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### Joseph Neef : Pestalozzian pioneer in America.

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UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

JOSEPH NEEF,  
PESTALOZZIAN PIONEER

IN  
AMERICA

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty  
Of the Graduate School of the University of Louisville  
In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Of Master of Arts

Department of Education

By

RUTH LEE KOCH

1922.

In the early nineteenth century the Pestalozzian system of education became very popular in Europe, and, aided by the necessity of something positive to take the place of the decayed and formalistic systems then prevalent, the movement spread rapidly. With its spread to America an old Napoleonic soldier, Joseph Neef, was eminently associated; but because this land was not yet ready for the seed he had to sow, his influence was little felt, and he himself was forgotten. At present only a few of the professional educators of the country even know his name. A distinction which attaches to his name is that he was the first real contributor to pedagogical literature in America. His book, Sketch of a plan and method of Education, founded on an analysis of the Human Faculties and Natural Reason,

suitable for the Offspring of a Free People,  
and for all Rational Beings, by Joseph Neef  
(formerly a coadjutor to Pestalozzi at his  
school near Berne, Switzerland) was printed  
in Philadelphia in 1808. Christopher Dook's  
Schul-Ordnung, while somewhat older than  
Neef's book, was written in German, and was  
not translated until years afterward. Neef's  
book was written in English.

Francis Joseph Nicholas Neef was  
born in Stouls, Alsace Lorraine, on December  
6, 1770. His father was a miller who destined  
his son for the Catholic priesthood; but having  
a distaste for the ministry, at twenty-one Neef  
entered the army of Napoleon, and rose rapidly  
to a high rank. At the battle of Ancole,  
Italy, in 1796, he was wounded severely in the  
head, and was forced to retire from military

life. He then turned his attention to education. He became interested in Pestalozzi's method and about 1800 joined him as instructor of gymnastics. Of his character as man and teacher, Ramsaner, his pupil during these first years, writes:

"Buss had the scholars sing whilst marching in time two and two, holding each other by the hand, in the large corridors of the castle (Burgdorf). This was our chief pleasure; but our joy reached its climax when our gymnastic master, Neef, with his peculiar charm took part in it. This Neef was an old soldier who had fought in all parts of the world. He was a giant with a great beard, a crabbed face, and severe air, a rude exterior; but he was kindness itself. When he marched with the air of a trooper at the head of sixty or eighty

children, his great voice thundering a Swiss air, then he enchanted the whole house. I should say that Neef, in spite of the rudeness of his exterior, was the pupils' favorite, and for this reason he always lived with them and felt happiest when amongst them. He played, exercised, walked, bathed, climbed, threw stones with the scholars, all in a childish spirit; this is how he had such unlimited authority over them. Meanwhile, he was not a pedagogue; he only had the heart of one."

The Pestalozzian System became very popular in France; and Neef, because of his familiarity with the German and French languages, was chosen to conduct the Paris school. His school was a sort of orphanage, not unlike Pestalozzi's at Burgdorf; and it was visited by numerous distinguished educators and philan-

thropists. The school was visited by even the great Napoleon, accompanied by his minister of Education, Talleyrand, and other distinguished men of education, among them William Maclure from Philadelphia, who was the guest of the American Minister to France. Maclure saw in the school the very thing that his country school stood in need of, and immediately made Neef a very favorable offer to go to America. The circumstances and date of Maclure's visit to Paris are given by Neef himself in the introduction to his work, Sketch of a Plan of Education, which he published in 1808.

"In the summer of 1805, Mr. William Maclure, of Philadelphia, one of Pennsylvania's most enlightened sons, happened to visit Helvetia's interesting mountains and valleys. He was accompanied by Mr. C. Cabell, a brother

of the present governor of Virginia. Pestalozzi's school attracted their notice. They repaired thither, and to be convinced soon of the solidity, importance, and usefulness of the Pestalozzian method displayed before their eyes and to form an unalterable wish of naturalizing it in their own country, were operations succeeding one and the same operation. As soon as he had returned to Paris, Mr. Maclure sought and sent for me. 'On what terms,' said the magnanimous patriot, 'would you go to my country, and introduce there your method of education? I have seen Pestalozzi; I know his system; my country wants it and will receive it with enthusiasm. I engage to pay your passage, to secure your livelihood. Go and be your master's apostle in the New World!' My soul was warmed with



admiration at such uncommon generosity. Republican by inclination and principle, and, of course, not at all pleased with the new order of things that was established under my eyes, I was not only glad to quit Europe; but I burned with desire to see that country, to live in it, to be useful to it which can boast of such citizens. But what still more heightens Mr. Maclure's magnanimity is that I did not at that period understand English at all. Two years at least were to be allowed for my acquiring a sufficient knowledge of the language of this land; during which space I had no other resource but Mr. Maclure's generosity. But neither this nor any other consideration could stagger his resolution. Thus it was that I became an inhabitant of the New World."

The agreement drawn up between the two men shows clearly the philanthropic nature of Maclure; expense was no object, when good was in sight.

"Prof. Neef agrees to go to Pennsylvania in the United States of America and teach children after the methods of Pestalozzi for three years from the date of his arrival, in consequence of which William Maclure agrees to pay Prof. Neef's expenses from Paris to the United States of America to the amount of three thousand two hundred Livres tournois, and to make good to Prof. Neef whatever sum as salary he may receive for teaching said methods that falls short of \$500 per annum, during the three years or the time Prof. Neef may continue to teach the system of Pestalozzi.

Paris, 19th March, 1806.

WM. MACLURE. "

On the back of the slip of paper on which this is written, is Neef's agreement.

" Paris 19th March 1806.

Received from M<sup>r</sup>. Maclure 3,200 Livres tournois in full for my expenses to the United States of America agreeable to the terms of the within agreement.

NEEF. "

With the help and under the supervision of Maclure, Neef opened a school at Philadelphia in 1809, at the Falls of the Schuylkill, where the Fairmont water works are now located. Here he collected over a hundred pupils. Mr. J. P. Wickersham, in his History of Education in Pennsylvania, speaking of the school at the Falls of the Schuylkill says -

"It was governed without punishment of any kind. The pupils used no books; but were taught orally and mainly in the open air; frequent excursions were taken that instruction might be fresh from the book of Nature."

On the same school, a kinsman of Mr. Gardette, who spent some time at the school, writes:

"I lived at the school for four years (from my seventh to my eleventh). During this period I saw no book, neither was I taught my alphabet. The chief subjects taught us orally were the languages, mathematics, the natural sciences; and the idea was to make us understand the object and application of all we learned. Out-door life was equally curious. We never wore hats, winter or summer, and many of us went barefooted also during warm weather. Our master, hatless as

ourselves, would lead us on long tramps through the adjacent country, talking, as we went, upon agriculture, botany, mineralogy, and the like, in a pleasant, descriptive way, and pointing out to us their practical illustration in the grain fields, the gardens, the rocks and streams along our route. And wherever we came, we were always recognized by our bare heads and hardy habits, as 'the Neef boys from the Falls'. We were encouraged in all athletic sports, were great swimmers and skaters, walkers and gymnasts. In the pleasant weather we went to bathe twice every day in the Schuylkill, with Neef, who was an accomplished swimmer, at our head. It was possibly owing to these amusements and exercises being taken in common with our master that there existed between Neef and his pupils a freedom so great

as to be sometimes, I fear, slightly inconsistent with good breeding or the deference due from pupil to teacher. But this seemed to be a part of the system, and Mr. Neef was thoroughly good-tempered, simple-mannered, an amiable man, without an atom of false pride or pedagogy."

The Schuylkill School was a great success; it ran for three years when Neef moved it to Village Green, Chester County, Pennsylvania. At this School David G. Farragut, the admiral, was a pupil of Neef. The change proved disastrous, however, and the attempt had to be abandoned in 1814, because of public prejudice against Neef's boldly proclaimed atheism. He was advised to move his school to Louisville, Kentucky, by a Dr. Galt, whose sons had been under Neef at Village Green.

**Various disappointments awaited**

**Neef in his new home in the West. At the very outset he became involved in a lawsuit over the title of some property he bought there for cash on his arrival, which eventually cost him every dollar he was worth. His school failed again, and he renounced teaching, and finally removed to a few acres of cleared land in the midst of virgin forest forty-five miles from Louisville. From this retreat he was brought to New Harmony by Owen and Maclure in 1826 when these two men were organizing their western Utopia. Here the higher schools for pupils between the ages of five and twelve years were taught by Neef as principal assisted by his four daughters and one son, all of whom had been pupils of Pestalozzi and had been brought to the community because of their familiarity**

with his system of instruction.

Robert Dale Owen, writing of Joseph Neef at this period says:

"Simple, straightforward, and cordial, proficient in modern languages, a good musician, he had brought with him from Pestalozzi's institution at Iverdon an excellent mode of teaching. To his earlier life, as an officer under Napoleon was due a blunt, off-hand manner, and an abrupt style of speech, enforced now and then with an oath, an awkward habit for a teacher, which I think he tried ineffectually to get rid of. One day a boy in his class used profane language.

'Youngster', said Neef to him, 'you mustn't swear. It's silly, and it's vulgar, and it means nothing. Don't let me hear you do so again.'



'But, Mr. Neef,' said the boy hesitatingly, and looking half-frightened, 'if it's vulgar and wrong to swear, why -----'

'Well, out with it! Never stop when you want to say anything. That's another bad habit. You wished to know why ---'

'Why you swear yourself, Mr. Neef?'

'Because I'm a d--d fool. Don't you be one too.'

With all his roughness, the good old man was a general favorite alike with children and adults. Those whose recollections of Harmony extend back thirty years preserve a general remembrance of him walking about in the sun of July or August, in linen trousers and shirt, always bareheaded, sometimes barefooted, with a grandchild in his arms, and humming to his infant charge some martial air, in a wonderful bass voice, which,

it was said, enabled him in his younger days, when giving command to a body of troops, to be distinctly heard by ten thousand men."

The school at New Harmony emphasized manual training and industrial education. Every child was expected to learn one trade well. He was permitted to choose the branch of industry in which he wished to work, or if no choice was made, the authorities tried to place him in the one for which he was best fitted. At night the children did not return home to their parents, whom they seldom saw; but slept in a room or loft above their workshop or schoolroom. Neef was a strong advocate of military training, and in leading his boys to the fields to work, always kept them in military order. On the way they performed various wheelings and maneuverings, common to

military life. Their whole life seems to have closely resembled military camp life. They even marched to meals in military order. Because of the strict surveillance inflicted, the pupils had a little song they used to sing --

"Number 2 pigs in a pen,  
When they get out, it's now and  
then;  
When they get out, they sneak  
about,  
For fear old Neef will find them  
out."

Of the New Harmony School it has been written:

"The system was the improved Pestalozzian, and of course, they never attempt to teach children what they cannot comprehend. In con-

sequence, all kinds of dogmas of every sect and persuasion are banished from the schools; but the purest and unsophisticated morals are taught by example and precept. In the infant school a friendly feeling and equanimity of temper, kindness, and mild disparity towards one another is taught more by example than by precept."

Sir Rowland Hill speaks of the schools:

"Here is a specimen of the advantages of the system. The naturalists having made the children acquainted with their wants, the little creatures swarm over the woods, and bring in such an abundance of specimens that they are forming several immense collections, some of which they will present to new communities, and others will be exchanged for collections in other parts of the world."

After New Harmony failed in 1828,

Neef moved to Cincinnati, and later to Steubenville, Ohio. In 1834, he returned to New Harmony where he died April 8, 1854.

Joseph Neef was blessed in an unusually good wife. On July 5, 1803, he married Eloisa Buss, the sister of Johannes Buss, teacher of Geometry and Drawing in Pestalozzi's school. Their love affair was intensely romantic. The school at Burgdorf was for boys only, but Buss had two brothers in Pestalozzi's school, and wanted his sister educated there also. He induced Madame Pestalozzi to take her under charge, and she was taught privately for three years. Neef was her teacher of French, and in this way he fell in love with his future bride. Mrs. Neef had her share of trouble with her eccentric and simple-hearted husband. Neef

had no inclination for society. When he visited the city, his wife tied a cravat around his neck, slapped a hat on his head, much to his annoyance and disgust. "Alas", he would exclaim, "must I again have the rope around my neck?" Taking the hat off in the stage or at the first stopping place in his journey, he invariably left it, returning to her hatless. If the day was warm, the cravat also was missing, so that Mrs. Neef found it necessary to attach her absent-minded husband's name inside his wearing apparel.

Neef is described as a "man of unusual abilities and eccentric character, a profound scholar, a deep and original thinker, a thorough philosopher and a sincere, honest man." As to personal appearance, he was

"firm-knit, sinewy, compact of form, with a bright, dark eye, and close-cut, coal black hair, the figure and garb of a well-drilled, graceful soldier, the face of a Roman tribune, the mind and the heart of a child."

Neef was a member of the Masonic order of Pennsylvania, and the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, being elected a corresponding member on June 4, 1812.

Neef's writings are practically forgotten. Of his best work, Sketch of a Plan and Method of Education, written after he had been studying English only seven months, only about a half dozen copies are in existence, one of them being in the Louisville Public Library. In the Introduction of his Sketch of a Plan of Education, he pays a high tribute to his master, Pestalozzi;

speaks of the cause of his coming to the United States; and discusses the scope of education. He bases his discussion on several principles of morality which he says are self-evident.

"Man is essentially an active and sociable being. The effects of one man's activity must necessarily affect his fellow-man. Perfect neutrality they cannot preserve. If they do not benefit, they must needs harm one another.

..... The man of refined morality feels it to be his duty not only to be good; but also to inquire in what situation and through what means he may be able to procure the greatest sum of good to his fellow creatures. It is my ambition and duty to become a useful member of society. The education of children and the rearing of vegetables are the only occupations for which I feel any aptitude. I



have, therefore, seriously inquired in which of these two spheres I should produce the greatest advantage to the society of which I may become a member, whether by clearing and tilling some secluded spot of land, or by cultivating the pretty bewildered field of education. After mature deliberation I became fully convinced that in the latter capacity my faculties will be more likely to be beneficial to my fellow-creatures. These are my reasons for appearing as a teacher, or rather educator."

Neef's system of education is, with some modifications that of his master, Pestalozzi. It is essentially oral and objective, and is subversive to all conventional rules and methods then in vogue.

"All possible knowledge which we shall in any

way be able to derive from our own senses and immediate sensations, shall be exclusively derived from them. The second source to which we shall next resort--but only in those cases where the first will be absolutely inaccessible--shall be our memory; our third resource shall be analogy. Human evidence shall not be neglected; but we shall only have recourse to it when all the foregoing means prove insufficient and unsuccessful.

Books, therefore, shall be the last fountain from which we shall endeavor to draw our knowledge. I may expect that a great part of the learned world will rise against me; that many enlightened pedagogues will not hesitate to call me a barbarian; but that for myself would be idle to combat their inveterate prejudices. But I cannot wholly avoid them, and, to tell

the simple truth, I do not care for them."

"It is irrevocably determined and decided that my pupils shall pry into no book, turn over no book, read no book, till they are able not only to comprehend what they are to read, but also to distinguish perfectly well good from bad, truth from falsehood, reality from chimera, and probabilities from absurdities. God's beautiful and prolific creation, all nature, shall be their book, and facts their instructors. As soon as they shall have reached the necessary maturity, then, and only then, they shall read, then their reading will be really useful, and both instructive and pleasing to them."

"To unfold any faculty whatever we must exercise it, and to exercise it we must possess means fitted for exercising it. And these

means we have in abundance. Let us but open our eyes. The whole cabinet of nature, beings and objects, animate and inanimate, obtrude themselves as it were, on us; and yet, how neglected they are! how little use is made of our faculties and these invaluable means!"

The second chapter of the book: treats of Numbers and Calculations. The instruction in these subjects is purely objective.

"As it is evident that all our numerical notions proceed from objects, we shall, of course, begin our studies by them. Easily movable things, as beans, peas, little stones, marbles, small boards, shall be our first instructors."

Chapters on Geometry, and Drawing

and Reading and Writing follows. In the chapter on Reading and Writing, the un-phonetic character of English speech is given a good deal of just condemnation. Writing is taught before reading. As soon as the pupil has acquired a sufficient ability to imitate the complicated figures of the alphabetical letters, he shall begin to write. Geometry and Drawing are simple, but the letters of the alphabet are very complicated indeed. To the objection that the children when they begin to write can neither read nor spell, Neef asks, "Do you think that Cadmus could spell or read before he began to write?" He argues that he is not overturning the natural order of things, but festering a direct tendency to restore it.

In the chapter on Grammar, he con-

tinues to argue for primitive methods, for,  
"What grammar, pray, did the first grammarian  
study who undertook to write the first gram-  
mar?" .... "I mean that my pupils shall com-  
pose their own grammar."

The Golden Rule becomes the basis  
of instruction in Ethics and Morals. His  
pupils shall be thoroughly familiar with the  
first truths of ethics and morals; but they  
shall not learn them through systematic  
dogmas, symbols, or catechisms. "These  
sublime truths my pupils shall not learn  
from me, they will, they shall discover them  
in themselves. My whole task will consist  
in aiding them to unfold, to develop their  
own ideas, and in supplying them with the  
corresponding words which may express their  
ideas."

The Sciences, Natural Philosophy, and Natural History have a place in his educational system also. "Our arts and sciences are not to be looked upon as means by which the natural faculties of the growing man should be gradually brought to their maturity."

It will be remembered that Gymnastics was Neef's subject in the Pestalozzian school at Burgdorf, and it also plays a prominent part in his own system. Military training, shooting, the use and care of fire-arms, the art of defense and of construction will all be taught.

In the chapter on the study of foreign languages, Neef opposes the conventional methods of teaching, and advocates the Pestalozzian plan, with no grammars or class-

books. Music, poetry, geography, and lexicology, are all taught in a similar manner. "Do you believe the first singer learned to sing by notes?" It must be borne in mind that Keef does not discard these things altogether; he merely refuses to regard them as ends of education.

In his Conclusion, he discusses the management of his school. "Well, then, father or mother, have you got any hobble-dehoy, gay, full of tricks, very nettlesome, inquisitive, sprightly, smart, bristling, teasing little fellow, every moment putting your patience to the test? This is what I want." ..... "It would be next to insulting the good sense of my readers should I attempt to tell them upon what footing I shall be with my pupils, for now they know enough



of me and my system to perceive that the grave, doctorial, magisterical, and dictatorial tone will never insult their ears; that they shall probably never hear of a cat-o-nine tails; that I shall be nothing else but their friend and guide, their school-fellow, play-fellow, and mess-mate."

The final paragraph of the piece is almost prophetic, for the very things he talks about did take place.

"Should my project of forming my own school miscarry, then the director of some already established seminary will perhaps please to accept my services; and if this should not be the case, I shall in all likelihood find out some remote obscure village, whose hardy youth want a schoolmaster. Hear it, ye men of the world! To become an

obscure, useful, country schoolmaster is the highest pitch of my worldly ambition."

Other literary works by Joseph Neef are a translation of the Logie of Condillac, a book on the method of instructing children rationally in the arts of reading and writing, and a book on teaching the French language, which was never printed.

Joseph Neef is interesting to us, not because his educational theories and practices were the best ever advanced, or because we believe they should immediately be put into practice in all of our educational institutions; but because he blazed the way for the second wave of the Pestalozzian movement, which came about twenty-five years later, when America had awakened to the needs of her people and when such men as Horace Mann,

and Henry Barnard had come to the front. It is also true that Neef and his associates became too enthusiastic over the Pestalozzian Method, and ascribed to it the teaching of abstractions and difficult processes, which it did not possess. Thus, "by means of an instrument called the trigonometer, the most useful propositions of Euclid are to be reduced to the comprehension of a child six years old" or by means of a set of Pestalozzian tables, Neef triumphantly cites a series of problems, which he declares can be solved rapidly by a child of nine; but which in reality are beyond the intelligent comprehension of a child of second year algebra. The mistake was not so much in the system as in ascribing to that system the impossible, and a thing for which it was never intended.

"All instruction should be adapted to the capabilities of the learner. The important thing is not what children can be made to do; but what they ought to be capable of doing at their stage of development."

Mr. H. A. Calkins says of Neef, "He failed to comprehend the necessity of Americanizing the Pestalozzian system instead of merely transplanting it." But the real cause of Neef's failure, as Professor W. S. Monroe has shown, lies in this: He lacked permanency; he should have remained in Philadelphia where his ideas were appreciated and endorsed; but he was easily persuaded and discouraged, and too often followed the advice of his well-meaning, but carelessly informed friends. The second reason is that he came to America too soon. Only a few men like

Maclure were interested in aiding education. The Renaissance of American Education did not begin until about twenty-five years later, when such men as Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, Walter Johnson, and others, came to the forefront in educational circles. Had Neef come to America then, he should now have a high rank in the educational history of the United States.

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