

A Workplace Accident: A Hamburg Shoemaker's Plea for Assistance and a Senator's Response (1883–84)

Abstract

Before Bismarck's health, accident, disability, and pension insurance were introduced in the 1880s, any sudden calamity or career interruption brought with it the possibility of immediate hardship—and possibly long-term social decline—for workers and their families. The following exchange of letters deals with the consequences of a workplace accident that befell a Hamburg shoemaker. It highlights the psychological and material repercussions of having to petition a local notable for a menial job that provided the shoemaker much less than his former income but was nonetheless essential for the family's survival.

Source

August 22, 1883

To the Most Honorable and Enlightened Herr Senator Versmann,

Since my wife has called on the Herr Senator and talked to the Most Enlightened Herr Senator about my private matter, namely a small post or job, I would like to request this from the Most Enlightened Herr Senator and ask for it sincerely. For I have already spent a whole year in the hospital and have only come home to my family at Christmas, and now I have almost completely lost my customers and am in the greatest poverty. For that reason I put myself wholly into the hands of the Most Enlightened Herr Senator and hope for the Herr Senator's kindness and ask the Most Enlightened Herr Senator very sincerely for a small post so that I can feed my family.

Most humbly requested by,
W. Huthmann

Result of the official inquiries. Report from August 22, 1883

This afternoon the most humble undersigned [a constable from the criminal investigation unit] went to the petitioner Huthmann's home and learned the following about his personal circumstances:

Huthmann, who composed and wrote the petition overleaf himself, is a native of Hamburg, 53 years old, and has been a citizen for 31 years; he is married and is the father of a 16-year-old daughter. He is a trained shoemaker but has worked for 18 years as an unskilled worker in Lauenstein's carriage factory. There he suffered serious injuries to his leg as the result of an accident that confined him to the sickbed for an entire year, until last Christmas. As soon as he was fit for work again, he returned to his old trade, shoemaking, and ekes out a meager living for his family by doing some mending, which is assigned to him by another shoemaker. His state of health is now very good; the injured leg has suffered minimal disfigurement, which does not hinder him in walking, however.

When he was with Lauenstein, he earned a weekly income of 12–15 marks and hopes to earn 12–14 marks a week in the post he has requested. He was unable to provide a clear answer to the question of how or where he imagined such a post. He has never taken advantage of any assistance from public funds.

Huthmann's wife makes a minimal contribution to the family's upkeep by cleaning; the daughter is staying with other people.

Rent for the Huthmann family's small flat is 140 marks per year; the occupants give the impression of being respectable people.

[Note: Senator Versmann, who had commissioned the inquiries on August 22, 1883, proposed the following day that Huthmann be employed as a "veteran of the construction squad"—these were old or physically handicapped men chosen by the poor relief department who were employed by the building department to do light work; in 1886 these men received a daily wage of 1.2 marks. It is probably on account of this low wage that Huthmann stated in September 1883 "that he wished to think it over." On November 17, 1883, F. Andreas Meyer, the chief engineer in charge, asked Versmann whether he "still wish[ed] to do something for the old man, who has not come around again but nevertheless seems to be living in abject poverty and whom we would like to admit to our veterans." On November 18, 1883, Versmann ordered that the matter rest until Huthmann got in touch again.^[1]

February 28, 1884

To Herr Senator Versmann,

Please accept my apologies for bothering you again, since you arranged the sweeper's post for me in 1883, but I fell once more with my leg, and since then I have had to lie still in bed. And now I am good enough with that leg to walk again and have reported this year to the Herr supervisor and was also at the meeting for the gentlemen. There, I was told [sic] how old I was, so I gave 55 years as the reply; then they say that I am much too young—this was a post for people over 60 years, so I was turned away completely and now I want to ask the Herr Senator for justice and support. Since I have had nothing to do all winter and my wife has had nothing either, on some days we have had nothing to eat.

I request from and ask the Herr Senator,
Humbly, W. Huthmann

[On March 10, 1884, Versmann recommended consideration of the application, as a result of which Huthmann was apparently hired.^[2]

NOTES

^[1] Secondary commentary from Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, p. 172.

^[2] See above, p. 173.

Source: Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Baudeputation, B 284; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 171–73.

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