

Lifestyle and Expenditures of a Skilled Worker's Family in Berlin (1890)

Abstract

Families of skilled workers usually spent more money on meat than families with less income. The table below shows that one such family in Berlin spent between one-third and one-half of its food budget on meat, which was usually not of the best quality, was mixed with other ingredients to stretch it further, and was often reserved for a Sunday treat. Food expenditures accounted for over half of this family's total living costs. This was a fairly common proportion for working-class families around 1890, although from the turn of the century onward, this amount declined slightly, to about 50% of living costs. The family's second largest expenditure was for rent, which accounted for 16% of living costs. Note that clothing costs reflect a disparity between the father and the other family members: whereas clothing and shoes for the mother and the children cost a total of 43 marks, 48.5 marks were spent on clothing for the father, who also spent 162 marks for tobacco and beer. Alcohol expenditures varied considerably among different regions of Germany, depending in part on whether drinking was done at home or in a pub.

Source

He works as a molder in a bronze workshop, a hard-working, highly respectable fellow, a good husband and father. [...] He almost never attends meetings and very rarely goes to pubs. Despite her sickliness, his wife, a former maid, is very industrious and economical. Their dwelling consists of a relatively spacious room adjoined by the kitchen. Even though the husband, wife, and two children sleep and live there, everything is scrupulously clean. Calico curtains with floral patterns hang from the two windows; modest flowers sit on the windowsills. One of the long walls accommodates two beds and a simple sofa bed that serves as the children's place of rest; the other wall is occupied by a Vertikow cabinet, a wardrobe, and a washstand. A table and chairs round out the furnishings.

The average annual income is 1,700 marks. [...] Rent costs 259 marks. Despite the lack of furnishings, these small apartments are also the most expensive ones, since they are the most sought-after. [...] When the molder receives his pay each Saturday, he sets aside a portion of the rent, which is paid monthly in advance. The wife is given 18 marks per week for household expenses, i.e., 2.57 marks a day, 64 pfennigs per person; this also has to cover the lighting. The husband pays for the heating. [...]

It is quite instructive to consider their daily food consumption. The following list represents an average, since the menu is not always the same. Legumes, potatoes, flour, bread, and milk are consumed rather frequently. In terms of meat products, the most common items apart from cheap sausage—which is smeared on bread rather than stacked upon it in slices—are ground beef or lungs, out of which meatballs or “fake rabbit” (i.e., ground meat mixed with breadcrumbs or bread cubes, then fried in a bit of fat) are made. In consideration of Sundays and holidays, they save on weekday meals.

The list shows the following average numbers:

-	-	Marks
Milk, 2–2 ½ liters	-	0.36–0.45
Meat, 1–2 pounds	-	0.70–1.40
Vegetables, potatoes, legumes, or rice	-	0.05–0.15

Coffee and chicory coffee	-	0.10–0.15
Bread	-	0.30–0.40
Bread rolls (coarse kaiser rolls) for breakfast	-	0.12½–0.12½
Sausage	c.	0.30–0.30
Fats, salt, and spices	c.	0.10–0.15
-	marks	2.03½–3.12½

The average of the two numbers is 2.58 marks, which thus corresponds to the amount allotted per day; but since it is not reached every day, the result is a surplus, which is used for lighting and a number of minor expenses. Nothing is purchased on credit; indeed, that is one of the main requirements for keeping a small household in order. If more substantial expenses are necessary, a certain amount of money is set aside each week so that the item can be purchased in cash.

In the morning, the husband takes a tin container of coffee along with him; in the evenings and at lunch he drinks two glasses of beer, three at the most, at a cost of 10 pfennigs per glass (he does not drink any schnapps); on weekdays he smokes two cigars, three on Sundays, at a cost of three pfennigs each; he goes to the pub perhaps once a week but returns home by 10:30 p.m. at the latest.

In the following, I will list the figures I was able to collect:

-	-	Marks
Income	-	1,700,-
Expenses:	-	-
Apartment	-	259,-
Household	-	924,-
Taxes	-	30,-
Health insurance and other contributions	-	13,-
Heating, on average	-	45,-
Winter clothing for husband	-	30,-
Hat	-	2.50
Boots for husband	-	16,-
Boots for wife	-	11,-
Boots for children	-	10,-
Clothing purchases for wife and children	-	23,-
Physician and pharmacy for wife	-	20,-
Newspaper, shared with someone else, totaling 6 marks, thus	-	3,-
Miscellaneous (mending, linens, entertainment)	-	64,-
Husband (beverages, tobacco, coin collections, etc.)	-	162,-
-	marks	1,612.50

In 1889, the savings amounted to 82 marks. [...] Entertainment involving money is very rare; there is just enough money for outings to the Zoological Park on “cheap Sundays” (the picnic basket is brought along) or to the Hasenheide; once in a blue moon, the family goes to a cheap “smoke” or variety theater. Basically, that is the extent of the entertainment outside the home. The husband manages by borrowing books from public libraries and reading in the evening if he is not too tired; the wife is content with a

novel and the local news in the paper, or she talks with the ladies next door as soon as she has put the children to bed.

Source: Otto von Leixner, *1888 bis 1891. Soziale Briefe aus Berlin. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der sozialdemokratischen Strömungen*. Berlin, 1891, pp. 183–88; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 276–78.

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