“It’s Amazingly Rare that I get an Egg!” Breakfast for a Leipzig Working-Class Family (mid-1880s)

Abstract

Working-class families spent a larger portion of their income on food than families from the middle and upper classes. But malnutrition still represented a serious problem. What emerges from this report about a five-person household in Saxony’s second-largest city is that carefully apportioned amounts of rye bread and potatoes constituted their staple diet. A watery brew of coffee and barley was considered an indulgence, eggs a rare delight, and milk and sugar for the coffee a luxury. Workers were nevertheless eager to keep up appearances when lunching with their workmates at the factory: hence eating bread without butter was not considered good form there.

Source

At 4 or 4:45 a.m., the housewife gets out of bed […] the older children get up with her as well. First, she makes a fire in order to prepare the first breakfast and then gets dressed. Later, she wakes the youngest boy to wash and comb him, and to put on his clothes. The husband gets up half an hour later than his wife. One of the wife’s most important morning duties is packing the things needed for a day in the factory—the ground coffee, some cold cuts, and the requisite bread, the staple food alongside potatoes. She must also slice off the bread apportioned to the children for the day. As a spread for the brown bread, which certainly is not like the coffee rolls of the rich but serves as the main food aside from potatoes, there is butter, and in the children’s case only butter. The family needs four eight-pound loaves of bread a week at a price of 88 pfennig; this is twice as much as well-to-do families of the same size consume on average. On weekdays, bread rolls or white bread are not eaten for the first breakfast but brown bread instead; there is never any sugar or milk with the coffee. Before the journey to the factory, coffee is consumed—an enjoyment that occurs three more times throughout the day. This is the pleasure afforded by a watery brew of ¼ pound of coffee at 30 pfennig and one liter of barley at 20 pfennig per week.

Instead of coffee, the husband eats gruel with some butter and a bit of sugar, sometimes—but not often—with an egg. On being questioned, the husband said to his wife: “It’s amazingly rare that I get an egg!” The butter used by the family is “butter from the barrel” at one mark a pound. Two pounds are required per week. […] Incidentally, the quality of [this] butter is such that the wife remarked that frequently she ate little or no butter at all with her bread—not to save, but because its taste was so disagreeable. At the factory, the workers have to eat their bread buttered, because the workers critique each other’s standard of living. White bread (without butter) is only consumed for the first breakfast on Sundays at a cost of 20, rarely 30, pfennig.

Source: H. Mehner, “Der Haushalt und die Lebenshaltung einer Leipziger Arbeiterfamilie,” in *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft* 11 (1887), pp. 304–3; reprinted in Klaus Saul, Jens Flemming, Dirk Stegmann, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Arbeiterfamilien im Kaiserreich. Materialien zur Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland 1871–1914*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1982, pp. 101–2.

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