

Report of a Poor-Relief Doctor in Berlin (c. 1890)

Abstract

This excerpt from a doctor's report on health conditions in a squalid Berlin neighborhood shows the downside of industrialization and urbanization. It also reveals just how urgent the need for social reform had become by the end of the Bismarckian period. Populated by unskilled workers, students, and the petite bourgeoisie, the neighborhood described here was beset by an interlocking set of afflictions: prostitution (sometimes involving grievous bodily harm), suicide, sexually transmitted diseases, and botched abortions, on the one hand, and tuberculosis, cholera, and other diseases, on the other. As these gaps in the social fabric grew wider—in the absence of what we today call a social safety net—it was often the elderly and the very young who fell through first.

Source

In those days, Eichendorffstraße—close to the north end of Friedrichstraße, Berlin's main north-south artery, and located at the Stettiner railway station—belonged to the *Quartier latin* [latin quarter]. Since the improvement of transportation facilities, this quarter seems to be shifting more and more to the area around Zoologische Garten^[1] and Savigny Square. The name *Quartier latin* meant that it was populated by a lot of petite bourgeoisie, particularly old people, who made a living by renting out rooms to students, and there was a huge amount of prostitution. Moreover, there were a lot of workers, even though not all of them came from the lowest strata: the *lumpenproletariat*. There were more skilled workers than unskilled ones.

Here, I looked for the first time—and with ever-increasing sympathy and mounting horror—at the gorgon's head of the social question. The doctor's practice here was for the little people, often for the poor people. More and more frequently, very poor families turned to me instead of the official poor-relief doctor. The entire misery of the big city unfolded before my very eyes, and I was struck by the number of diseases that stemmed from social problems. As a physician at the ambulance station, I often had to treat injuries resulting from severe brawls. Once, I was called into the most terrible milieu I had ever encountered: an old prostitute had been seriously injured by her pimp; this was supposedly done with a broken plate but probably with a more dangerous instrument. The edge of her shoulder blade was exposed in the gaping wound in her back. Every couple of weeks, I was called to one of the small, dark, cheap flophouses in this area to make out death certificates for a pair of suicides; and I earned a regular income from certifying bruises and similar small injuries—certificates used in successful court actions. Heinous brutality, shameful lack of education, terrible ignorance!

And what about the rest of the practice? At the top of the list was the deadly disease that killed one tenth of the infants in big cities back then: children's cholera, the summer diarrhea, which had robbed me of my little brother Georg so long ago. We knew the cause: spoiled milk and bad air in overheated tenement houses, where even night could not bring cooler temperatures, for the closely built masses of walls radiated the heat they had absorbed all day long. The disease raged in the narrow backyards in particular. Full of bitter outrage, a famous doctor remarked back then: "The poor children only cool down when they lie on their deathbeds." How many death certificates did I write out for such poor little worms, whom I had never seen before! Death carried them off with almost lightning speed. In terms of numbers, second on the list of scourges was tuberculosis, especially in the form of pulmonary tuberculosis. [...]

This usually struck people without unfavorable backgrounds: men and women who were healthy to

begin with, but had fallen victim to the effects of factory dust, flats without light and air, and insufficient diet, or who had been infected through cohabitation with other sick persons. We had to watch them die and see the families go to ruin. If we occasionally managed to get a patient admitted to one of the few existing institutions at the time, this was almost always just a short reprieve—the patient had to go back to work, of course, and the voracious creature in his lungs triumphed over him. Third on the list was the enormous number of artificially induced miscarriages for which I had to provide follow-up treatment; these “miscarriages” were perpetrated in dirty corners by even dirtier women who conned their victims out of their last penny and often brought them lasting infirmity or even death. And then, of course, there was the army of venereal diseases, prostitution of all different shades, ranging from the elegant mistress of several men all the way down to the completely degenerated whore on the street. Even today, all of humanity’s misery grips me when I recall the wretchedness that passed before me like a grotesque movie.

NOTES

[1] Berlin’s zoo—trans.

Source: Franz Oppenheimer, *Erlebtes, Erstrebt, Erreichtes. Lebenserinnerungen*. Düsseldorf, 1964, pp. 100ff. An earlier edition of this text is available online at: <http://www.ub.uni-koeln.de/cdm/ref/collection/soziologie/id/4389>. Original text reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 248–50.

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