Ottilie Baader, Seamstress and Home-Worker (1870s)

Abstract

In nearly every sector of the German economy, the number of female employees grew during the late nineteenth century. In the textile and clothing industries, much of the work was done outside factory walls, and most of these home-workers were women. Unlike in previous eras, home-work was situated not only in rural areas but also in large cities. In this document, Ottilie Baader (1847–1925) recounts her work as a seamstress. This description is drawn from the early chapters of her autobiography, published in 1921. Baader was the daughter of sugar refinery workers, and her account was intended to inspire other working-class women. Whereas most of the autobiography focuses on Baader's prominent role in the Social Democratic women's movement (where she advocated the granting of women's suffrage), this excerpt describes the numbing effect of the countless hours she spent at a sewing machine in the 1870s. Baader also explains how difficult it was to organize women working in such factories in those years.

Source

It was not until the 1860s that the sewing machine industry in Germany reached a point where machines were in general use. This caused a radical transformation above all in the gainful employment of women, especially in the manufacture of white goods and shirts. The production of collars and shirt cuffs developed into a distinct industry; previously, these items had been an integral part of men's shirts. In Berlin, there were four or five companies engaged in large-scale production at the time.

As I mentioned previously, by then I had tried my hand at a range of jobs. But now I learned to sew on a machine and worked in one of the factories on Spandauerstrasse. There, about 50 women worked on sewing machines and an equal number prepared pieces of fabric for the seamstresses. Two workers from each group, one seamstress and one preparer, always had to join forces and work as a team, and their wage was calculated jointly as well.

The working hours were 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., without any real break. At noon, you ate the sandwich you had brought along or hurried to the inn next door to spend a few groschen on something warm. Seven, at most ten thalers a week were the wages earned by a preparer and a machine seamstress together. Since machine sewing was more strenuous than preparing, custom dictated that the machine seamstress received 17½ groschen and the preparer 12½ groschen of every thaler. Before they divided their money, however, they had to deduct the cost of wasted thread and broken sewing needles, which on average amounted to 2½ groschen per thaler.

The Franco-Prussian War gave us the first impetus to take the initiative in changing these conditions. Immediately after the war broke out, sales in the white goods and shirt industry came to a standstill. Female workers were dismissed and found themselves destitute because they hadn't been able to put aside any of their previous earnings. Our company was willing to take the "risk" of continuing to employ us full-time in the face of reduced sales, provided that we worked for "*half*" the wages. We had no conception of organizing along union lines—and we were in a desperate situation, since most of the female workers had to support themselves; they lived, as it were, hand to mouth. So we agreed to try it for a week.

So we started to slave away. The result, however, was miserable; the company still deducted the full cost of thread and needles from our half wages. The owner's brutal approach prompted us to come to our senses. We resolved unanimously that it was better to be laid off than to work for pay so paltry that you

couldn't even live on it. Three women workers, myself among them, were selected to inform the boss. When our delegation presented him with our joint decision, he tried to calm us down by telling us that as soon as news of a victory came, business would immediately pick up again, and wages would increase. He was careful to avoid saying that "they would reach the old level." Fortunately, we were quick-witted enough to reply that wages never rose as quickly as they were cut, and on top of that, the company had a warehouse filled with goods produced at low wages. When the boss realized that we would not buckle so easily, he became so irate that he screamed at us, his face turning red with anger: "Well, in that case, I'll pay you the full wages again! Are you going to work now?" We replied curtly, "Yes, now we'll work again."

We were surprised by our success. And the owner found it equally novel that female workers would band together and make common demands. He had been caught unawares, but collar seamstresses were also very much in demand at the time. Not long after this, the boss called me into his office and told me that I did not have to fear that my involvement in this matter would have any negative repercussions. As long as he had work, I would have a place. This certainly sounded good, but it wasn't true. Eventually, he criticized my work left and right, and it wasn't long before I tired of this and left voluntarily. The unanimity of workers that had brought us our success did not last for very long. Even after news of victory had arrived, business did not recover as quickly as expected. The company owners had learned their lesson, however. They didn't take such brutal action again; instead, they followed a subtler course. They arranged wage deductions with individual women workers who found themselves in particularly difficult situations. Of course, this fostered mistrust rather than solidarity among the women, and many a year passed before they recognized that this was the underlying intention and confronted entrepreneurs with a unified organization. For many, this was a long period of suffering.

After quitting, I bought my own machine and worked at home. In doing so, I became all too familiar with the lot of female home-workers. It is common to "pedal" continuously from six o'clock in the morning until 12 at night, with only a one-hour lunch break. This meant getting up at 4 a.m. to do the housework and prepare meals. I had a small clock in front of me while I worked and made sure that one dozen collars did not take longer than the previous dozen. Nothing gave me more cause for happiness than being able to save a few minutes.

This continued for five years. And the years passed without my even noticing that I was young, without life offering me anything. Around me, quite a few things had changed. First my sister and then my brother had married; my youngest sister had drowned on a boat ride. My father had not been able to work for a long time, so I shared my lot with many daughters who remain single and do not establish happy lives for themselves in good time: they have to hold everything together, acting not only as mother but also as father, i.e., as the breadwinner for family members who cannot earn their own livelihood. Thus, I supported my father for over twenty years and have always been able to find enough work to manage to maintain an apartment with a living room and a kitchen.

My brother's wife died when their first child, a girl, was still very young. I took the child in, and she gave me a lot of joy during that year. She even learned to walk while staying with me. But when my brother remarried, I had to give her back. My brother, in turn, died a few years later, and I often took care of the two boys from the second marriage, because their mother had to earn money.

I can't say that I was always happy. After all, I had expected to get something more out of life. There were times when I was so sick and tired of life, just sitting at the sewing machine year after year, always a pile of collars and cuffs there in front of me, one dozen after the other; life had no meaning at all, you were merely a work machine without any future prospects. And you saw and heard nothing of the beautiful things in life; you were simply excluded from all of that.

Source of original German text: Ottilie Baader, *Ein steiniger Weg. Lebenserinnerungen einer Sozialistin* (orig. 1921), 3rd ed., introduced by Marie Juchacz. Berlin and Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., 1979, pp. 17–20.

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