

Large Dresden Family Living on 1,000 Marks per Year (1880s)

Abstract

Illness and unforeseen circumstances could always jeopardize the welfare of working-class families in Imperial Germany. But as this excerpt from the autobiography of a working-class woman in Dresden shows, even a modest income sometimes allowed parents of large families to give their children better prospects for the future—particularly if the family followed a strict savings regimen and received support from relatives. Despite its affected cheerfulness and references to self-sacrifice, this mother’s account still manages to show that workers’ everyday lives were not always uniformly dull and dreary.

Source

Starting with our first child, I began depositing money into savings accounts. The child was only two years old, but money was already going into a school account, for I had told myself that if I only started [saving] when the money was needed, it would be too late. By then, we might have also grown accustomed to too much “luxury,” and I believe that scaling back is more difficult than the opposite.

And how fortunate that was! We had five children at two-year intervals. When the fifth child was three months old, the third one, a sweet little girl of four and a half, caught diphtheria and unfortunately died, despite the doctor’s efforts. That cost a lot of money, because the second child also fell seriously ill. I went to the savings bank with a heavy heart, but was glad that the money was available, and I withdrew from the contingency fund the amount needed to pay for the doctor, the pharmacy, and the funeral. Three years later, the same misfortune befell us: the youngest child, a three-year-old boy, fell ill. After being sick for one day, the dear boy was taken from us.

In this instance, we also had to take money from the contingency fund. However, I never lost my courage, thank God, to continue saving, even though the money disappeared time and again in such a sad way. I thought that one day it would be used for something good after all. After opening my savings accounts, I immediately saw to it that my husband and I joined the “Dresden General Health Insurance Company” [*Allgemeine Dresdner Krankenkasse*], so that in case of illness the doctor and the pharmacy would be free of charge, and a bit of sick pay would be granted to us as well. This included a death benefit (paid from the additional charge fund). How nice it was when the account statements arrived and all the money was there. — When the children started school, they were admitted to a confirmand’s savings plan. The two older daughters were subscribed with five pennies each. When the eldest daughter completed school, the second one had her contribution raised to ten pennies. The third child, however, a boy, was set up with 20 pennies right away. I put away the deposits from the money I had available for board. Each confirmation disbursement was wonderful, like hitting the jackpot. The money was then used for educational purposes; the children were allowed to learn what they felt like. The eldest daughter trained as a childcare worker at the Fröbelstift and is now married. The second one also got proper training and now has a good position. The boy was able to acquire all the books he needed at the seminar. — But the most important thing, however, was that my loved ones were very modest; great was the delight on birthdays when sausages and buns were served for breakfast, along with a bag full of goodies that grandmother bought from the confectioner for 15 pennies. As a girl, I had learned some tailoring, which now turned out to be very practical. I made everything myself, dresses and hats, and thus I had the advantage of being able to re-use second-hand garments after they had been washed and ironed. I made the boys’ suits up until their confirmation, using all of their father’s old things. At Christmas, the

children's kitchen was replenished (it had been around since my childhood and is now used by the grandchildren), and some cooking supplies were purchased for it, which was a great source of pleasure time and again. We owned only a few toys; rather, we had higher-quality items, such as a picture lotto, dominoes, a checkerboard, a construction kit, a stove, and tin soldiers—all things that were shared and still exist today. A paper doll with different little dresses, cut out by their dad, also delighted the children; the girls cut out some of their own and painted them as colorfully as possible. Each girl also had a little doll of her own. When they turned ten, they got bigger ones (stuffed bodies made of canvas because it doesn't break). These were the last of the dolls; from that point on the girls received only little pieces of fabric as gifts, and the sewing started right away. It was great fun when aprons, shirts, and dresses were finished. And what great effort they made to create new fashions and excel at sewing. For this was my primary motive: to have them learn something in a playful way. I simply believed that big girls did not learn anything by dressing and undressing dolls; besides, it would eventually get boring. As a girl, I also sewed a doll's wardrobe on my own. Now, however, I did not sit back and do nothing. From time to time, I did some tailoring for others, and the resulting income was not spent but saved separately. Each child also had a savings bankbook from grandmother. In addition to the 50 pennies she brought on each birthday, I added another 50 from the household till, so that one mark went into savings on every such occasion. Our children never suffered deprivation, and, thank God, they were never seriously ill; but they were also not spoiled. When they were little, they had pieces of white bread rolls put in their milk quite early; later they got double rolls, which were buttered on Sundays. Taking sugar with coffee was reserved for their dad; of course, he often let them have a piece. In the evening, we had soup (mostly bread soup or gruel) or a cup of coffee, tea, mulled beer, and the like. Each child was allowed to have one sip from dad's glass of straight beer. Only on Sundays was there a real supper with cold cuts and cheese; my children still recall with delight how good the food tasted back then. We baptized five children but did not organize any christenings (there was no extra fund for that). Relatives acted as godparents, and all we needed was coffee and a *Gugelhupf*.^[1] For the same reason, we had no Christmas cookies; instead, on each of the Christmas holidays we got a *Stollen*^[2] for 50 pennies, which was enjoyed in moderation and did not upset our stomachs. This may sound a bit put on to someone who has never had to make do with 1,000 marks and to think about the future at the same time, but that was the reality. — On Sundays we went for walks together, taking along sandwiches. Only when the fourth child, the boy, was born did I buy a cheap baby carriage, so I was able to come along each Sunday when the weather was nice. With all the previous children I stayed home on Sundays as long as they had to be carried around in their little beds. — Thank God we always felt quite good about living this kind life.

NOTES

[1] *Gugelhupf*: a light, circular yeast bread with raisins and frequently topped with almonds—trans.

[2] *Stollen*: a dense, elongated yeast bread with raisins, citron, and chopped nuts. *Stollen* is traditionally eaten during Advent and the Christmas season—trans.

Source: Augusta Petri-Dresden, "Aus dreißigjähriger Erfahrung," in *Wie wirtschaftet man gut und billig bei einem jährlichen Einkommen von 800-1000 Mark? (Volkswohl-Schriften 28)*. Dresden, 1900, pp. 7–10; 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. 116–18.

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