

A Tailor in a Small Pomeranian Town (1870s)

Abstract

Franz Rehbein (1867–1909) was a farm laborer whose principal legacy was his autobiography—one of the rare personal testimonies of the agrarian working class of the late nineteenth century. Rehbein's text was published in 1911, edited by the former Protestant minister and social reformer Paul Göhre (1864–1928). In another section of the text, Rehbein tells of his work on a north German farm, but in this excerpt he describes his difficult childhood as the son of a tailor and a washerwoman in a small town in the Prussian province of Pomerania.

Source

FROM MY CHILDHOOD

[...]

My father was a tailor. I can still see him before me: tall, lean, old-fashioned; a good soul but unfortunately weak and sickly—the neighbors called it chest trouble. He himself was not at all averse to being addressed as “master.”

He did not, however, have a workshop with journeymen and apprentices. Our small rented apartment had just one room that served simultaneously as a living room, bedroom, and kitchen for our family of six and—on top of that—as my father's workshop as well. There he sat at his table between rags and patches, pecking and pecking [with his needle] from dusk until dawn; mother helped out.

Certainly in those days—the 1870s—sewing machines had already been introduced into eastern Pomerania, but my father thoroughly mistrusted those “new-fangled devices.” His guild aphorism was, “Machine work is nothing compared to handiwork!” He might have changed his mind, however, had the sewing machine not been quite so expensive.

Thus, as a “hand tailor,” he continued pecking, year after year, for the urban dwellers who farmed in the countryside, for the workers, and also for the farmers in the surrounding villages, always working tirelessly and industriously—until he could manage no more. During severe coughing attacks, he would wheeze: “It's right here, right here,” grabbing his chest and gasping for breath.

He strove to provide for his family, doing as much as the meager circumstances in eastern Pomerania allowed any small master to do. These circumstances, though, forced one to become accustomed to meagerness from the get-go.

A bit of money went farther in this industry-poor region than in the modern industrial towns of western Germany. Anyone who lived in this small town and boasted an income comparable to that of a skilled big-city worker could easily count himself among the town's “better people”; like it or not, he would rank among the respected members of the bourgeoisie. One can well imagine what it must have been like for the truly poor.

Back then, for instance, if my father had a thaler, he looked at it entirely differently than we view a common, ordinary three-mark piece nowadays. Goodness gracious! — That was a “hard thaler,” a “wheel,” and the happy owner's gaze would all but caress the coin that was so extraordinarily valuable to him. After all, imagine all the things one could buy for a thaler and how hard it was to earn! Moreover, if a

sum of 1.5 marks was pocketed or, worse, had to be spent at once, we did not speak disparagingly of 15 measly ten-pfennig pieces. Oh no, that was half a thaler, a “pure half thaler.” The sweat of one-and-a-half to two working days clung to it. Thus, it’s evident that under such circumstances my parents had to count every penny. Indeed, I never saw a ten- or twenty-mark piece, not to mention a hundred-mark bill, at home.

No wonder, then, that we were short on rations at home. Oh yes, the “cuisine!” I will never forget it, this eastern Pomeranian fare. We had little, very little, to chew on.

In the morning, we had coffee. “Schlurck”^[1] is what my mother called this fine beverage. “Fourteen cups from 13 beans,” she commented occasionally, in a fit of angry humor, to which my father grumbled in response: “Well, as craftsmen we certainly cannot eat gruel like the day laborers.” Of course, the reputation of every last member of the honorable tailors’ guild would have suffered had we enjoyed gruel instead of chicory water! As for something solid, each of us got a whole or half *Pamel*, a.k.a., bread roll.

When the coffee beans ran out and the wallet was equally low, we even had to go without that humble chicory brine. In those instances, six pfennigs worth of milk was bought and diluted with a hefty quantity of hot water. This thin, bluish-white slop was then heavily seasoned with salt to prevent it from tasting too bland. *Probatum est!* — It’s proven!

One day, that “milk” even helped us earn quite a reputation. Since I usually had no breakfast sandwich to take to school, the son of the master painter often shared his with me. One day, the teacher saw this, and he asked me sympathetically whether I had perhaps come to school with an empty stomach. “No, we had milk and bread rolls,” I answered promptly. To that, the good man issued a curiously drawn-out reply: “Well, if the whole family still manages to have milk in the morning [...]”. I could well imagine the rest. Of course, he had no idea *what kind* of “milk” it had been. At home, though, my father was pleased as punch that the teacher had been diverted from the embarrassing suspicion that we might be doing badly! And as for myself? Well, I had just heard something about optical illusions at school.

Our lunch menu was just as plain as the morning meal. The following items alternated in sweet succession: potato soup, buttermilk and potatoes, rutabagas and potatoes, cabbage and potatoes, carrots and potatoes, potato fritters in suet, potato dumplings, etc., everything in the most beautiful potato harmony. Meat was served only once or twice a week, and even then merely as a “morsel.” On meat day, everyone ogled everyone else’s plate, checking to see whether someone had perhaps received “too much,” and busily fished for any blobs of fat in the bowl.

How often I thought of the lovely fairytale “The Wishing Table.” Oh, all the magnificent dishes I would have conjured up for us! Roast at least three times a day and thick rice with blueberry sauce. To be sure, I would have seen to it that all of the butcher’s sausages and confectioner’s cakes were permanently whisked from their shop windows. For my mouth watered every time I stood in front of those shops. Unfortunately, no one came by to give me my magic table.

In the evening, the menu was even more frugal. In the summertime, the eastern Pomeranian favorite, “Klieben and Klamörkens”—a mishmash of water, flour, and old crusts of bread—was served with a bit of milk as a whitener. In the wintertime, it was potatoes and herring one evening and herring and potatoes the next. Two herrings, at the most, had to suffice for the entire family. That did the trick. One certainly didn’t become an athlete on this type of diet.

How happy I was on those occasions when I hit upon exactly the right moment for a bold assault on the breadbox. I would quickly cut off a slice and hide it underneath my coat; then, when I was outside, or in some safe place, I would devour it with gusto. It was always delicious, even though it was dry. As mother

always said, “Dry bread makes for red cheeks.” Mind you, the rough and slanted end of the cut loaf always tipped her off to the fact that someone had once again devoted unauthorized attention to that fine manna. Most of the time, I was identified as the culprit and therefore received many a hefty poke. It was worth the risk, though; after all, I had obtained my compensation in advance—in my belly.

Now, one should not assume that our family was particularly poor, for that was not at all the case. No, hundreds of other families shared exactly the same lot, or worse. In these parts, this type of diet had been the rule for the lower social strata since time immemorial. People didn’t know any better and simply believed that it had to be that way. It was just “eastern Pomeranian.”

As a result, poorer families worried about their livelihood day and night. Food and fuel: these were the be-all and end-all. The first question was: How do we get the necessary potatoes? With so little income, buying all of them was out of the question. So they were “planted out” on the land of the farming burghers.

Land-owning city dwellers usually need more manure than they are able to produce with their limited quantity of livestock. Therefore, they are eager to take the dung that poorer people accumulate over the course of the year. In the spring, for a small transportation fee, the farming burghers take this dung to their plots. Whatever land can be fertilized with this manure is then made available to people for potato growing. Once the potatoes are harvested in the fall, the city landowner normally sows these fields with a winter crop (rye), with the grain benefiting from the manure as well.

Given these circumstances, it is easy to understand that each “planter” aims to collect as much manure as possible. The more he manages to accumulate, the more potatoes he can cultivate; not to mention the fact that urban landowners definitely prefer it when someone provides approximately two to three loads of manure rather than just a half.

Anyone capable of doing so will therefore raise a goat, and, if possible, a pig, too. We only managed a goat, whose care was largely entrusted to me. It was essential to fetch sufficient food in the summertime so that the animal did not “dry out.” Well, I soon became an expert at that sort of thing and learned to avoid being grabbed by the neck by the field guard. Additionally, the necessary straw needed to be collected, since there wouldn’t be enough dung otherwise. I also knew how to accomplish that to the satisfaction of—the goat. During the haymaking and grain harvest season, I “raked together” a lot of stuff that was lying in front of the barns of the farming burghers and on the dirt roads. To the same end, I gathered moss and spruce needles from the surrounding copses. A small supply could even be set aside for winter. In late fall, when there was no more grass and leaves to pick, the goat was fed potato peels and rutabagas. Eventually, there was no way to avoid buying one to one-and-a-half short hundredweights of hay. In the summertime, after school, my sister and I often set out on the country lanes, equipped with a bag and cart, to collect “windfalls” to enlarge our manure heap. That’s what we called road apples and cow pies, which we picked up carefully in various states of dryness—sometimes half dry but often still relatively warm and fresh—and transported home triumphantly. The more, the better. We were not overly enthusiastic about it, though, as the business was not only quite grubby but occasionally taxing on the olfactory nerves. But what was one to do? Mother’s wish was our command, and afterwards we got an extra slice of bread.

Moreover, my sister and I put a lot of effort into gathering firewood as well. Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, when there was no school, we grabbed our cart and walked about half a mile to the forest to collect a load of so-called “grabbing and gathering wood,” an activity authorized by the forest warden’s office. The summer holidays, in particular, provided extensive opportunities for picking up firewood; during that time, we were out in the bush almost every day. After all, the point was to collect as large a supply as possible for the wintertime. Frequently, we also brought home a meal’s worth of mushrooms on these occasions. For us, however, the best thing about these bush outings were the ripe and ready

berries, even though they gave us severe stomach upsets every now and then.

Thus, we children had to make ourselves useful even at a tender age; this simply accompanied the pitiable income structure of the region. Certainly, had my parents been able to do so, they would have created a better lot for us. They simply had no other choice, however. What was impossible was simply impossible. Sometimes my mother would say resignedly, “Children, I just think we were born to be poor.”

How often I wished for pair of *new* boots when I saw how the children of well-to-do parents enjoyed strutting along in such footwear. For me, unfortunately, that was merely a pipe dream and was never fulfilled during my time at home. I had to walk barefoot from early summer until the cold late fall. In that period, footwear constituted an unnecessary luxury for “our sort of people.” Only on Sundays was I allowed to wear boots, which had been bought from some Jewish junk dealer for 1.2 to 1.5 marks as “cast-offs,” mended and patched up everywhere. “Just polish them diligently,” my mother said, “then people won’t notice as easily.” In the winter, I always walked around in clogs on the weekdays; socks were “soled” with coarse patches in order to save darning wool.

Of course, things were a bit better with regard to clothing. At least there was no shortage of necessary patches. After all, what good would there have been in my father’s being a tailor otherwise?! Rarely was it enough for a new suit, however. I still recall with delight how my father pieced together a “brand new” long blue coat for me from the ancient, worn-out coat of a deceased executor. A ten-year-old nipper, I was proud as a peacock of my patentable garment as I set out for church, where I had to join the organ choir of city pupils for a recital. I also cared little that the coattails flapped around my calves and that other boys laughed heartily at me because of it. After all, even our old choirmaster deigned to cast an admiring eye on me on account of my coat, commenting with an affable smile that I looked almost as elegant as Joseph in the colorful coat made for him by the patriarch Jacob. And as for the overlong coattails and rolled-up sleeves, my father said to me knowingly that he had designed them in this “perfect” way in order to give me a chance to grow into it. That in turn was a good indicator of just how long the old “smock” was meant to last.

NOTES

[1] “Schlurck” is a slight variation on the High German “Schluck,” which means gulp—trans.

Source: Franz Rehbein, *Das Leben eines Landarbeiters*, herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Paul Göhre. Verlegt bei Eugen Diederichs in Jena, 1911, pp. 14–20.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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