

A Working-Class File-Cutter Remembers his Fatherless Childhood (1879–1909)

Abstract

Without a comprehensive social welfare system yet in place, the injury or death of the family's main breadwinner could easily bring low-income workers' families to the brink of ruin. This excerpt from the memoirs of a fatherless file-cutter offers a poignant view of the difficulties faced by widowed working-class mothers and their children, who often had to be placed with relatives or strangers to ensure the family's survival.

Source

I was born on February 7, 1879, as the son of Karl Hussels and Emma Hussels (maiden name Conrads) in Tattenscheid, District of Solingen. My mother was a factory worker up to the time of my birth. My father was a plush weaver and a widower with one child. When I was three months old, my father died of tuberculosis. My mother was then left on her own with two children. Because she was also trained as a plush weaver, she tried at first to continue running her own household, but meager wages of about six to eight marks per week meant that she had to resort to other means. At first, she signed on with a butter merchant, then with some small farmers. She did this for eight years, during which time I was put up with acquaintances and relatives. My half-brother, on the other hand, was placed with strangers; he was completely abandoned but died of pulmonary tuberculosis early on. Between the ages of six and nine, I attended four elementary schools of the most dissimilar sort; I was left entirely to my own devices and had to work my way through as best I could. Likewise, my relatives were also happy just to make it from one day to the next. A change came in 1888; my mother had had enough of the drudgery with the small farmers and was, at any rate, longing for a home of her own. So she married the file-cutter G.H., who owned a little old house, was a widower, and had three children of his own. He was a cripple but a very hard worker. Now an even greater distance separated me from my mother, although I had not lived with her before either. She visited me every two to three weeks, however, brought along many things, and I was therefore awfully attached to her. At the time, I was living with my grandparents and that was where I was supposed to stay; but there was no holding me back, I simply had to get to this new home. Finally, my mother took me in on account of all the crying that I did. But as much as I liked being with my mother, it was in this new home that I saw images of suffering in sharper dimensions. Suddenly, there was a family of six. One year later a little brother joined us. So then it was seven. Our family was housed in three small rooms: a kitchen, a workroom, and a small bedroom that fit only two beds. Four of us slept in one bed and three in the other, but that wasn't the worst of it. Because of his accident, my stepfather had incurred debts, about 200-300 marks, and then a file-cutters' strike was called in 1890. A lean period set in: there was no work and the debts mounted. Melancholy and dejection spread. The marriage was no longer as it was in the beginning; as an eleven-year-old boy I had to see my mother and stepfather hit each other and call each other names. But even this phase ended and work was available once more, even though it meant working from early morning until late at night. My stepbrother and I also did industrial work. In the morning before school, we had to tip files; at noon, in the evening, and on Sundays, we set up bowling pins to alleviate the oppressive situation. Once I had completed school, I also joined the home workshop. At the time, file-cutting was mostly outwork; the hours were from 6 o'clock in the morning until 9 o'clock at night. On Sundays, I mostly played cards or went bowling. My stepbrother, on the other hand, busied himself with reading above all. He had subscribed to the *Eberfelder Freie Presse*, borrowed books from the library of the Wermelskirch Social Democratic People's

Association and, as a result, was constantly telling me about all the things he had read. Soon this weaned me from my games as well. It prompted me to reflect more and soon led me to join organized labor: the File-Cutters' Association and the local union, and later the [Social Democratic] party and the German Metalworkers' Association.

Source: Alwin Hussels in Adolf Levenstein, ed., *Proletariers Jugendjahre*. Berlin, 1909, pp. 53–54; reprinted in Klaus Saul, Jens Flemming, Dirk Stegmann, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Arbeiterfamilien im Kaiserreich. Materialien zur Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland 1871–1914*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1982, pp. 38–40.

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