

Childhood of a Tobacco Worker (1868–70)

Abstract

Tobacco workers were among the first group of Germans who became politically conscious and active. The childhood memories of Julius Bruhns (1860–1927) help us understand why that was so. Bruhns was the oldest son of a tobacco worker and at age five he had already begun helping his father. By 1877 he had become an agitator for the Social Democrats. In 1880 he was expelled from Hamburg and settled in Bremen a year later. There, he was publisher and editor of the party's newspaper, the *Bremer Bürgerzeitung*. Not long after establishing his own tobacco business, he also served briefly in the Reichstag (1890–93). In this excerpt we learn that reading aloud was typical in the workplace—something that was noted in many other working-class biographies drawn from the early years of the German labor movement.

Source

The fact that more than half a century ago I, a ten-year-old boy, became an enthusiastic Social Democrat, will elicit smiles from some about the Social Democratic “child prodigy.” And yet this was no miracle, it was explained simply by the living conditions under which I grew up and about which I want to say more. [...]

My father was a cigar maker in Altona. Unfortunately, he was not productive at his trade, but he was unable to take on any other. He was prevented from this because of his severe physical suffering. As a young man of twenty-five years, my father had taken part in the Schleswig-Holstein liberation war of 1848–49. The travails of war, especially camping on wet, cold ground, had resulted in a severe illness and, as an aftereffect, permanent paralysis of the left side of his body. [...]

Because he had no proof of war wounds or disability caused by them, my father had to petition for many years before he obtained a pension, which then reached the amazing amount of two and a half Prussian talers per month. In the end, he received this pension retroactively, for five years (instead of 20 years!), one hundred and fifty brand new talers in cash, an event that caused great joy in our home and still remains today—I was then nine years old—very much alive in my memory.

As in Old Mother Hubbard's kitchen, the cupboard in our poor household was always bare. Father and mother, both of whom had entered into marriage at a more mature age, had a hard time struggling to make ends meet with their three little ones, of whom I, the oldest, was born on August 15, 1860. My two sisters were born in 1862 and 1865. My father was an “outworker,” in other words, he brought home the raw tobacco from a manufacturer and made cigars at home. Since he was very slow as a result of his paralysis, he only managed to produce a few cigars each day. So he hired several helpers who made the cigars for him while he confined himself to preparing the raw material. This brought in a little more income, but still so little that my mother was also forced to take employment. She washed and ironed for my father's acquaintances and fellow workers, so that if she was not occupied by housework and care of her three children, she stood at the washing trough or ironing board week in and week out, from dawn to dusk. Nevertheless, it was difficult to provide life's necessities, and often we children had to eat dry bread when it was not possible to spend a few pennies for lard or syrup.

A child's innocently cheerful disposition bears such deprivations easily. Much worse were the bitter sufferings I soon had to endure, which the loathsome “outwork” inflicted upon proletarian children. To be sure, there are still enough people today who, for “moral and pedagogical reasons,” want children to

be commercially employed as early as possible—of course only working-class children! Some people even rave about the image of a family working diligently, young and old together in a cramped little “cozy” room, and see the fruit of their combined effort in the form of the growing pile of handsome goods. It certainly looks different when you yourself play a role in this lovely family picture. I have learned that the hard way. I was not yet five years old when I had to begin working hard in my father’s workroom. Day after day I had to prepare tobacco, meaning I had to spread apart the damp, folded tobacco leaves with my tiny fingers, remove the thicker stems and lay out each bit of tobacco leaf by leaf. And this had to happen quickly, since the cigar-makers were waiting for the prepared tobacco, and urged me to hurry with shouts and often with swear words. My mother suffered greatly when she saw her darling so tormented, but what could she do? So I had to spend most of my “golden youth” in the dusty, hazy rooms of the cigar factory, always among working adults, while my luckier companions romped outside in the bright sunshine in the streets and squares.

When I started school—I was already seven years old—the few free hours of time during which I was allowed to be and play like a child became even shorter, since now, school took away a good part of my working time. But another obstacle to my work in the cigar-maker’s room had already appeared long before I became an abecedarian, which increasingly kept me away both from the tobacco table and then from my school desk: sickness! Insufficient food, a damp, unhealthy dwelling, and lack of exercise in the fresh air had given me scrofula. One—not the only one, but the ugliest—effect of this miserable proletarian disease was a recurrent, severe inflammation of the eyes. [...]

Working at home and frequent outbreaks of this eye disease completely eliminated normal interaction with my peers. I rarely came out to play with other children, and when it happened, I was not a very good playmate. I was shy, almost retreating when interacting with other children. I lived for myself, and sat in a workroom surrounded by adults, who didn’t care about me and mostly talked about things that I, little tyke that I was, did not yet fully understand. There in my illness I created my own world. Yes, a whole world unto myself, which I did not allow anyone to enter, not even my beloved mother; a world that I populated with a thousand fantastic characters and in which I experienced the most wonderful things. [...]

But my fluency in reading soon provided me with another kind of work, which turned out to be important for my early development: it was my task to read aloud to the cigar-makers in the work room. And what did I read? Socialist pamphlets and newspapers! Back in 1863 the socialist movement was still in its infancy. In Hamburg-Altona, however, it already had many followers among the workers. But the movement was most widespread among the cigar-makers, who for many years formed the driving force and leadership of the Social Democratic Party in my homeland. This was due to the particular working and living conditions of cigar-makers.

Outwork flourished in the cigar industry. The manufacturers gave the raw materials to the individual cigar-makers, called outworkers, to take home, thus saving the expense of building their own workrooms equipped with lighting and heating, and also saving the expense of wages for factory foremen. This also allowed the manufacturers to suppress wages more effectively than would have been the case with a workforce at a large factory facility. The outworkers for their part sought assistants, whose numbers depended on the amount of raw material that the manufacturer had supplied, and also on the size of the available workrooms, and so on. Naturally only a few of these outworkers were able to operate on a larger scale. Most of them lived with one, at most two or three assistants in the most wretched holes—in garrets, attics, basements, or, like my father, in old, dilapidated, damp huts. The product was usually delivered once per week; the finished goods were taken to the manufacturer on a two-wheeled Scottish cart, and new raw materials were returned the same way. The manufacturer thus did not involve himself with a large number of employed workers in his own factory, who, as a result of working together, would be in close contact with each other and could resist any kind of wage reduction or harassment; rather, he dealt only with small groups of domestic craftsmen, isolated from, and often unknown to, one another.

Consequently, he could always skillfully play one against the other, obtaining the best possible finished product for the lowest wages, and from raw material that was the most difficult to process.

For the members of the workforce these conditions in the cigar industry resulted, of course, in the worst possible working conditions: completely unstable, uncontrollable and ever-decreasing wage rates with totally unregulated working hours and in the worst conceivable and unhealthy workspaces. There was no talk of any legal labor protection, not even just for women and children. From early morning until late in the evening, a motley combination of young and old, men, women, and children labored in dusty and smoke-filled rooms, which were usually used not only for work, but also for living, sleeping, cooking, etc. Of course, especially the better, thinking elements of this workforce sought to oppose such degrading conditions. And so Lassalle's teachings, laid down in his splendid agitational pamphlets, "Open Letter," "Workers' Program," "Workers' Reader," and so forth, fell on the most fertile ground among many Hamburg-Altona cigar-makers. From the mid-sixties on, many hundreds of cigar-makers became Lassalleans, and later formed the core of the strong and proud Social-Democratic Party in Hamburg-Altona.

The particular working conditions of the cigar-makers offered a special opportunity for the spread and consolidation of Social-Democratic views in another respect as well. Here, in a certain way, an advantageous aspect of those otherwise so unfortunate circumstances became apparent. For if the cigar-makers had no large factories with bright, healthy workspaces, regular working hours, and steady wages, they also had no strict working orders and no watchdogs. They were, in a sense, free, and could do and say what they wanted in their workrooms. At that time the cigar-makers in my hometown made extensive use of this freedom. Another benefit was the fact that the mechanical, habitual nature of their work gave their minds certain possibilities of movement that many other professions did not offer to their workers. There was debate and political discussion throughout the day—certainly a lot of nonsense was talked, but also many good, healthy ideas were expressed. Many a capable leader of Social Democracy laid the groundwork for his later career in this zealous debating of socialist aspirations and theories with his fellow workers in the cigar-makers' huts.

Before this audience it was my task to read selections such as these: Lassalle's writings, the "People's State," the "Social Democrat," Hasenclever's "Social Political Pages," the speeches of the few Social Democratic members of the Reichstag, who were split into two factions, and other writings as well. Afterwards, when I was sitting at the tobacco table, I listened to the debates about what I had read, which were often very vigorous. At that time Social Democracy still had the qualities of a religious sect, with the same advantages and disadvantages. Our opponents, who today continue to find fault with the simply "negative" aspect of social democracy, should have listened to the Social Democratic cigar-makers then, in the late sixties and early seventies. Of all the evils in the world, only capitalism and its wicked vehicle, the rotten bourgeoisie, were to blame for anything whatsoever—workers' poverty, floods, wars, plagues, storms or any other calamity that had arisen anywhere on the globe. The terrible conditions that really were the fault of capitalism, and the eagerness to prove this grave guilt—to make the guilty, along with their victims, aware of this guilt for the first time—may well have justified or even necessitated the exaggeration and rigid one-sidedness that at that time characterized Social Democracy's heedless criticism of prevailing conditions. And the scorn and mockery of our opponents, especially of the liberals, who dominated politics in the cities, and who at first did not even consider taking us seriously, poured oil onto the fire, and allowed Social Democratic criticism to become what it was.

The ugly, profound hostilities between the two Social Democratic groups, the members of the General German Workers' Association, or the Lassalleans, and the Eisenachers, or "Honest Ones," as they were mockingly called by their hostile brethren, often played a significant role in the cigar-makers' debates. Hamburg-Altona was dominated by the Lassalleans, and a newcomer who was an "Honest One" did not have an easy time among members of the other faction. These quarrels did not affect me, but reading the

Social Democratic pamphlets and newspapers soon made me into an enthusiastic supporter of their ideas. I grasped the splendid ideas of freedom, equality, and justice with all the exuberance of an imaginative, enthusiastic boy, and was seized by the zeal of the great, sacred struggle against oppression, exploitation, lies, and hypocrisy. I soon renounced monsters and giants, Indians and other enemies, along with knights and other strongman heroes, and continued to dream only of becoming a leader of the people, producing gripping articles and flaming speeches, and fighting for the cause of the people against their enemies. To become a Social Democratic member of the Reichstag, and, after a victorious revolution, to become a leader, minister, even president of a social-democratic republic, this seemed to me the epitome of all greatness, the only worthy goal of my ambition.

Source: Julius Bruhns, *“Es klingt im Sturm ein altes Lied!” Aus der Jugendzeit der Sozialdemokratie*. Stuttgart, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1921, pp. 7–15, reprinted in Wolfgang Emmerich, ed., *Proletarische Lebensläufe. Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Anfänge bis 1914*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974, pp. 105–09.

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