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The open-air schools of Dudelange and Esch-sur-Alzette

A threat to the regular school system in Luxembourg or a peripheral phenomenon?

'Open-air schools' or 'forest schools' have historically presented themselves as an absolute ideal with regard to education. They first aimed primarily at the 'weak' and 'sickly', but soon targeted all children and youth, including the healthy (whether or not 'hereditarily') (Thyssen, 2009). Their advocates aimed at nothing less than to reform entirely the 'regular' education system. Two of these schools were constructed in Luxembourg: one in 1913 in Dudelange, and another in 1928 in Esch-sur-Alzette. Both schools still exist, although during the school year the one in Esch is now reserved for nature classes and workshops, whereas in Dudelange since the beginning of the 1980s three classes of the 'regular' Brill school are accommodated (Weber, 1982, p. 8; *ibid.*, 1983, p. 10; and François, 1982, p. 11). During the holidays each of them now functions as a recreation centre. In what follows, I investigate how these schools emerged and operated and what their education programme looked like (whether this differed significantly from 'normal' schools). I also examine how the regular system and parents reacted to the open-air schools, particularly considering if they posed a threat or were too insignificant to do so.

The emergence of the Dudelange and Esch schools has to be understood in its context.

In the first decades of the 20th century, increasing attention was paid to school hygiene, medical inspection, gymnastics, 'progressive' education, etc. (Ewert & Urbany, 1914, p. 3). Knowledge and practices related to this in Luxembourg were spread in a similar way as in neighbouring countries. Open-air schools held a key position in the "qualitative population policy" that was then pursued; the physical education they prioritized, for instance, was seen as a "first-rate political-economical factor" (Heirens, 1930, p. 7). The schools were thought of as 'social works'¹ with a dual goal: to promote health and to re-educate, as it was not just the physical condition of certain children that was believed to be inferior.

Emile Mayrisch, the then president of the steel group ARBED, is always mentioned as the founder of the Dudelange school. He is typically portrayed as an 'enlightened philanthropist', who "introduced hygiene, well-being and prosperity to the humblest of working-class homes" (Ewert & Urbany, pp. 44 and 48). Open-air schools, however, did not provide any structural solutions to workers' poor health and living conditions; they were simply cheap alternatives to private preventoriums and sanatoriums that could only be afforded by the wealthy (François, 1982, p. 10). That industries like ARBED themselves were at the basis of

detrimental conditions for working class families, if only by pumping exhaust fumes into the air, was also covered with the cloak of charity (see, e.g.: Heirens, 1930, p. 5). In any case, inspiration for the Dudelange school came from Germany; an ARBED commission, namely, visited forest schools in Charlottenburg, Elberfeld and München-Gladbach. The organizational plans for the Dudelange school were based on its report (Ewert & Urbany, p. 4) and later copied almost literally for the school of Esch.

The school of Dudelange, whose domain comprised 1½ hectares, was located in the 'Leh' city park (Ewert & Urbany, p. 6); the one in Esch, in a manmade valley called 'iron pit' that as of 1919 belonged to the Société métallurgique des Terres rouges (Oswiler, 1992, p. 24), a company co-founded by ARBED. Both schools were located two kilometres away from the city: symbolically at its margin, but still easily reachable. The Dudelange school was a one-class school that in the warmer season accommodated only 42 children; the one in Esch had two 'stylish' school pavilions (Heirens, 1930, p. 3) and catered to 72 pupils of the same age (8 to 12). This age

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group was claimed to be 'overstrained' and to display many 'worrisome' and 'morbid conditions' (Ewert & Urbany, p. 4-5), whereas children of different ages were either too weak for a forest school stay or posed surveillance issues for the (female) teaching staff (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Children's admission procedures in both open-air schools were basically the same as in other countries (Ewert & Urbany, p. 10); city school doctors proposed those 'needy' of a forest school stay, after which the schools' proper doctor selected the neediest among them. Social workers later were also involved. Among other things, they kept the children's medical and social filing cards up to date and checked on them in case of absences.² Monday to Sunday attendance to the schools was binding (Weber, 1982, p. 8; and *ibid.*, 1983, p. 10) as the two to five month 'cure' could not be interrupted.³ Only serious misconduct could lead to immediate discharge, which now and then occurred.⁴ If the cure was unsuccessful, it was attributed to the most diverse 'constitutional conditions' of some children, including 'underdevelopment' and 'nervosity', which resulted possibly from a 'hereditary defect' but in each case were 'unsusceptible to treatment' (cf. Ewert & Urbany, pp. 21 and 28).

As for the kind of children targeted, at least on paper, the Dudelange and Esch schools differed somewhat from similar institutions abroad in that principally they did not wish to accept undernourished children, for whom soup distributions and health camps were deemed sufficient, but rather aimed at sick children. In practice, however, these were mostly seen as 'pretuberculous', a category flexible enough to include the (not-yet-)sick'. The latter were classified in 4 large groups: the heart patients, the lung patients, the scrofulous, and the anaemic (Ewert & Urbany, pp. 10-11, 25 and 30). Undernourished children were nevertheless to be admitted in the schools, and not just 'on probation' as in 1913 (*ibid.*, p. 13) or 'exceptionally' after World War I.⁵ After all, undernourishment was a prime pathogenic factor and, as was admitted, the above groups could seldom be distinguished objectively. Also unusual, again on paper at least, was that from the outset the schools aimed at children from all spheres of the



population. Allegedly some parents even allowed their children to be admitted only on payment (*ibid.*, p. 14). Most pupils, however, came from poor families, associated to ARBED or Terres rouges (see: Weber, 1982, p. 8; *ibid.*, 1983, p. 10; Heirens, 1930, p. 5; and Osweiler, 1992, p. 25). Especially for them, the open-air school's complementary school and health programmes were deemed beneficial.

The actual school programme prioritized the health of the children; it primarily aimed to enable them to return to their fellow classmates after their cure. To meet this aim, the number of lessons was approximately reduced to half, compared to 'regular' schools, whose curriculum content was entirely adopted. The difference was merely one of more versus less: the forest schools treated only the basics (Ewert & Urbany, p. 31). Remarkably, and contrary to what happened in at least some schools abroad, in Dudelange the originally proposed timetable was deemed *too heavy* by the school inspector. Mathematics, for instance, was believed to figure disproportionately on the curriculum, whereas 'more pleasant' courses, such as local history and geography, were entirely absent. Therefore, the curriculum was lightened considerably compared to the original proposal.⁶

The actual lessons took place from Monday to Saturday. Theoretical subjects were mainly scheduled in the morning; lighter,

subsidiary subjects like calligraphy, gardening and religion in the afternoon (Ewert & Urbany, pp. 32-33). The schools' scheduling over time underwent only minor changes. Handicrafts for girls, for instance, disappeared from the curriculum and gradually the afternoon was reserved entirely for non-theoretical subjects.⁷ As in all forest schools, it was taught outside when the weather allowed it. Regular walks were also held, during which notions of geography, history and physics were passed on. The result of this, from a pedagogical view, was considered to be most satisfactory.⁸ Pupils supposedly became accustomed quickly to open-air teaching and enjoyed the greater freedom conceded to them. It allegedly made them more natural and open, enabling teachers to better adjust lessons to their individual needs (*ibid.*, p. 33). The 'looser' education, thought to enhance children's learning capacity and diligence, almost gave the schools the appearance of a 'pedagogical idyll'. The question remains, however, whether they actually were (cf. François, 1982, pp. 10 and 11). Photographs of the schools (e.g.: *ibid.*, pp. 9 and 12; and Ewert & Urbany, p. 36) suggest a rather 'normal' school culture reigned there, for instance in terms of the use of space and time.

More particular perhaps was the open-air schools' health programme, with its daily respiratory exercises, sunbaths, and lengthy siesta after lunch. They were part of the schools' 'curative' [*sic*], 'medical treatment',⁹

analogous to that of sanatoriums, which also included (over)feeding. In the schools the calorific value of the three to five meals always exceeded the demand (cf. Ewert & Urbany, pp. 15-16), resulting in telling statistics on children's weight and length (see, e.g.: *ibid.*, p. 24). These had to convince even the most skeptical of the "high social and hygienic value" of the enterprise (Heirens, 1930, p. 19). Meals also represented an educational event, at which the children were kept under close surveillance by a teacher so that order and rest could reign at all times (Ewert & Urbany, p. 17).

The educational element held a key position in the schools (Ewert & Urbany, pp. 36-37). Due to the intense cooperation of the school doctor and teachers, some even claimed they could substitute the parental home entirely; children there were even observed more precisely, and attended to more quickly in case of major and minor ailments. The latter tended to be hidden by parents, it was claimed (*ibid.*, p. 18), but did not go unnoticed at the forest schools' regular medical inspections and bath or shower sessions. At least in Dudelange, the 'heart patients' and the 'scrofulous' received carbonated saltwater baths twice a week, prepared by city nurses (Ewert & Urbany, p. 14). Another typical feature of the schools were the rest cures, obligatory until at least the beginning of the 1960s. Some children apparently hated the siestas; others welcomed them instead (François, 1982, pp. 10 and 11). Apart from such features, however, more importantly the schools' hygienic regime offered a "regularity in life style",¹⁰ which ultimately had to return children to their parents "normal and healthy of body and spirit" (Ewert & Urbany, p. 49).

That said, how did parents, and for that matter the regular school system, respond to the schools? The answer to that question seems ambiguous. In November 1913 a questionnaire was reportedly sent to the schools of Dudelange from which pupils were recruited for the forest school, in order to determine whether they had progressed enough intellectually during their cure. The responses generally seem to have been positive (Ewert & Urbany, p. 34). The inspection and administration (from the district school inspector and ditto commission to

the Director-General of Public Education) in turn seem to have been satisfied of the Dudelange school¹¹ that, like the school of Esch, 'au fond' was regarded as just another public school,¹² albeit one sponsored by private entities. Yet, throughout its existence, the school had to fight the reputation of being a place for children "of little means, from anti-social families and of foreigners" (François, 1982, p. 11). Thus, after having operated for 60 years along the same principles, the school, at least until 1980, degenerated into a mere recreation centre for the holidays. With some regret, the then mayor of Dudelange had to admit that at

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the basis of this change were objections of many parents, who believed their children were not taught as well in the forest school as in regular schools. Even though tests had to provide evidence to the contrary, each year many places remained vacant (Weber, 1982, p. 8; *ibid.*, 1983, p. 10). The same may have happened in Esch, as there too the school was to develop in a different direction (see the websites below).

What is clear, then, is that the open-air schools did not succeed in reforming, let alone threatening, the regular education system but rather operated within its margins. In their capacity of 'perischoolastic works',¹³ they indeed remained peripheral, at the service of the regular school system (if only, for instance, in terms of their opening times). Given that the 5 % of all school-age children claimed to be needy of a stay at the forest schools (Ewert & Urbany, pp. 38-39) actually attended them, this still represented a negligible proportion. Thus, even if some regarded the schools as an "interesting alternative in terms of education" (François, p. 11), the question remains whether they ever truly represented one. ♦

1 Cf. "Mitteilungen über die im Stadtpark 'Leh' errichtete Dödelinger Waldschule" [Typewritten report of 1.5.1913, Archives nationales du Luxembourg, file IP 1438, "Ecoles en plein air, 1913-1933" (henceforth ANL)].

2 "Projet d'un Règlement intérieur pour l'école en forêt d'Esch (25.4.1930)" [Annex to "Extrait du registre aux délibérations du conseil communal d'Esch-sur-Alzette" of 28.2.1931 and "Organisation de l'école en forêt pour l'année 1931", ANL].

3 "Mitteilungen".

4 "L'école en forêt de la ville de Dudelange. Rapport du Médecin de l'école, Dr. med. A. Urbany, Exercice 1918", p. 4 [Typewritten report of 30.4.1919, ANL].

5 "L'école en forêt de la ville de Dudelange", p. 2.

6 "Waldschule Dödelingen, Stundenplan, Sommer 1915" [Annex to "Organisation der Waldschule zu Dödelingen. Sommer 1915", ANL].

7 Compare "Plan d'heures de l'Ecole en Forêt de Dudelange pour 1931" [Annex to "Organisation et programme des cours de l'Ecole en Forêt de Dudelange. Été 1931", ANL]; and "L'Ecole en forêt, Plan d'heures, Été 1932" [Annex to "Extrait du registre aux délibérations du conseil communal d'Esch-sur-Alzette" of 6.2.1932 and "Organisation de l'école en forêt pour l'année 1932", ANL].

8 "L'école en forêt de la ville de Dudelange", p. 3.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

10 "Mitteilungen".

11 "L'école en forêt de la ville de Dudelange", p. 7.

12 Letter of 13.10.1920 from Director-General of Public Education Braun to school inspector Knaff [ANL].

13 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 8.

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