

# A Proletarian Mother and Her Stillborn Child (1860–1882)

## Abstract

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This text presents the proletarian family as a terrorizing institution mirroring capitalist society in its most irrational form. The account draws on the memoir of a poor German woman, “Kathrin,” whose surname we do not know. The memoir was edited by Eugen Bleuler (1857–1939), a Swiss psychiatrist and colleague of Sigmund Freud, who coined the term “schizophrenia” in a lecture on April 24, 1908. (Bleuler’s version of the text was later edited by Wolfgang Emmerich; both men’s notes appear in the text that follows.) Kathrin presents herself, from early childhood onward, as the victim of her family and social circumstances, including an abusive father. Afflicted twice with stillborn children, she twice hid the corpses for days due to her shame, maternal attachment, and fear of public censure. She was imprisoned both times, and after the second episode—not described here—she was institutionalized in a psychiatric clinic.

## Source

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I was born in Z. on 30 September 1860. I was then given into foster care to two old people in C., who had no children. I had a good life with them. I was in foster care until I was four years old. From Z. my parents moved to D., and there they went back to the factory. During the day I had to look after my brother and sister as best I could; my mother prepared everything each morning, since my brother was then only half a year old and my sister, three years old. My mother told me and showed me how to do everything until she came home. I always had to get up onto a bench, and for a long time I could not reach into the little cart where my brother lay. Sometimes things were not in good order. We were in that town about half a year, and then my parents moved to W., where again they took up the same work as before. My sister and I again had to take care of my brother until I was five years old. Each day we two sisters had to take two or three trips with a cart into the forest, which was one hour away, always taking our brother with us. We had to search for and collect wood, and sometimes we had to spend the whole day alone outside in the forest, gathering a large pile of wood. In the evening, father and mother would then come with a larger cart and retrieve us. Once we were alone in the forest all day long, but had not collected as large a pile of wood as father expected. Father asked what we had done that day. We did not say anything. He then held me over a piece of wood that had been cut down and beat me with a four-ply rope until I was completely blue. After that he also beat my sister. The whole time our mother tried to fend him off, but he was going to beat her, too.

Sometimes, if we had not gathered much wood, we had to go to bed without having eaten, and then sometimes in the morning we had to go into the forest at half past four without breakfast. Sometimes my mother secretly gave us each a large piece of bread with butter and honey and a pitcher full of warm milk. We devoured this after we had been walking for about half an hour.

When I was six years old I had to go to school. I loved going and was well behaved. I do not ever remember being beaten for laughing or chatting or any other foolishness. I only remember that the teacher liked me. Along with school, we also had to go into the forest. In winter, when I came home from school, I had to go to the factory to help my father with weaving. I had to get up on a box and mind the working of the looms. These were large shuttle looms for making handkerchiefs. If there were any mistakes, I got smacked right and left. My mother often said to him, “You are a brute!” He was also not gentle with our mother at home. For he liked to drink schnapps, half a liter almost every day, and even more on Sundays. He seldom dined with us at midday since he was already drunk early in the morning.

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When mother said he should eat with us, he said to her, “kiss my ass!” and started cursing. She then had to give him money, and if she didn’t give him any, he drank on credit, stayed away the whole day, and did not come home until twelve, one, two, or three o’clock in the morning. Then, when he came home late and had already had enough to drink, my sister and I had to get out of bed to bring him schnapps from the inn; sometimes we had to go out at twelve o’clock at night and wake people up. We were not allowed to come back empty-handed. We trembled all over and were afraid of him.

[...]

In this town I also had to go for religious instruction to R., which was about three quarters of an hour away. I was happy to go and listened gladly to the word of God. On Sunday we had to go to church with our mother, and at home we had to pray every night and every morning. Our clothes were always clean and very simple. We also had enough to eat and the food was decent. Father was also well again and happy to let us have food. On Sundays he often went hiking with us at four o’clock in the morning in the Alps. We brought raw eggs and bread with us, and then we drank goats’ milk from the farmers. [Here, when Kathrin was nine years old, a farmer, from whom she had to fetch milk in the barn, attempted to rape her for the first time. E. B.] I screamed and said I would tell my father. I cannot remember whether I then got a beating. I was nine at the time. I was not allowed to fetch the milk anymore. We soon moved away again from this place, too. My mother often used to scold our father for not wanting to stay in one place. He repeatedly skipped work on Mondays and then the factory owners fired him.

[...]

[Kathrin begins menstruating at the age of 16, does not understand it, and hides in bed in the morning. When her mother, after repeatedly calling her, comes into the room with a pad, she crawls under the covers and is ashamed. E. B.]

My sister soon had to go to the factory too. We were then able to afford nice new household goods. I was happy about that and enjoyed cleaning and putting things in order. If father had saved as much as mother, we could have put a few thousand francs in the bank. But father made it worse. Sometimes he gave almost nothing to mother. We had to pay 12 to 15 francs almost every 14 days for his drinking, without counting what he needed on Sundays. By this point Mother could not say anything about it.

[...]

There was also an evening when my father again came home rather drunk. He kept wanting to send me off to bed. I told him I could go to bed when I wanted to. He could do whatever he wanted to me, but he would not send me to bed. But then I had to run since he jumped at me with an ax. But I could jump even better than he could! I had to spend the night in a shed that was near our house. I cried very much and at once decided to take my own life. There was a canal close to our house. I walked up and down and wanted to throw myself in, but at that same moment it was as if someone were tugging at my skirt, shouting: “don’t do that!”

[...]

[...] In 1881, after the death of her mother, Kathrin gets to know a young man, with whom she lives for half a year without a sexual relationship due to religious piety. Then she relents. W. E.]

But it had serious consequences: I became pregnant. I told the fellow but then all hell broke loose. He kept ranting at me, telling me I had to abort and not to wait too long until it would no longer work. But I knew a person could not do that. I said, “yes I’ll do it,” just to shut him up, but I did nothing. The whole time I never thought of doing anything bad, that’s something I can say with a clean conscience. It never occurred to me to put an end to the pregnancy. I like children, but I also thought: it is a big job if one

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wants to raise a child properly. It felt more and more difficult, and I kept thinking about it. I often cried when I was alone, sometimes I did not know why. It always weighed heavily on my heart. But at that time, I was never really healthy. Something was always wrong with me, now here, now there. I also did not feel like laughing any more. I only felt pain. People sometimes said, something must be wrong, because I was always so sad and never in high spirits anymore. They didn't hear me singing as before.

[...]

I could still hide my condition from people, and I thought it would be soon enough that they would find out, when I couldn't hide it anymore. When I had to go to childbed they would learn that I had a child. But he kept saying to me that I should not tell people or his parents, or else I would see what would happen. I took fright of him, thought he might do something to me, because he was always threatening me, and said he was leaving. I also didn't want to go dancing with him anymore, but he told me that if I did not come, he would go alone. I agreed, but only on the condition that he not go home with anyone else. I was very jealous at that time. He kept asking me whether I was doing anything about it, saying I was getting fatter and fatter. I said "yes," but it was not true. He then quarreled with me, claiming that I was setting it up so that we would have to marry: "But you'll see what happens to you, you won't get off so easily." I sometimes had to drink tea so he would see I was trying to do something about it. But I always made only chamomile tea, or juniper berry tea, and this only did me good. My sister was always angry with me because I couldn't work anymore the way I did before. Everything I tried to do seemed difficult, and even with the best intentions I couldn't do any better, couldn't finish my tasks.

[During this time, their father comes to visit once and stays overnight with the daughters. Kathrin makes an awful discovery<sup>[1]</sup> but she does not say anything until her father taunts her at breakfast because of her condition. E. B.] Then I lost my temper and went after him about how he had been behaving...My father sneered at me, saying how I preferred young boys rather than him. I thought to myself, he was right about that, but I know it was less sinful than carrying on with one's own father.

My sweetheart was always berating me for getting fatter. I couldn't stand it. It hurt me too much when he kept quarreling with me. I often seemed to go out of my senses, even said things he did not like to hear, and afterwards I did not remember what I had said when he asked me. I was afraid to say that I was pregnant. The more maniacal he was toward me, the more fearful I became of him. At one point I said to a woman that I was no longer well. She told this to his brothers and sisters. That evening he came to me quite furious: was it true that I had said to someone that I was expecting? I said it was not true, but I said this only out of fear. He did not believe me, beat me left and right, and pushed me so hard that I fell to the ground. When I came to again, I got up, went to the window, and was going to throw myself out. But he had grown a little calmer again and held me back. I often said to him that he would make me take my own life. There were times when I wanted to do it, but could not, because then I thought to myself, "not suicide, for you will find no mercy before God." [...]

And so things continued this way. He kept saying that I had to abort the baby until I actually gave birth. It was on a Sunday morning in September 1882. At about four o'clock I got a severe bellyache and had to get up and get back into bed again and again but could not stand it in bed. It went on like this until six o'clock. My sister then came to my room and asked me what was wrong. I told her she must make me tea, that I had a bellyache. All she said was that it served me right and asked why I was always drinking tea. I felt a stab through my heart—she simply could not feel the pain I was in. It got worse so that I could hardly bear it anymore. At eight o'clock my sister went to church. My bellyache grew worse and worse, and the sweat poured down over me; I was so fearful that I no longer knew where I was. I went back to bed, had to get up again immediately, but couldn't move any further. There was a table by my bed, and I held myself up using the table and the bed. I looked at my body and thought the child would have to come out at the navel, it hurt me more and more. All of a sudden something burst onto the floor, but I couldn't see what it was, since my eyes were completely blinded and I felt very sick. At the same time, I

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tore something out of my body, and had to lie back down in bed. But I heard no crying, and much less could I see anything moving. I simply dozed off for a while until I came to my senses again. I noticed that I was bleeding badly, got up, looked at it—but as I did this, I thought that I wanted to report it so that the child could be buried. But right away I took fright again and thought that my sweetheart would come and kill me. It must have been about nine o'clock when I placed the child under the bed on a clean cloth and put the afterbirth in the privy. The floor was all bloody, so I washed it. I was done before my sister left church and I was back in my room when she arrived home. Although I was still rather agitated, she did not notice anything unusual about me, and said only that I looked so pale and thin in the face. I then said that I was in a bad way, and this was the truth. My sweetheart came at noon. I was still up in my room and looked at the child again. I thought, they must be very dear when they come into the world alive. But I also felt that I would not have been able to leave it lying on the floor, that I would have returned to my senses at the moment that it fell to the floor, if it had been crying or moving. My sweetheart called out to me and asked what I was doing in my room for so long. I came down, trembling all over, almost unable to speak. He did not notice and said nothing to me. In the evening I refused to have intercourse with him, knowing that you mustn't do that.

On Monday morning I went back to the factory as if nothing had happened. But other people there also did not say anything to me. I kept bleeding for about four days and then no more. I had the child under my bed for two days—my sister did not come into my room very much. I looked at the little boy every night before going to bed. I just liked seeing him and could not look at him enough. I also went back into my room to look at him at midday, but when I heard someone, I put him down. I was already thinking that someone would come and do something to me. I was not afraid of the child, my conscience did not plague me, and I was able to sleep well. On the third day in the evening, I brought a small basket from the shed, laid the child into it wrapped up in a cloth, and went to the shed, which stood beside the house and always remained cool. There was still bright daylight, and the shed was unlocked. Someone could quite easily have discovered the corpse there, but I didn't want to throw away or bury the little one—no! I kept thinking, tomorrow I will report it, but I couldn't dare to do this, and so it went, day after day. Why did I keep it in the shed? I want to write about this, too. I just thought that it would not decay so fast this way and I could still look at it even if someone discovered it. I went down every day to see if it was still there, looked at it, but this was very painful. My sister often asked me why I was always crying. Even in the factory, I could not hide it. They often told my sister that something was disturbing me, I couldn't say what. But sometimes, when I did not check to see if the child was still there, I could not sleep all night, thinking constantly that someone had stolen it, and that I was lost for all eternity for not taking better care of it. Sometimes I got up as early as four o'clock in the morning, went straight to the shed, looked to see that the child was still there, and then I felt better again. [...]

My sweetheart and my sister knew nothing of all that, and did not notice anything, either. My sister often said that I was not so fat anymore. Later, other people also looked at me somewhat strangely. They knew that I was not a bad person and did not imagine I would do something like this. [...]

My sweetheart went away at that time, thinking that I had aborted the child. I said yes, it was so, and he was satisfied with this answer. I sometimes went into the shed, took the little basket in hand in order to report it, but did not get farther than the door before I had to put it back, since someone was coming toward me. Next to our firewood bin, another man had his own bin. I kept running into him each time I tried to carry the basket out of the shed. He often asked me why I took fright every time he came, saying I was white as chalk. I couldn't answer. This happened often.

We moved to another apartment in November. At midday I took the little basket out of our shed and put it under a small firewood bin that was next to the front door. But from there someone could take the basket. Other people passed by, and I thought that coming from the factory in the evening I would fetch the basket and take it with me to the new apartment. It did not matter to me anymore if it was discovered by someone. I thought that one day it would have to come out, sooner or later. My conscience

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was also telling me the same thing and did not leave me any peace. In the afternoon a policeman came, took me into custody and brought me to K., where I confessed immediately. But then my conscience was at rest again. However, I also regretted how I had acted, always thinking, if only I had reported it immediately.

But I could not change that now, although I would have liked to. I firmly resolved not to do such a thing in my life again and prayed sincerely to God for forgiveness. I thought, I would rather be cast out of the world than be cast out by God. I also felt better about myself now. I was sentenced to three months in prison. They kept asking me why I did what I did. But I could not say anything except “out of fear.” It was not intentional, God forbid.

## NOTES

[1] Presumably the “awful discovery” refers to a sexual advance made by Kathrin’s father, but this is not clear in the text—ed.

Source: Eugen Bleuler, ed., “*Dulden*”. *Aus der Lebensbeschreibung einer Armen*. Munich: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, 1910, pp. 7–13, 15–18, 24–26, 29–36; reprinted in Wolfgang Emmerich, ed., *Proletarische Lebensläufe. Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland*, 2 volumes, vol. 1, *Anfänge bis 1914*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974, pp. 168–76.

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