicted the etiquette of meetings between men and women. It also required some skill to steer the sledge on which the women were seated, with its iron rails, and to hold a conversation at the same time.

Wachtsmuth's account is the only one that mentions a separate use of the ice rink. His details on the rituals of ice skating are precise. The handing over of the management of the rink to the students was celebrated every year as a public occasion: The students had "...their big day [...] when they 'donated’ the music during the Christmas vacations. A military band would play at their (or more correctly, at their fathers') expense. The students would appear in unison and were greeted at once with a befitting fanfare [...]."[18]

The writings of Oswald Hartge, born twenty years later in 1895, are much more personal. He describes the winters in the Estonian province of Dorpat. His reflections are more precise than most, perhaps because he began skating at a very young age – he even gives the date on which he learned to skate. At the age of five, Hartge received his first shoes fitted with ice blades. They were "[...] not the newly introduced, nickel-plated 'Schneewittchen' skates with a perky upturned toe, nor the ordinary 'Halifax' model, which were fastened with a spring at the front and a strap at the back, but very primitive ones that were simply strapped on at the toe and heel."[19]

Engraving from a French fashion magazine: Family skating.
La Mode Illustrée. Journal de la Famille, 19.01.1900,
Free access - no reuse

Here, Hartge not only provides an insight into the various models of skates that existed around 1900, but he also mentions his childhood skates in order to draw attention to his father's method of education. At first glance, this seems to have been rather harsh, as the Halifax skate, which Hartge would much rather have received, had been very fashionable since the 1860s. However, his father had deliberately chosen this wobbly model so that his son could learn the right stance and develop a good sense of balance. The father himself, who had learned to skate almost half a century before his son, in the 1860s, had probably had to wear even worse skates, so-called “Strittschohe” which were based on a Dutch model.[20] These featured an "iron blade [...] inserted into a wooden sole, which had a spike at the heel that was kicked into the boot heel. The skate was tied to the front with a sugar cord or fastened with a strap"[21]

Hartge's father took on the role of teacher, as skating was a family tradition passed down among the male members of the family. Later, when he was at school, Hartge received “the best skates available from the Brock company” with the brand name “Yachtclub”[22] as a reward from his father for his good training. According to Hartge, with these skates it was even possible to skate artistically. They were firmly screwed on, which meant that his lessons could now advance to a higher level. Nevertheless, he still had enough time for “boyish

games" on the ice, and describes playing "catch and tackle" with groups of more than 15 boys. Although Hartge did not have any experiences with girls – at least there is no mention of this – his accounts also bear witness to certain regulations regarding acceptable behavior at the ice rink. There would always be a supervising father present, who would make sure that there would be no close contact with boys from 'simple' families. It was considered undesirable for relationships to develop with Estonian children, or even German-speaking children of lower social standing, who also frequented the public ice rinks.[23]

A glance at the autobiographical writings that remain from this time make it clear that the majority of reminiscences about ice skating were written by men. Only a few women reported on their experiences on the ice. One of these is Emmy Seidel, née Loesevitz, who was born in 1860. She, a non-noblewoman, recalls her childhood experiences in Riga in the winter of 1869/70. Although she also describes ice skating alongside her first experiences at dance parties (so-called children's balls) within the context of interaction with boys, Seidel's account is more concerned with critically addressing fundamental aspects of education. Her memoirs stand out in this respect because they are much more reflective. Seidel is the only one who questions educational practices and the social guidelines for girls in their dealings with boys. She criticizes the fact that the sexes were kept separate in everyday life and stresses how this resulted in insecurity and stiffness in the way men and women related to each other. To illustrate her point, she cites a personal experience at the ice rink when she was nine years old and skated alone in the company of a boy. When another boy she didn't know approached her and spoke about her skating companion, she was horrified because the stranger had assumed that her companion was a "courmachers"[24], i.e. her suitor and future groom.

However, Else Frobenius, née Gaehtgens, who was born 15 years later and also lived in Riga, describes decidedly different experiences. She received a very strict upbringing from her father. As a pastor's daughter, many activities were forbidden for her – much to her regret. These included ice skating, which, unlike her female schoolmates, she was not allowed to take part in. For moral reasons, her father did not consider it appropriate for her "...to roll and swoop along on ice skates to the sound of militarymusic"[25] together with her male peers from the nearby grammar school. His daughter was not to have direct contact with young men in public – and certainly not dancing on the ice.

Le Style Parisien: ice skating clothes by Chéruit, Premet, Callot, Jenny, Lanvin and Paquin. Anna Russ / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek, CC BY-SA 4.0

The idea that the ice rink offered young men a space where they could get closer to their female peers than their families might have wanted, or that it was a place where they could even have direct contact with each other, seems – as this last example shows – not to have been far-fetched. Ernst von Hoyningen-Huene, born in 1872, tells of an emotional, even fateful encounter on the ice. Originally from the Estonian island of Oesel, he had moved to St. Petersburg in 1896 for professional reasons. In his memoirs, under the heading “My first acquaintance with your mother”, he describes the skating rink as the place where he fell in love. His descriptions refer to the skating rink at the Taurian Palace, where the high nobility of Northern Europe gathered for recreation and amusement. Women such as the later Empress Marie, daughter of the Danish king Christian IX., the Empress herself, and other “grand princes” – who Hoyningen-Huene does not name – skated here. The whole social spectacle was accompanied by music. He describes how several bands played “lively tunes”, which heightened people’s enjoyment of the sport and the convivial atmosphere. From an observer's point of view, however, the special thing about the skating rink was not the facility itself or the large number of visitors, but the fact that parts of the rink were obscured from view. Connected to the iced- over surface of the lake was a river with a bend that meandered through the park and offered skaters the opportunity to retreat from public view and thus also to escape social surveillance and control. "The secluded 'tour du monde' gave us [von Hoyningen-Huene and his future wife] the best opportunity to chat undisturbed and get to

know each other better."[26]

Ice skating as an opportunity for flirting was an integral part of people's memories of childhood and school days, especially for boys, from the second half of the 19th century onwards. The skating rink offered a space for exchange between the sexes, a meeting place for young men and women. In this sense, it was perceived as a less regulated equivalent of the ball or dance floor. Often, people's first experiences with the opposite sex took place on the ice, the specialness of these encounters remaining fixed in their memories for years to come. The ice rink also offered adults a rare opportunity away from the strict regulations of social behavioral codes to make contact with the opposite sex. And, as the example of von Hoyningen-Huene's memoir shows, such touching and tender early experiences sometimes developed into marriages.

The microcosm of the skating rink therefore offers scope for further research into the consolidation or development of gender roles and affiliations – a subject that has so far been neglected in research.

Engraving from a French fashion magazine: children ice skating. La Mode Illustrée. Journal de la Famille 18.11.1900, Free access - no reuse

English translation: William Connor ↗

Footnotes

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