

Interior of Workers' Homes in Hamburg and Karlsruhe (1891)

Abstract

The large-scale migration of laborers from the countryside to the cities meant that urban housing became a major challenge. This passage, which was taken from reports by Protestant workers' associations in Hamburg and Karlsruhe, shows that workers' families often lived in extremely cramped and modest quarters. Nevertheless, many were committed to keeping their homes reasonably well furnished and tidy. Interior decoration in the form of portraits attested to working-class ideals (Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle) but also showed loyalty to the Empire (Wilhelm I) and reflected the inhabitants' religious faith (Martin Luther or Catholic saints).

Source

Reports of the Evangelical Workers' Association of Hamburg and Karlsruhe (1891)

From Hamburg we get [...] the following report: "The landlord supplies only the essential materials and the worker then repairs the defects, without getting any compensation. On average, the living rooms have wallpaper; the kitchen and bedroom are whitewashed. The pictures decorating the living room are either taken from a subscription or purchased in installments; aside from that, one finds some family pictures, portraits of Social Democratic leaders and more recently embroidered poetry, an imitation of our good old framed Christian proverbs, now provided, however, with Social Democratic content. As to furnishings, you can find a couch, a table, upholstered chairs, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe and, most of the time these days, a sewing machine (it is purchased in installments, of course). Upon entering an apartment, you know at first glance with whom you are dealing, and even though Christian workers might live in very modest circumstances, Christian attitudes nevertheless can be recognized at once. Each household has water pipes [but what kind!]. By contrast, as a rule, two families use one toilet, in some cases four to five families have to make do with one." [...]

From Karlsruhe we get the following report: "The vast majority of apartments are being kept clean and tidy by the women. Two beds constitute the rule. If there are at most two children, a little bed table is provided or a bassinet. If the family has more children, two or even three of them share one bed or bassinet. Everywhere the furnishings include a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, two tables, and the necessary items. Only rarely does the stove serve as a furnace for the living room as well. These days most workers own one of the so-called economical stoves that can be found among the higher classes, too. The value of the furnishings owned by the average worker ranges from 500 to 800 marks. Curtains on the windows and small carpets on the floor or tablecloths are common. Tending flowers is a frequent pursuit, as is breeding birds. As to pictures, one finds well-known reproductions of oil paintings depicting some landscape. Additionally, a picture of the husband from his time as a soldier can usually be found; apart from that, quite often a portrait of Lassalle or Marx, but also the first German Emperor, Wilhelm I. Other pieces include commemorations of confirmation and other religious images—pictures of the saints in Catholic households—Luther portraits among Protestants."

Source: Ludwig Weber, "Wohnungen und Sonntagsbeschäftigung der deutschen Arbeiter. Nach

urkundlichen Quellen geschildert,” *Sammlung theologischer und sozialer Reden und Abhandlungen III*, 8/9. Leipzig, 1892, pp. 212–13; reprinted in Klaus Saul, Jens Flemming, Dirk Stegmann, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Arbeiterfamilien im Kaiserreich. Materialien zur Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland, 1871–1914*. Düsseldorf, 1982, pp. 149–50.

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