

Household of a Large Working-Class Family in a Village near Frankfurt am Main (1877)

Abstract

This report from Taunus, a hilly area near Frankfurt, makes clear that families of workers—especially unskilled ones—often lived on the edge of desperation. As in this case, their situation often involved numerous children, irregular employment, low income, meager savings (or none at all), cramped accommodations, poor diet, and little likelihood of husbands and wives enjoying leisure activities together, even on Sundays. Sometimes, children as young as seven contended with long working hours in various occupations, including the construction industry.

Source

At the time these notes were recorded, the family whose domestic situation we will describe consisted of the following seven persons:

Head of the household	44 years old
His wife (married since 1859)	38 years old
Joseph, the eldest son	16 years old
Adam, the second son	15 years old
Magdalene, the elder daughter	9 years old
Georg, the third son	5 years old
Christiane, the younger daughter	2½ years old

Apart from these five surviving children, N. had also had two sons who died before their first birthday, and a third one who had succumbed to spinal tuberculosis at the age of 10. These children would now be 13, 11, and 7 years of age. Before long, N. will become father to a ninth child.

N. can be regarded as more or less typical of the penniless day laborers living in the Feldberg villages [in the Taunus region]. He owns neither fields nor livestock and lives in a little rented house made of clay and half-timbering, which he owned in the past but was forced to sell because of his debts. He still has use of all rooms in the house: a living room (3.88 m long, 3.50 m wide, and 2 m high), which accommodates the common bed for him, his wife, and his youngest daughter, as well as the children's bedstead for the youngest son; and an unheatable, very damp room (3.88 x 3.75 x 2.17 m), in which the two older sons and the eldest daughter sleep in one bed. The cottage also has a small barn used for storing potatoes and a pantry; N. manages to grow some herbs and a bit of lettuce in a small garden measuring about 25 square meters. In the usual fashion, the kitchen is identical to the hallway. There is no separate wash-boiler; water is heated in one of the cooking pots. As the inventory shows, kitchen utensils in general, as well as home furnishings, are very meager. The situation is even worse in terms of clothing. The inventory shows that most of their clothes were already purchased second-hand.

[...]

Under these circumstances, it is hardly worth mentioning that N. does not have any ready money. On the contrary, he has outstanding debts:

to the baker, grocer, and cobbler; moreover, [he owes] 125 marks for iron used in the nailery and for goods purchased for the purpose of peddling. — For outstanding rent he owes 41.15 marks, and for various goods borrowed over the course of time, namely for business purposes, 65.14 marks, totaling 231.29 marks.

N. does not receive support payments from associations or other funds, or from municipal or state resources, except for the free schooling available to all children in the village,^[1] and the usual allotment of free firewood from the forests. Likewise, he has no claims to assistance of any kind for the future.

N., who used to be a nail smith, has been working for a year on the country road being built between Oberursel and Schmitten, which meets up with the road running alongside the Weil River. His task sometimes consists of hammering stones, sometimes of spreading them out; he is paid partly by the day, partly by piece rate. He works on the road all year long, except on holidays and rainy days and during the weeks spent blueberry picking. But he does not even let rainy days go wasted. In the workshop of the master for whom he once was a nail smith, he sometimes uses springs purchased in Homburg to manufacture S-shaped hooks, which he then sells to butchers in the vicinity. At times, when his brother, a nail maker, happens to be away, he also uses his idle equipment to forge nails. [...]

The eldest son, Joseph, works on the road just like his father. Even as a schoolboy he suffered from gout, which is why his father, who was still a nail maker at the time, refrained from taking him as an apprentice right after confirmation. As a result, Joseph was put to work at home, doing filet work for a year. Despite this care, his illness did not disappear but rushed him to the sickbed for two winters. When he had recovered reasonably well, it was finally decided that he had to begin work on the road, too, in order to tackle the family's mounting poverty. Father and son worked the same number of hours per day, fewer in wintertime, more in the summer; during the latter season this amounted to 11 hours (6-12 a.m., 1-4 p.m., 4:30-7 p.m.) and in the winter 9-11 hours (7-9 a.m., 9¼-12 a.m., 12:45-5 or 6 p.m.).

The second son, Adam, is also employed on the road project, as an errand boy for the site foreman. [...] The two sons hand over their entire earnings to their father.

The little daughter, Magdalene, does filet work. She was 7 years when she started to do regular, ongoing work of this sort. Her normal working hours, from October to March, include the period between morning and afternoon classes, and the time from dusk until 9 o'clock p.m. [...]

Earlier on, the wife had also been doing needlework for wages: crochet at first and filet later on; however, once the men went to work on the road, she was forced by the increased demands of housework to limit that activity substantially. [...]

By and large, the family's food is the common fare of the poorer people of the Feldberg villages. Meat and butter are eaten very rarely; potatoes constitute the staple food. They are only prepared in the simplest ways; dumplings and pancakes are seldom made from them, supposedly, because it takes too much time for the wife. The usual meals are potato soup for lunch and boiled potatoes with coffee or curds for supper. Thus N. gives the following as a typical daily meal list:

Morning: 15.6 grams of coffee mixed with 18 grams chicory, boiled in 3 liters of water, ½ liter of milk, and 1 kilogram of bread.

Second breakfast: ½ kilogram of bread.

Noon: Potato soup, consisting of 4 ½ kilograms of potatoes, c. 60 grams of beef dripping, salt, spices, and 4 liters of water; on average, 375 grams of bread are consumed with the soup. Now and then, barley or peas are added to the soup, often sauerkraut as well, in which case the amount of potatoes is reduced somewhat.

Afternoon snack: Chicory coffee and bread, like morning.

Evening: 4½ kilograms of boiled potatoes, served with coffee, as above, or a pot of curds, and an average of 375 grams of bread.

As a Sunday meal, the potato soup is sometimes enriched with rice or replaced with sauerkraut and mashed potatoes; vegetables such as beans, carrots, etc., are very rare. [...]

Lunch is usually brought by the wife to those working on the road. [...]

N.'s handwriting is comparatively very tidy, his wife, on the other hand, has forgotten almost all of the writing skills she had acquired. N. is Roman Catholic but it does not appear that his family pays much attention to religious customs. The husband attends church only irregularly, his wife only a few times a year; the housework, she says, keeps her too busy. [...]

N. only smokes cigars on Sundays but no more than one; during the week he sticks to his old habit of chewing tobacco; his sons have not yet acquired the habit of smoking.

Alcoholic drinks are never consumed at home by the family and otherwise only in very modest amounts; N. claims that he only started having the glass of brandy listed in the budget since he took up work on the road. However, occasionally he goes to the pub on weekday nights, especially in the winter, but, as he claims, only for conversation and without consuming anything. [...]

On Sundays and holidays, N. is usually preoccupied with domestic work in the morning. In the afternoon he takes a nap or a walk with an old friend; afterwards he goes to the pub, where he stays until the evening, frequently playing "Solo," one penny a game. During this time, his wife remains at home; barely more often than twice a year does she partake in his holiday leisure pursuits. [...]

NOTES

[1] Recently, in all Feldberg villages, including ***, school fees are being paid (original footnote).

Source: Gottlob Schnapper-Arndt, *5 Dorfgemeinden auf dem Hohen Taunus*. Leipzig, 1883, pp. 245–52; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 264–67.

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