

A Journeyman Bookbinder (c. 1870)

Abstract

This excerpt from a bookbinder's memoirs offers a view into the German guild system, more specifically, the intricate initiation rituals it imposed on job-seeking, itinerant journeymen up until 1870. Although guild procedures were highly restrictive—and increasingly challenged by regional laws guaranteeing freedom of occupation—they provided for the close integration of qualified artisans into workshops and families. The resulting exchange and spread of skills contributed considerably to Germany's economic advancement.

Source

So I journeyed through the wonderful forests and meadows along the Silesian-Saxon border, all by myself, deliberately avoiding any traveling companions, to the town of Reichenbach in Silesia. In this place, however, I did find a companion, who had become “alien” on the same day. He had been employed in the town for an extended period and now wished to move on. He was a file-cutter who came from a good family but wanted to get a taste of the wide world. He had taken part in the war of 1866 as an infantryman and had much to say about that experience. What appealed to me most was the fact that he was really well-informed about all metalworking techniques, and was above all thoroughly familiar with the customs of the so-called “look around,” that is, the search for employment opportunities according to guild tradition. Back then, traveling metalworkers, smiths, locksmiths, file-cutters, nail smiths, etc. were obliged to “hum in” when looking for a job. Probably all the old ones who knew this practice are gone by now. Today we might smirk at such customs and shrug our shoulders; but the tradition nevertheless served a special purpose: Proper use of “looking around” customs was the most reliable legitimization for members of a particular craft. Woe to anyone who dared give away the customs to someone other than a fellow guild member. This spelled life-long scorn and ostracism.

However, this code of secrecy did not prevent an “external” from learning about these trade secrets, provided he was deemed trustworthy. That so little of these secret guild customs has been passed down to us is attributable to the strict silence that the honorable journeyman maintained with respect to them. “Humming in,” unknown today, took place according to the following custom: Using his cane, the “newcomer” knocked at the workshop door according to a very specific code, opened it only a little, and hummed audibly through the crack of the door. At this point, he was asked to come in; but the stranger modestly stood near the door, until he was invited to come closer. After that, however, he was immediately introduced as an equal, asked to take a seat and, above all, to tell stories. He had to report about life in other cities and even countries, about work methods in other regions, about the country and its people. The farther he had traveled, the more respected he was. In those days, this constituted the only opportunity to transplant new work methods, the only way to convey knowledge about materials and various tools to other areas. If possible, the newcomer was refreshed with food and drink, and, if no work was available, he received his “Viatikum,” his travel present, whose value differed from one guild to another.

Among bookbinders, the common procedure was less elaborate. After knocking at the door and entering came the greeting: “With goodwill! Master and journeymen!” The response was: “With goodwill!” And that already did the trick.

Source: Paul Adam, *Lebenserinnerungen eines alten Kunstbuchbinders*, 3rd ed. Stuttgart, 1951, pp. 49 ff; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982, pp. 291–92.

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