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Educating or Doing Business? Owners and Teachers of Private Commercial Schools in Imperial Austria, 1834–1918

Petr Kadlec¹, Ivan Puš^{2,*}

¹ Centre for Economic and Social History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava, 702 00, Czech Republic

² Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc, 779 00, Czech Republic

***Correspondence to:** Mr. Petr Kadlec, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Centre for Economic and Social History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava, Havlíčkovo nábřeží 3120/28, Ostrava 702 00, Czech Republic; Email: petr.kadlec@osu.cz

Abstract: This study is dedicated to the owners and teachers of private commercial schools in Imperial Austria between 1834 and 1918. The authors present them as a traditional, significant and distinctive part of the commercial educational infrastructure. The characteristic features of these schools are identified in the text, with particular attention to their owners, teachers and the quality of instruction. Based on archival and printed sources, the study shows to what extent school owners were involved in teaching and how financial motives influenced their approach to designing curricula, selecting teachers and providing education. In other words, to what extent private commercial schools appeared as a profit-making enterprise and to what extent as an educational institution.

Keywords: Commercial Education, Teachers, 19th Century, 20th Century, Imperial Austria

1. Introduction

Our text is dedicated to the owners and teachers of private commercial schools in Imperial Austria between 1834 and 1918, that is, from the establishment of the first institution of this kind in Ljubljana to the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. We intend to identify the characteristic features of private schools, with a focus on their owners, teachers and the quality of instruction. Specifically, we aim to show to what extent the private nature of the schools was reflected in the organisation of curricula, the qualification requirements for teachers, and the quality

of teaching. We are interested in the degree to which their owners were involved in teaching and how financial motives influenced their approach to designing curricula, selecting teachers, admitting pupils, and providing education. Based on these findings, we will assess the contribution of private schools in the context of the development of commercial education in Imperial Austria, and whether their role was primarily educational or profit-oriented (school as family/business), or to what extent these functions overlapped. The structure of our text corresponds to the objectives outlined above.



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The following study is based primarily on an analysis of printed and archival sources, among which school statistics, reports on school inspections, and materials documenting communication with state authorities can be highlighted. The extent of preservation of sources for individual private schools varies greatly, partly due to poor record-keeping of these institutions by state authorities, and partly due to other circumstances (destruction of materials in archive fires, inaccessible archival collections). Despite the combination of different sources, the selection of schools included in our research is therefore limited. Nevertheless, we consider it sufficiently representative, as it includes institutions of various sizes, languages of instruction, and locations. The text features private schools primarily from regions where the majority of (private) commercial schools were located (Vienna, Bohemia, and Moravia). It is precisely for these regions that we possess the most comprehensive material.

Our text intends to enrich the so far underdeveloped historiographical discourse on commercial education in the territory of the former Imperial Austria with the theme of the commercialization of schools. Although the topic of commercial education belongs to the traditional areas of research in the history of pedagogy and education, works with this particular focus represent only a small part of the overall scholarly output. Yet, the first of these works for this part of the Habsburg Monarchy were published by pedagogues, statisticians, and national economists as early as the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Synthetic works and broadly conceived overviews, in which commercial education would be included within the more general trends of the development of Austrian society and economy, are exceptional, as are high-quality case studies^[1]. Although commercial schools prepared a qualified workforce for two important components of economic development, specifically commercial activity and administration responsible for financial matters, the role of these educational institutions in industrialization, bureaucratization and social transformation in the 19th and early 20th centuries did not receive adequate attention. Works on private schools for the territory under study are entirely absent. As a result, the attention devoted to commercial education in Imperial Austria in the indicated areas did not match the interest

in the history of (private) commercial schools in France or Germany, which were economic competitors during the period under study and a source of inspiration for the Habsburg Monarchy in the field of professional education^[2]. These works provide an important factual basis for our research, including its interpretative framework and methodological foundations.

The topic of private commercial schools can also be regarded as a contribution to current discussions regarding the role of private schools and actors in access to schooling, the financing of education and educational policy in history, and the privatisation and decentralisation of education, whose perspective has so far included the United States and primarily the Western and Northern European context^[3].

2. Private Schools as a Traditional and Important Part of the Austrian Commercial Education Infrastructure

Commercial education in Imperial Austria encompassed a wide range of institutions of varying educational levels, forms of instruction, and founders (notably merchant associations, private individuals, municipalities, and the state)^[4]. Two main categories of these schools, which simultaneously represent two educational levels, can be distinguished: 1) with a shortened curriculum (training of merchant apprentices for retail; two- to three-year programmes, several hours of instruction per week in the afternoons/evenings on weekdays, or sometimes on Sundays); 2) with instruction in the traditional full-day format (one- to four-year programmes for trade and business

¹ The term 'commercial' was commonly used interchangeably with 'business' in contemporary educational practice, while the standardisation of terminology can only be discussed from the 1880s onwards. According to the authors, the designation 'commercial' more accurately reflects the broader focus of these schools, namely preparing not only future merchants and entrepreneurs but also clerks entrusted with financial administration. In contrast, the more widespread term 'business' tends to imply education solely for entrepreneurial careers and obscures the preparation of future clerks, who nevertheless predominated among graduates of full-time schools. The traditional preference for 'business' in school names (*Handelsschulen* / *Handelsakademien*, etc.) reflected both the inclinations of merchant associations, which operated or at least partially financed the growing number of schools, and the effort to make schools more attractive, particularly among private institutions.

of medium and larger scale, increasingly also for administrative work responsible for financial and clerical tasks)^[5].

Private institutions represented a specific category of commercial schools, which could be classified within either of the two categories mentioned above according to the organisation of instruction. Their purpose was primarily to prepare graduates for administrative work in banks, insurance companies, industrial and transport enterprises, the public sector, or offices of self-governing bodies. To a lesser extent, they also trained personnel for independent trade or business activities, as the knowledge and competencies required for commercial clerks and for entrepreneurship were similar and overlapped. The contemporary term '*Privatschule*' ('private school' / '*szkola prywatna*') refers both to the provisional law of 27 June 1850, which allowed the implementation of so-called *Privatunterricht*, and to the founders of these institutions^[6]. They were primarily dominated by individuals (*Private*) from among merchants or commercial clerks. These were public schools, although their certificates were not always universally recognised, which complicated their position in the educational market and thus directly threatened their existence.

Most private commercial schools in Imperial Austria offered programmes lasting a maximum of two years. Another distinctive feature was that they often provided several programmes with different instructional formats. The duration of the main programmes varied between a few months and two years. The same applied to supplementary educational courses (ranging from a few weeks to two years).

The opportunity for private educational initiatives in Imperial Austria was created by a pronounced lack of institutions preparing new generations of higher-category merchants and personnel for financial administration (special commercial departments at several *Realschulen*, polytechnics, or lectures at universities)^[7]. The pioneers in establishing private commercial schools in the 1830s and 1840s included Jacob Franz Mahr (founder of the oldest school in Ljubljana, 1834), Johann Geyer, Karl Mühlbauer (both Vienna, 1840/1848), Karl Petr Kheil (Prague, 1848), and Josef Ferdinand Devidé (own school in the

second half of the 1840s)^[8]². It was no coincidence that these schools emerged in important centres of Austrian trade and administration. The high demand for such specialised educational institutions in these centres seemed to be the most compelling reason for establishing them.

The dynamic development of private commercial schools in Imperial Austria occurred only after the mid-19th century. It was associated with transformations in domestic and foreign commerce in the context of economic and sociocultural modernisation, which involved the development of capitalism, industrialisation, urbanisation, bureaucratisation, changes in transport, social transformation, individualisation, differentiation and rationalisation^[9]. Liberal economic policy stimulated commercial exchange and simultaneously increased qualification requirements for merchants. Entrepreneurial expansion and the opening of the domestic market brought the loss of traditional privileges, the redirection of markets and trade routes and significantly intensified competition. The modern merchant therefore necessarily had specific needs, values and expectations. At the same time, social transformation reshaped the composition, requirements and preferences of customers to which merchants had to respond in their own interest. Education evidently played an important role in adapting to the new conditions, since it broadened horizons and created or redefined commercial and promotional strategies^[10]. This applied to both the middle and higher categories of merchants, who are central to this study, as well as to retail, where associations of merchants became active in establishing specialised schools for merchant apprentices.

The institutional development of the financial sector, state administration, local self-government, and regional economic organizations (chambers of commerce and trade associations) dynamically increased the demand for educated administrative personnel competent in handling correspondence and managing financial records. The growing demand for so-called commercial clerks could not be ignored, as

² From a European perspective, the first private commercial schools in Imperial Austria emerged relatively late. The first institutions of this kind were established in England, Russia, Spain, Norway and the German states as early as the 18th century.

white-collar employees had become indispensable for the functioning of institutions, businesses, and enterprises^[11]. The temporary paralysis of the economy and societal demand for commercial education following the outbreak of the economic crisis in 1873 did not alter these trends. The temporary decline, however, was succeeded in the following decades by an even stronger emphasis on knowledge and competence, accompanied by an even more dynamic rise in demand for commercial education.

Because the Austrian administration long failed to address the educational needs of modern merchants and commercial clerks, non-state actors played a key role in the development of commercial education after the mid-19th century. Merchant associations focused mainly on meeting the needs of the emerging generation of retail merchants (schools for merchant apprentices) and only partially on higher categories of merchants and clerks (commercial academies in Prague, Vienna, Graz, and the school in Liberec). Individuals founding private commercial schools, by contrast, targeted primarily administrative personnel, although their curricula were also suitable for many merchants.

According to the earliest statistical data, private schools traditionally constituted a very important part of the system of commercially oriented educational institutions of a non-apprenticeship nature. In the 1871/1872 school year, they represented 19 of 28 schools (68 %), and three years later, 20 of 33 (61 %) ^[12]. Their key role was likely due to greater flexibility, responsiveness, and the willingness of individuals to take entrepreneurial risks in an uncertain educational market. Compared with merchant associations, individual initiatives avoided lengthy procedures, the need for compromises, or persuading conservative opponents of the school concept. Although they could present it differently, school founders were primarily motivated by personal ambition, the prospect of self-realization, and, above all, financial benefits.

As a result of the economic crisis, several private schools ceased to exist between 1873 and 1874 due to a decline in demand for study. Nevertheless, these institutions maintained a dominant position among commercial schools in the following years. Even in the 1881/1882 school year, 23 private schools represented 70 % of all 33 non-apprenticeship commercial schools

in Imperial Austria^[13]. A change occurred only in the 1880s, mainly in connection with the growing involvement of merchant associations and municipal authorities in non-apprenticeship commercial education. By the 1892/1893 school year, the share of private institutions among non-apprenticeship commercial schools had fallen to 42 %^[14]. The proportion of private institutions continued to decline during the 1890s and at the beginning of the 20th century, reaching 29 % in 1908/1909 (40 of 139 schools, with a 34 % share of total enrolment).

Private initiative was rarely applied to multi-year institutions within the system of non-apprenticeship commercial schools. In the 1908/1909 school year, the only example was Olga Ehrenhaft-Steindler's school in Vienna (founded in 1907). By contrast, among schools offering study programmes of up to two years, private institutions represented 34 % that same year, attended by 8,014 of 16,125 pupils³. The concentration of private initiative on schools with shorter study programmes had several reasons, primarily lower requirements for teaching premises, material resources, and personnel, resulting in reduced financial costs. Simultaneously, stricter regulation and supervision had prevailed in multi-year schools since the end of the 19th century. Meeting the increasingly demanding requirements of the state, which conditioned the rights granted to graduates, was difficult if not impossible for the owners of private schools. Their willingness to relinquish a substantial part of their autonomy in the organisation of teaching and, more generally, in the administration of the school was clearly lower than in the case of associations of merchants or municipal authorities.

Private commercial schools initially concentrated in major centres of administration, financial institutions, trade and services. Traditionally, these were key centres of Imperial Austria, especially Vienna and Prague. Gradually, however, they spread to provincial centres such as Ljubljana, Graz, Salzburg, Trieste, Brno, Lviv, and to regional centres like Jihlava, Olomouc,

³ In the statistics for the school years 1909/1910, 1910/1911, 1912/1913, and 1913/1914, two private schools were already listed in the highest category of commercial schools: in addition to the aforementioned girls' school of Olga Ehrenhaft-Steindler, there was also Franz Glasser's school (founded in 1906), although it was noted that its certificates were not centrally recognised (absence of the so-called *Öffentlichkeitsrecht*).

Tarnów, Cieszyn, Pilsen and Liberec, later also to smaller localities (e.g. Česká Lípa, Hodonín, Náchod, Voitsberg). An exceptional concentration of these schools was traditionally in the capital of the Habsburg Monarchy, Vienna (1874: 8, 1911: 11), followed at a distance by Prague (3, 8)^[15]. Other locations often had only a single private school over the years, while the existence of multiple institutions of this type over a longer period was rather exceptional (e.g. Brno, Ljubljana, Trieste, later also Cieszyn).

The concentration of private initiative in commercial education in larger centres is not surprising. It was precisely in these locations, for the aforementioned reasons, that the labour market demanded individuals with such specialised qualifications most, and the opportunity to succeed in this type of enterprise was therefore greatest. The demand for qualified labour was accompanied by an acute shortage of educational institutions with this focus, the underutilisation of teachers from other schools, and better spatial conditions for instruction. These attributes were long-term and began to change more noticeably only from the 1890s, in connection with the dynamic establishment of non-apprenticeship commercial schools^[16].

The number of pupils in individual private schools varied. It changed in connection with economic cycles (a decline in interest in study in the 1870s during the economic crisis, increased interest from the 1880s due to economic recovery) and shifts in social demand caused by extraordinary events (the wartime school years 1914–1918). The figure was influenced by a range of individual factors, especially reputation, organisational and marketing abilities, the initiative of owners/directors, and their decisiveness and flexibility in the face of changing conditions on the educational market. The attractiveness of a school was further determined by the number, composition and focus of study programmes, teachers, spatial conditions for instruction, location, tuition fees, admission requirements, competition from other schools, and, in ethnically mixed regions, the language of instruction.

This can be illustrated by the example of the 1908/1909 school year^[17]. Most private commercial schools at that time had only a few dozen pupils. However, some of them enrolled several hundred (the school of Nicolaus Kapamadžija in Vienna 447,

Alfred Ruprich in Brno 454, and the Prague schools of Wilhelm Wertheimer 500 and Otto Bergmann 384), or even considerably more (Vienna schools of Alois Weiss 1,786, Max Allin 1,196, and Franz Glasser 896). Significant differences also existed between schools within the same city. In Vienna, alongside the aforementioned large institutions, there were considerably smaller private schools, e.g. the institutions of Karl Porges (15 pupils) or Gabriele Pisko (52). In Ljubljana, the traditional and reputable school of Arthur Mahr (133) had almost four times as many pupils as the girls' school of A. Weinlich (36). In Prague, the schools of Bergmann and Wertheimer significantly surpassed the institutions of Napoleon Kheil (42), Vladimír Skřivan (22), or Sabrine Taussig (12). Another important phenomenon documented for Prague was that the number of pupils was clearly determined not only by the range of study programmes but also by the capacity of each of them. For example, the school of Tomáš Jan Maděra offered a total of six study programmes in 1908/1909 and was attended by 235 pupils. In contrast, at the institution of Wilhelm Wertheimer in the same year, it was possible to study only half as many programmes, yet a total of more than twice as many pupils (500) were enrolled in them.

An important part of pupils in private schools were girls and women. It was precisely private institutions that made commercial study accessible to them the earliest and, for a long time, to the greatest extent. This was not philanthropy, progressivism, or support for women's emancipation movements, but a rational calculation to meet the growing demand for qualified labour. The central point of the owners' considerations regarding the admission of girls and women was the prospect of increasing tuition revenue, i.e., maximising profit. While for private schools this was a relatively simple decision for the individual owner, in schools run by other founders, establishing girls' or women's study programmes required agreement within a broader body and addressing opponents' arguments (including concerns about competition from women in the labour market).

The most common way for girls and women to study was through separate educational courses or special classes. However, as early as the early 1860s, coeducation of women with men is documented in advertisements for enrolment at the school of Karel Petr

Kheil in Prague^[18]. Education for girls and women took various forms, from specialised afternoon or evening courses lasting a few weeks to full-day instruction (usually one to two year programmes) in the standard school-year format. Later and to a lesser extent, special private commercial girls' schools were also established. For the 1908/1909 school year, statistics recorded a total of ten such schools in Imperial Austria, located in Vienna (5), Vienna-New Town, Ljubljana, Prague, Pilsen, and Feldkirch (one each). With the exception of the Vienna schools of Robert Pöschl (founded 1878) and Emanuel Margold (founded 1880), these were institutions established only at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Notably, some private schools for girls were founded and run by enterprising women (in Vienna Olga Ehrenhaft-Steindler, founded 1907, and Gabriele Pisko, founded 1906; in Prague Sabine Taussig, founded 1907). With the exception of Olga Ehrenhaft-Steindler's school, the institutions offered programmes of no more than two years, corresponding to the prevailing notion of women's employment as assistants in commerce, in lower administrative positions, and only in exceptional cases as independent retailers^[19]. In terms of the number of pupils, girls' institutions generally belonged to the smaller private schools, typically with a few dozen pupils. Consequently, gender-defined classes, departments, and courses within more broadly conceived educational institutions were the most significant contributor to female enrolment. Indeed, in the aforementioned school year 1908/1909, girls and women were absent from only three of the 39 active private commercial schools, and altogether they constituted 52 % of all their pupils.

3. Owners of Private Schools – Origin and Genesis of Their Business

Private commercial school owners mainly came from families of officials and merchants. They were primarily individuals with experience in administration or teaching, only exceptionally (and mostly in earlier periods) merchants as well, such as Karel Petr Kheil senior^[20]. This observation is not self-evident, as the owners' previous professional experience, education, and competencies influenced the conception of the schools, the focus of study programmes, the quality of instruction, and marketing strategies. Individuals knowledgeable in financial management,

administration, and possessing adequate professional and general education or insights into pedagogy and didactics were clearly at an advantage over those lacking such knowledge and skills. They knew better what to emphasise in teaching, what and how to develop, and, conversely, what to avoid. Life and professional experience were and remain transferable, representing, together with education, an important component of cultural capital, as defined years ago by Pierre Bourdieu^[21]. A strict separation between previous clerical and pedagogical experience did not exist. Many private school owners in the past held clerical positions (notably as office managers, auditors, or accountants) while simultaneously teaching, either privately or at other schools. With few exceptions, these were men; women were primarily active as teachers. It is a relevant question to what extent the minimal representation of women among private school owners was due to the significantly lower proportion of women among teachers and administrative leaders, and to what extent it was the result of their lower assertiveness and ambition or greater distrust on the part of potential pupils and their parents.

The establishment of a private school (i.e., a licensed institution) was a step into the unknown for only some of their owners. A few, such as Karl Mayer from Teplice, W. Wertheimer, and A. Skřivan from Prague, had extensive experience in individual or collective private teaching before founding a school. Much more common, however, were cases in which future private school owners were pedagogically active directly in commercial education, or in other types of schools. Knowledge of commercial subjects and pedagogical-didactic experience evidently supported personal ambition and confidence in successfully becoming independent with the prospect of higher earnings. This was the case of Wenzel Ruprich, who founded his own school in Brno in 1869 (after an evening course a year earlier), having previously taught at the local school for merchant apprentices and the German *Realschule*^[22]. In Galicia, pedagogical experience from teaching at commercial academies in Kraków and Lviv was employed by Witold Skalski and Mieczysław Christoff, who before World War I established one-year commercial courses/schools. Similarly, Samuel Weinberg drew on experience from running a commercial school in the Galician town of Sambir

between 1891 and 1897, before founding his own school in Ivano-Frankivsk/Stanislaw in 1897^[23].

Individuals became private school owners in two ways. They either founded the schools themselves or assumed responsibility for them through the transfer of a licence, usually due to the poor health or death of the previous owners. In the latter case, intergenerational succession from father to son(s) was common across Imperial Austria. Examples include the schools of Jacob Franz Mahr in Ljubljana (owner Ferdinand, his son, 1845–1900; Arthur M., his grandson, 1900–1918), Wenzel Ruprich in Brno (from 1902, owner Alfred, his son), and Antonín Skřivan (from 1887, owner Vladimír, his son). In these cases, as well as in the families Schroeder in Cieszyn and Wertheimer and Kheil in Prague, private school ownership became a family business, in which the succeeding generation was gradually and deliberately involved in operating the educational institutions (teacher → deputy director → director/owner). Some descendants of founders, such as the sons of Karel Petr Kheil, Napoleon and Petr junior, used family pedagogical and administrative experience to open their own schools (1875 and 1881, respectively)^[24]. Family ties could also involve other relatives, such as brothers (Josef Získal's school in Brno, founded in 1899, transferred to his brother Stanislav), wives (Stanislav Získal → Antonie Z. in 1916), or sons-in-law (Ignaz Pazelt's school in Vienna to Franz Glasser in 1885). Sometimes a licence was transferred to someone without a familial connection, often a teacher, collaborator, or friend. Positive personal experience, respect, trust, and belief in the individual's abilities clearly played a key role. In this way, Johann Geyer's school was taken over by Ignaz Pazelt in 1856, Max Allina acquired Karla Mühlbauer's school in 1884 (both in Vienna), and František Hlaváček assumed Napoleon Kheil's school in Prague in 1902^[25].

Establishing and operation of private commercial schools was quite risky. Success depended on a combination of factors – the owners' individual capabilities, favourable general trends (economic prosperity improving labour market opportunities and social demand), and local or regional conditions, particularly competition within the educational sector. Unsuccessful projects were also part of the history of private commercial schools, including failed foundations, unsuccessful organisational changes

(school transformations or new programmes), or institutions that ceased shortly after opening. For instance, between 1909 and 1914, attempts to establish commercial schools in Bielsk by Alfred Näbe, Ludwig Kraus, or Moritz Klappholz failed because they did not receive the official authorisation required for a licence. Their applications were rejected by Friedrich Oberdorfer, inspector for commercial education, who questioned the school concepts, organisation and methods of instruction, the applicants' qualifications, and the staffing of the institutions. His assessment was evidently not entirely objective, as Oberdorfer simultaneously directed a two-year commercial school in Opava and may have seen the proposed schools and their future graduates as competition^[26]. The official rejection of private school projects, however, became more prominent only from the 1890s, after the establishment of the inspectorate for commercial schools^[27].

In the earlier period, correct timing and an accurate assessment of social demand for this type of study were key factors. Numerous examples of schools with very short existence show that these conditions were not always met. Typically, such institutions emerged just before the onset of the economic crisis in mid-1873 or in the following years. Private school owners were not (and could hardly have been) prepared for a major cyclical downturn in the economy and the consequent changes in the labour market and demand for education. Owners of smaller institutions with a limited range of programmes, narrowly specialised in specific activities, as well as less established schools with lower prestige and brand recognition, encountered the greatest difficulties. Their situation was further worsened by competition from other commercial schools in the same locations. Examples include the Vienna schools of L. Beran (founded 1863), E. Theimann and A. Kühnel (1866), the Brno schools of F. Mikesch and A. Kuhn (1879), and Ernst Ruprecht's school in Olomouc (1874–1881). Under difficult conditions and in the competition for public attention, established and prestigious schools with a wider range of programmes proved to be more resilient, for example the Porges, Patzelt, and Mühlbauer schools in Vienna, the Skřivan and Kheil schools in Prague, or the Ruprich school in Brno. Not coincidentally, these institutions operated as family businesses (Kheil, Wertheimer, Ruprich,

Skřivan, Mahr, etc.). Naturally, it remains a question to what extent this reflected a more responsible approach, stronger personnel resources, the possibility of using family finances to cover shortfalls in tuition fees, or the making of strategic decisions involving multiple family members.

4. Owners, Managers, and/or Teachers?

Owners of commercial schools usually directed their institutions personally as directors⁴. At the same time, they participated in instruction as teachers, sometimes serving as the sole instructor in smaller schools. Leading the school did not conflict with teaching; on the contrary, it reinforced it. Direct personal involvement in both running the school and teaching primarily reflected personal commitment, the drive for self-realisation, and the pursuit of maximum prosperity and an excellent reputation. In smaller schools, the need to save financial resources was a key factor, making the owners' active participation in teaching indispensable. Among private school owners, pedagogical functions were therefore commonly combined with roles that Fritz Redlich used to define for entrepreneurs: capitalist (providing capital and assuming business risks), entrepreneur (making fundamental strategic decisions), and manager (making tactical decisions and ensuring the day-to-day organisational activities necessary to implement strategic decisions)^[28]. Similarly, definitions of entrepreneurs based on their positions within enterprises are also applicable (person with the highest authority; holder of ownership rights / entrepreneurial functions and discretionary powers; executive)^[29].

The combination of the above-mentioned functions, the enormous workload, personal responsibility, and the stress associated with ensuring sufficient pupil enrolment and staffing for instruction constituted an integral part of owning a commercial school. Nevertheless, many private school owners also taught concurrently at other schools (including universities, e.g., Wenzel Ruprich, Josef Auspitz, and Karel Peter Kheil Jr.), many developed expertise in publishing, and were members of various organisations. Some of them became prominent figures in the development

of commercial schooling in imperial Austria and, through their professional activities (e.g., the creation of terminology, textbooks, and teaching aids, as well as innovations in didactic methods), significantly influenced the formation of a qualified workforce for commerce and administration. In Bohemia, this role was fulfilled by Antonín Skřivan, Karel Petr Kheil and his namesake son; in Moravia by Wenzel Ruprich; in Lower Austria by Franz Glasser; in the southern part of imperial Austria by Ferdinand Mahr; and in commercial education for Austrian girls and women by Olga Ehrenhaft-Steindler^[30].

There were multiple paths to the success of private commercial schools. The quantity, composition, and focus of study programmes, marketing, and, in ethnically mixed localities (regions), the choice of the language(s) of instruction appeared to be crucial. These requirements necessarily demanded a well-conceived strategy, expertise, professional experience, decisiveness, and flexibility on the part of the owners, in terms of adapting to changes in the labour market, societal demand, and the competitive environment in the educational sector. In this context, pedagogical activities, important for the schools' reputation, overshadowed purely entrepreneurial work and strategic as well as organisational decision-making.

Private schools were characterised from the outset by a diverse organisation reflecting the individual capacities, abilities, and preferences of their owners. Many combined the main study programme with additional courses^[31]. This remained true at the beginning of the 20th century; for example, in the school year 1908/1909, approximately half of private schools consisted of a single study programme, which simultaneously defined the institution. These schools, spread across larger and smaller towns throughout imperial Austria, were characterised by a lower number of pupils and teachers. The remaining schools offered a more varied composition of study programmes, differing in terms of pupil gender or age, duration (from several months to one year), schedule (full-time or evening instruction), or specialisation (general commercial subjects, preparatory courses, typing, banking, accounting). The combination and number of study programmes were highly variable. While Karel Mayer's school in Teplice (founded 1895) offered only an evening course alongside its main study programme,

⁴ Separation of ownership from the role of director was rather exceptional. An example is Ignaz Richter, owner of a girls' school in Liberec (founded 1895), where Friedrich Schiller served as director.

Alfred Ruprich's school in Brno had five study programmes, Otto Bergmann's in Prague (founded 1900) six, and Nicolaus Kapamadžija's in Vienna (founded 1882 by Johann Friedrich Engler) even seven^[32]. Moreover, the range of study programmes at individual schools was not static but varied according to each institution. This was not accidental, because 1) school owners were usually also their directors, enabling them to implement relatively radical changes quickly, as they were not dependent on approval processes from authorities or other supporters; 2) the speed and intensity of owners' responses to current needs or demand had an existential dimension and were a priority, since the very existence of the schools, whose primary purpose was to generate profit for their owners, depended on it. While some owners did not hesitate to take decisive steps in relatively quick succession, others were more conservative and preferred gradual changes over the long term. Sometimes significant organisational changes were associated with the transfer of a licence, while at other times the original owner remained highly flexible and progressive even during many years of management^[33].

Almost constant institutional and organisational innovation, recalibration, and remodelling were essential for private commercial schools to survive in a competitive environment, enhance their attractiveness, and increase income from school fees⁵. Owners able to implement functional changes and respond flexibly to social demand can be seen as entrepreneurial innovators, actively seeking ways to expand their institutions. By taking such initiatives, they met Joseph A. Schumpeter's definition of entrepreneurs and demonstrated the ability to quickly recognise and exploit market opportunities, as noted by Mark Casson^[34]. Organisational changes did not always have a positive effect. Even in the educational sector, taking risks (the courage to implement changes) did not automatically lead to profit (increased enrolments and thus income from school fees). The same, however, applied to an overly cautious strategy, the preservation of organisational structures, or excessive adherence to tradition. The ambitions of school owners sometimes collided with the realities of the educational market,

as illustrated by the unsuccessful attempt to introduce a special railway course at Ernst Ruprecht's school in Olomouc in 1880, as well as the effort of Wenzel Ruprich from Brno to expand the institution from a two-year to a three-year programme in the mid-1870s^[35].

An important element of the entrepreneurial strategy of private school owners in ethnically heterogeneous locations and regions was the choice of the language of instruction. This reflected both the composition of the local population and the demands of the local labour market. It was particularly in private institutions that non-German languages, especially Czech and Polish, were first and most widely adopted. Schools often had a bilingual or even multilingual character, with individual study programmes conducted in different languages or, in some cases, teaching delivered bilingually within a single programme⁶. The approach of private school owners to implementing various languages in their institutions lacked emotional attachment and did not necessarily reflect personal preferences or national identification. It was based on a pragmatic calculation and the conception of the school as a profit-making enterprise. The aim was to increase the attractiveness of the school and gain an advantage in the competitive struggle for pupils, who ultimately also benefited from this arrangement. The example of Prague institutions illustrates the tendency towards linguistic differentiation in schools: originally predominantly bilingual schools gradually became identified by their language of instruction as either German or Czech. However, Prague seems to have been an exception in this regard for a long time. In other Bohemian cities, schools were bilingual or entirely German. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that Czech schools began to open in locations with a predominantly Czech-speaking population, such as Kladno and Plzeň. The same applied initially to Polish-German schools in Galician cities: Lviv (Samuel Szlagowski, 1898), Ivano-Frankivsk/Stanišlau (Samuel Weinberg, 1897), and Tarnów (Henryk Rausch, 1900). At the latter school, however, instruction was conducted exclusively in Polish before the First World War, as

⁵ Regarding the issue of remodelling, recalibration and permanent innovation in education, also as a factor of economic growth and competitiveness, in greater detail.

⁶ While bilingualism was fairly common in private commercial schools, a multilingual character was rare, occurring only exceptionally (e.g., the schools of Adolf Eckert in Prague /est. 1893/ or the Mahr family in Ljubljana).

was the case at the later-established school of Ch. Sennensieb-Kleiner^[36]. A different situation prevailed in the Moravian centre of Brno and the Silesian centre of Cieszyn, where only German schools operated for a long period, clearly reflecting the preferences and composition of the local German-speaking communities. Nevertheless, in Brno, the situation began to change at the beginning of the 20th century with the establishment of Czech schools by Stanislav Ziskal, František Pouchlý, and Franz Kozák.

In response to growing competition in commercial schooling, the struggle for pupils, and the threat of losing autonomy due to increasing state regulation of this educational sector, private school owners vigorously defended their entrepreneurial interests. Their practices were diverse and reflected the immediate challenges they faced. In particular, they countered defamatory campaigns by teachers and founders of other schools through intensive marketing and more lenient admission policies. Instances of unlicensed private teaching were reported to educational and municipal authorities. Conflicts with school authorities were also resolved through long-term legal disputes, such as those of Franz Glasser (a case concerning the so-called *Öffentlichkeitsrecht* for classes in multi-year educational programmes) or Olga Ehrenhaft-Steindler (a case over the use of the term 'academy' for her girls' school)^[37].

5. Teachers and Instruction in Private Schools

An important factor in the development of private commercial schools and their success on the education market was the provision of teaching personnel. Without adequate teaching provision, it was not possible to establish new study programmes, open new classes, or fulfil educational objectives. The composition of the teaching staff influenced the quality of schools, their prestige, brand, and attractiveness. The position of the school owners was challenging: on the one hand, they had a strong interest in developing their schools and thus increasing profitability; on the other hand, their ambitions were constantly confronted with limited financial resources. It was precisely the availability of sufficient financial resources that determined whether school owners could afford to employ an adequate number of teachers with the required qualifications.

Because private schools were financially dependent on school fees from pupils, everything depended on the fluctuating interest in studying at the schools. Owners of newly established schools found themselves in a particularly difficult situation. They were the ones who, in the initial period, bore the main burden of teaching duties. In many cases, they were the only teachers. The length of this phase was highly variable. While sometimes it lasted one to two years, in other cases it extended over several years (e.g., Karl Mühlbauer from 1848 to 1859) and, in some instances, even became a permanent condition^[38]. Private schools with an owner who also acted as the sole teacher were not uncommon until the early 1890s. At that time, more extensive teaching personnel became a prerequisite for a school's success in the increasingly tough competition with other institutions. The model of a private school with a single teacher, i.e., an owner who taught alone, remained limited to isolated cases of modest institutions with limited reputation and often short existence⁷.

Considerable differences existed in the number of teachers among private schools. Most employed only a few (usually no more than ten), while others matched or even exceeded the staffing levels of schools operated by other founders. In this regard, the Vienna schools of A. Weiss, F. Glasser, and M. Allina were exceptional, with several dozen teachers teaching simultaneously. They were not matched by the established schools of the Mahr family in Ljubljana, the Ruprich's in Brno, or the Prague schools of O. Bergmann and Wilhelm Wertheimer, which had at most around twenty teachers. Moreover, the number of teachers at individual private commercial schools was highly variable, apparently more so than in institutions of other founders. Although exceptions existed as well in this context, as shown by the list of teachers at Ignaz Patzelt's school from 1856 to 1881, which included individuals with more than ten years of experience at the school^[39].

The relatively high variability in teacher numbers was linked to the dynamic opening and closing of study programmes and to the significant reliance on external staff, who often formed the core of the teaching body in private institutions. This was simultaneously a strength

⁷ For example, in the 1874/1875 school year, 5 of 20 private schools had a single teacher; in 1881/1882, 4 of 23; in 1892/1893, 1 of 18; and in 1908/1909, 3 of 40.

and a weakness of private schools. From the owners' perspective, it was essentially a necessity dictated by financial constraints and the uncertain prospects of their schools. Employing external staff allowed for more flexible responses to changes in demand for studies and, consequently, to organisational adjustments within the schools. For the external teachers, the typically few-hour positions at private schools represented a welcome supplementary source of income. For many, it provided valuable experience and a starting point at the beginning of their teaching careers, which was reflected in the age composition of the teaching staff. However, excessive reliance on external staff and the resulting higher turnover did not always benefit the quality of instruction, as evidenced by inspection reports of these schools^[40]⁸.

Besides the generally high proportion of external staff, inspectors frequently criticised multiple appointments, insufficient hours, and the inadequate qualifications of many external staff. However, generalisations are not appropriate, as there were considerable differences even among teachers at private commercial schools. Institutions in traditional educational centres or locations with secondary and higher education provision had a clear advantage: those in Vienna, Prague, or Brno employed teachers with strong prior education and experience from *Gymnasien*, *Realschulen*, technical colleges, or universities, whereas in smaller towns, instruction was often provided by individuals whose experience was limited to primary schools^[41].

Teachers without pedagogical experience were traditionally present in private schools to a considerable extent. They were usually individuals with administrative (accounting, office management, etc.) or legal experience who taught subjects aimed at developing these skills and competencies. Pupils' contact with the requirements of real professional practice was beneficial. The relevant question, of course, was pedagogical competence, whether and to what extent these teachers were able to convey the necessary knowledge and develop the pupils' skills. In

connection with the dynamic development of secondary and commercial schools and within the context of increasing state regulation, the proportion of individuals with non-pedagogical professional experience in the teaching staff of private institutions gradually declined. However, it could not disappear entirely. Although the Austrian educational authorities, led by the Ministry of Education, tightened qualification requirements for commercial school teachers from the late 19th century (examination regulations for teachers from 1870, 1892, 1899 and 1907), they did not fully cover this segment of education. In fact, state regulation focused mainly on teachers of multi-year commercial schools, where private institutions were rare, and on teachers of two-year schools. The reach of regulation regarding the qualifications of commercial school teachers was significant, yet private schools were affected only partially. Primarily, they were generally independent of state benefits for graduates and of subsidies; secondly, a large part of their study programmes lasted less than two years, and consequently only the teachers of their two-year study programmes were subject to regulation.

Although inspection reports often noted that private school owners paid little attention to teacher qualifications, such a view would be simplistic. Most schools were regularly scrutinised by state inspectors, who criticised teacher qualifications, multiple job holdings, and overall instructional quality^[42]. In highly competitive commercial education centres, however, owners had to ensure qualified and experienced teachers to maintain school quality and reputation, crucial for their prosperity. Consequently, significant differences existed among private schools in both instructional quality and staff composition. This is illustrated by the Czech girls' two-year school in Královské Vinohrady (now part of Prague), which at the start of the 20th century employed properly certified men and women, many of whom were university-educated with general secondary teaching experience^[43]. It was in the teaching staff of girls' schools and girls'/women's study programmes in boys' schools that women first began to enter from the late 19th century, gradually challenging the previously exclusively male environment.

It is not appropriate to equate all private schools with poor quality. There were considerable differences among them, not only in the organisation of studies, the range of study programmes, or material resources,

⁸ Private institutions were subject to the same inspection as other non-apprenticeship commercial schools. The inspectors directly managed by the Ministry of Education were active or retired teachers or directors of multi-year commercial schools, and, in exceptional cases, of two-year schools.

but also in the quality of instruction. It is no coincidence that those schools owned by prominent figures in commercial education in Imperial Austria such as Ferdinand Mahr, Antonín Skřivan, Karel Petr Kheil, Max Allina or Wenzel Ruprich were especially notable. The aforementioned criticisms of instruction in private schools by state inspectors, as we have already indicated, sometimes bore signs of intentional and biased evaluation. This was not always simply a conflict of interests between inspectors and their attempt to discredit private schools before the educational authorities, but also reflected conservatism, a lack of understanding of modern teaching trends, and the real demands of the labour market. For example, the well-established and popular Prague school of Wilhelm Wertheimer (founded 1889) was subjected to a devastating criticism at the end of 1906 by Theodor Ried, who, among other things, expressed objections to the individualised aspects of instruction typical for private schools and the overall teaching concept. According to him, even referring to this institution as a school was entirely inappropriate^[44].

The quality of instruction at private commercial schools was influenced not only by the teaching staff but also by temporal (total number of teaching hours, distribution of lessons throughout the day or week, hourly allocation of individual subjects), as well as material and spatial conditions. In this context, the prosperity of the schools also played a decisive role.

The economic condition of schools influenced the hourly allocations assigned to individual study programmes, redefined learning objectives, and determined the degree to which the curriculum was condensed in specific subjects. Under favourable circumstances, private institutions offered comfortable conditions for study, including extensive collections of teaching aids and school libraries, their own instructional texts, or parallel classes. By contrast, the stagnation or decline of schools led owners to reduce expenditure on teaching staff (including the merging of classes, reducing their number, and placing less emphasis on qualifications) and on the provision of pedagogical and didactic aids. In unfavourable periods, a greater degree of leniency in pupil admissions became more apparent at many schools. Common practices included the lowering of admission requirements or the

acceptance of pupils during the course of the school year, although such practices could also be observed relatively frequently at prosperous schools (e.g. the schools of Alfred Ruprich in Brno or Adolf Eckert in Prague)^[45]. In other words, when private schools failed to prosper, owners prioritised economic considerations over pedagogical and didactic quality and overall standards.

6. Conclusion

Private schools emerged on the European continent from the late 18th century in response to the insufficiency of educational capacities in non-apprenticeship commercial schooling, and simultaneously as a reaction to deficiencies in the orientation and organisation of schools administered by other founders. In Imperial Austria, they represented a traditional and important component of the local educational infrastructure. The interest in studying at private schools indicates that their strengths sufficiently compensated for their generally weak (negative) aspects. Despite the dynamic development of schools established by merchant associations and municipal authorities from the 1880s, the commercially oriented educational infrastructure in Imperial Austria could scarcely have done without them, even though their critics (teachers and founders of other commercial schools) perceived and presented the situation quite differently. Certain criticism resulted from the competitive impact of private schools in the educational market. The existence of these institutions undoubtedly increased competition in the sector, while simultaneously helping to meet the demand for qualified personnel in commerce and administration, thereby stimulating the economy of the Austrian part of the Habsburg Monarchy. This was also reflected by the Austrian administration, which tolerated their existence. Moreover, the defensive reaction of competitors of private schools had an interesting side effect, as it mobilised both the professional and the lay public, stimulated reform debates, and thus contributed to the qualitative transformation of commercial education in Imperial Austria.

Private schools in Imperial Austria constituted a differentiated group of educational institutions, each developing in a highly individual manner. They depended on school fees and typically offered several

study programmes, rarely exceeding two years. From a linguistic perspective, bilingual instruction was more commonly applied, and female pupils were also admitted, partly thanks to coeducation. Considerable differences, however, existed in the composition of study programmes and teaching staff, spatial and material conditions, capacity, and overall quality of the schools. Alongside established, prestigious, and innovative schools there were modest institutions with a poorly qualified teaching staff (sometimes only a single teacher) and questionable instructional quality. While the first category often survived for decades, the latter stagnated, declined, or existed only briefly.

A key factor determining the success, quality, prestige, and long-term prosperity of private schools was their owners. Evidence shows that in most cases, the role of owner-entrepreneur predominated, often combined with that of entrepreneur-manager. At the same time, the equally essential role of the teacher was consistently observed, particularly in smaller schools. Owners' personal involvement was necessarily diverse, encompassing ownership, managerial, and teaching functions, with their relative balance varying according to individual circumstances and capabilities. Regardless of how the distribution of roles, functions, and positions among the owners was arranged, it invariably entailed excessive time and work demands, as well as stress. Managing educational institutions was not straightforward, and guiding them to prosperity was even more challenging in the face of changing labour market demands, increasing competition, and state regulatory efforts. Like other forms of enterprise, it required, in addition to the necessary expertise and experience, an approach that was rational, flexible, and efficient. It appears that the success or failure of schools depended primarily on the mastery of the entrepreneurial role, specifically the ability to make swift, correct, and effective decisions. Responsiveness and flexibility in adapting to changes in external conditions were absolutely crucial.

Private commercial schools primarily functioned as enterprises, where rationalisation, careful calculation, and effective marketing played a central role. The essence of all activity was to secure sufficient income, which in practice meant maintaining an adequate number of pupils. The pursuit of profitability often

overshadowed the qualitative aspects of education, a point regularly noted by school authorities. Many owners' resignation from instructional quality was reflected in greater leniency, even benevolence, in pupil admissions, overcrowded classes, and insufficient teaching provision, both in numbers and qualifications. Nevertheless, generalisation would be misleading. Numerous private schools met strict standards regarding instructional quality and the composition of the teaching staff, and could be regarded as model institutions, in this respect at least equalling schools operated by other founders. Many of their owners left a significant mark on the history of commercial education in Imperial Austria. Overall, the contribution of private schools to the development of non-apprenticeship commercial education in this part of the Habsburg Monarchy can be assessed as highly important.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The research was conducted independently without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. The funding sources (if any) had no role in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, writing of the manuscript, or the decision to submit the article for publication.

Author's Contributions

The study is the work of both authors, who contributed equally to all parts of it. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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- [36] *Österreichische Statistik (Neue Folge)*, 8/2: *Statistik... für das Jahr 1910/1911*. Wien: Karl Gerold's Sohn; 1914. p. 156.
- [37] Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (further ÖStA), Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (further AVA), fund Ministerium für Kultus und Unterricht, sign. 16A-D/5, cart. 4552; Státní okresní archiv Olomouc, fund Archiv města Olomouce, cart. 511 (Letter from Ernst Ruprecht to the Municipal Council of Olomouc, 13 October 1881); *Jednání ankety o nedostatech školství obchodního, která se konala dne 27. června 1898, byvši svolána správním výborem sboru pro zřízení a vydržování československé akademie obchodní v Praze*. Praha; 1898; Nemeček O. *Der Akademietitel der höheren Handelsschulen. Österreichische Handelsschulzeitung (Neue Folge)*, 1913; 5: 274–277.
- [38] Allina. *Geschichte*. p. 6.
- [39] *Denkschrift, Table A* (unpag.).
- [40] Cf. Löwner, H. (editor). *Jahrbuch des höheren Unterrichtswesens in Österreich mit Einschluß der bedeutendsten Erziehungsanstalten*. Wien: F.

Tempsky; 1914. p. 44–45.

[41] Ibidem. p. 5–6; Kleibel. Denkschrift, *passim*; Allina. Geschichte. p. 6, 10–11, 17–20.

[42] For many examples of inspections of private schools in Bohemia, Moravia, and Vienna, see ÖStA, AVA, fund Unterrichtsministerium (U2), cart. 4552, 4608–4609, 4657.

[43] Archiv hlavního města Prahy, Soukromá obchodní

škola kongregace Školských sester O.S.F. (Praha XII-Vinohrady), unsorted (teachers' personal records 1907–1922).

[44] Kadlec. Vzdělávání jako podnikání: 305.

[45] ÖStA, AVA, Unterrichtsministerium (U2), cart. 4608 (Reports on the inspections of A. Eckert's private school from 1901 and 1908).