Exclusivity and the Entrepreneurial Class in Remscheid (1880s)

Abstract

An awareness of hierarchical distinctions not only conditioned relations between the classes, it also reinforced fine gradations within them, as can be seen in this report by an in-law of the Mannesmanns, an important industrial family in Remscheid. As industrialization continued to accelerate in places like Remscheid, the social elite was increasingly constituted by merchants and industrialists whose status derived mainly from income. Long working hours were often required to maintain this upper-middle-class standing.

Source

In terms of societal structure, Remscheid was pretty much the same as many other small cities in those days. Lacking interaction with any nearby metropolis, secluded by virtue of its specialized manufacturing, and barely influenced by its surroundings, society was structured, just like the town council, on the basis of the class tax law then in effect. The more affluent families at the top of Remscheid industry thus formed a separate class of residents. Of course even in this class there were different gradations, that is, less important firms, whose families were certainly considered to belong to “higher society,” but without enjoying the same high status. The gatherings every Sunday afternoon from 5:00-8:00 p.m. at the Hotel “Zum Weinberg”[1] were extremely interesting, especially for observant strangers. Here, all gentlemen belonging to “society” got together for a glass of wine. Groups would sit at separate tables according to the amount of their tax assessment, carefully maintaining order and not tolerating any arrogance. Only in exceptional cases, mostly due to reasons of familial ties or business, was the tax barrier broken. Thus, for instance, there was a so-called “ten-sided” table as the top rank; it was also named the “commercial counselors’ table” [*Kommerzienratstisch*].[2] The people seated there were not only commercial counselors [*Kommerzienräte*], but also the brothers, brothers-in-law, and cousins of these gentlemen. Seated at another table were twelve elderly men, whom malicious gossips dubbed “the twelve apostles.”

The mutual family ties between Remscheid families were extraordinarily extensive. For the “perfect stranger” who had just moved there, they were completely unfathomable, so that, when in such company, you had to take care not to make any disparaging remarks about a third party, because one of those present was almost always a “relative.” Even people connected only by marriage to the most remote groups of relatives were considered as belonging to the family and thus were to be addressed as cousins. For instance, on the occasion of one dinner, a lady from Remscheid sat beside me and told me that she had no fewer than 83 cousins, almost all of whom were living there. This figure, however, also shows the extent to which intermarriage was common in Remscheid society. Unfortunately, this practice often led to degeneration with the rather well-known results. The “perfect strangers” found this great degree of interrelationship sometimes rather depressing. Therefore, one often heard bitter complaints and quite derogatory remarks about Remscheid society; on many occasions, for example, I have heard the following wish expressed, especially among lawyers: “If only I could leave this boring dump behind me.” For these kinds of people, it was particularly difficult to adjust to the commercial society that was solely geared towards making money. At that time, residents of Remscheid assessed people mainly according to the size of their income and, in this respect, public servants came off badly. Of course, these attitudes changed substantially over time.

I was fortunate not to encounter too many difficulties in getting accepted among local circles, because a few years earlier one of my cousins had married a cousin of the inventors. According to the rules of Remscheid, therefore, despite being a "perfect stranger," I passed as a kind of relative, and because of this legitimation I was welcomed in the friendliest way and without reservation. When it comes to social interaction, the residents of Remscheid are courteous, friendly, and hospitable, but rather reserved and cautious towards strangers. […]

The activities of members of Remscheid's high society were, as mentioned earlier, primarily concerned with business. Thus, it was understandable that all of their sons were inevitably trained as merchants. Back then, it was customary for young people to take classes up to the highest grade of grammar school and then to enter into a three-year apprenticeship, the third year of which often took place abroad for the purpose of language study. After completing the apprenticeship, the young man initially joined his father's business in order to familiarize himself with manufacturing […] and marketing. Following that, young businessmen usually went abroad for three years to work in branches of their fathers' businesses in order to become familiar with the use of tools, the wishes and demands of customers, the competitors' products, and various languages. After these three years, they would usually return to Remscheid and soon became associates and fathers as well. Sometimes this journey abroad had to be repeated, quite often with a wife and children.

All of Remscheid's offices were bustling with activity. At 7 o'clock in the morning the boss would sit in the office opening the incoming mail delivered by the postman and issuing instructions for dealing with it. Between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m., the boss allowed himself a half-hour breakfast—while the staff continued to work until 12:00 p.m.—and then after a two-hour lunch break he stayed on until 7:00 p.m., often even 8:00 p.m., when all the mail was worked through. Some businesses had retained the older familiar custom of providing a cup of coffee at 4:00 p.m., which was enjoyed at the office between tasks.

NOTES

[1] The Hotel "To the Vineyard"—trans.
[2] *Kommerzienrat* was an honorary title given to distinguished businessmen and financiers—trans.

Source: R. Bungeroth, *50 Jahre Mannesmannröhren 1884–1934*. Berlin: VDI-Verlag, 1934, pp. 5ff.; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 325–26.

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