

Working-Class Boarding Houses in Chemnitz and Berlin (1890)

Abstract

Germany's explosive population growth and urbanization made housing a social problem of immense proportions. In the 1860s tenements were built, first in Berlin, then in other larger cities, but four out of five unskilled workers in Berlin still lived in tiny apartments with just one heated room. Many apartments also had to accommodate a lodger [*Schlafgänger*] or meal-time boarder [*Kostgänger*]. The excerpt below describes such living conditions. The author of this account is Paul Göhre (1864–1928), a Protestant pastor and social reformer who spent three months as a factory worker in Chemnitz to experience working-class life and study class relations. His observations were published in the book *Three Months in a Workshop: A Practical Study* [*Drei Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche. Eine praktische Studie*]. Here, Göhre describes the housing conditions he encountered and discusses the impact of lodgers and boarders on the families who were forced by economic necessity to accommodate them.

Source

[...]

And now as to the interiors, which were comfortable, indifferent, or wretched, depending on many and varied causes. A sofa, a round table, a chest of drawers, a good-sized mirror, some cane-seated and more wooden chairs, and a few pictures were almost always to be seen; not seldom, too, a sewing-machine, a hanging lamp, and a wardrobe of showy appearance but very flimsy construction. In the corner or at the side where the stove stood, hung the few cooking utensils; in the small room adjoining, which was usually almost wholly filled by bedsteads, were pots, old shoes, and other rubbish, perhaps also another press. In the case of young married people, one or another of the above named articles would often be missing, the sofa, the mirror, or the clock, circumstances not allowing their purchase, since, in this section of the population, the marriages are portionless. But, in such a household, the number of the children and their ages, the morals and manners of the husband, the employment and, above all, of course, the character of the wife, her natural ability, and her bringing-up, decided whether or not the reigning spirit should be one of order, neatness, intelligent management, and inviting friendliness, in spite of narrow quarters and the utmost simplicity. I have been in the homes of many of my comrades who earned but a few more pfennigs hourly than I myself did, and who had many children and few possessions, but where it was a pleasure to stay. I have visited drillers and polishers, piece-workers, earning from forty to fifty marks weekly, in homes no plainer than my father's own, with white covers on sofa, table, and commode, white curtains before the flower-filled windows, and many pictures on the spotless walls; and I have seen the opposite of all this among people with incomes large or small, children few or many, furniture new or old.

However—and I desire to state this sharply and emphatically—the families who, with all the restrictions of their circumstances and their dwellings, yet sought to maintain a certain standard of decency and refinement, and did actually maintain it, were very much more numerous than those with whom, for whatever reason, this was not the case.

The saddest feature of the whole matter of housing the people was that one which I was so often obliged to deplore, namely, the disproportion between the size of the rooms and the number of their occupants. Lodgings like those I have described might serve young married people with a child or two as tolerably

satisfactory and healthy dwelling-places, but when two or three more children made their appearance, and when, in order to make both ends meet, strangers must be boarded and lodged, conditions existed which can be more easily commiserated than depicted. Yet such was, I need hardly say, the rule. The great majority of families had a troop of children as well as lodgers and table boarders, and perfect domiciliary conditions were, of course, possible only where neither the one nor the other was found. When a childless couple, or an aged married pair whose children were grown and settled for themselves, had a fair or full income, they preferred to be alone, and they lived comfortably and pleasantly. Such was the case with a polisher whose youngest lad was just out of school. I visited him more than once, and found it simply delightful. There were other conditions which must still be called favourable, such as I found, for example, in the family of one of the hands in my own section, who lived in an old farm-house which had been converted into a lodging-house. Here the father, mother, grown-up step-daughter, and three little children occupied a large corner room, an "alcove" with one window, and a garret. The young girl slept alone in the garret, the others in the alcove, where the baby had a capacious cradle, and the two children occupied one bed and the parents another. It was the common practice, as far as I could observe it, for parents as well as children, even older children, and brothers and sisters, indiscriminately to sleep together in one bed. I found a better state of affairs in this respect only twice, in the case of childless couples, when husband and wife had each a bed. Less fortunate than those above-mentioned were the conditions in the family of another of my friends, consisting of the young parents, a two-year-old child, an infant, and an outsider, a factory-girl. These had to content themselves with one small room on the ground floor and the loft where the lodger slept. Into this single room, which was at once living-room, bedroom, guest-room, and kitchen, were crowded a bed for the parents, a baby-carriage, a table, some chairs, a commode, a wardrobe, and all the cooking apparatus. But even this was comparatively comfortable. There is worse to come. Another workman of my section, whom I often visited, and who had an industrious, energetic wife, a cook before her marriage, and two children, tenderly loved and cared for—a girl of nine and a boy of six years—lived, together with three young apprentices of our mill, in one small two-windowed room, one alcove, and a garret, in a crowded rear-tenement house. The parents slept in one bed, the children in another, the two beds filling nearly the whole room, the three young men in the somewhat larger garret, likewise in but two beds, so that two, strangers to each other, occupied the same bed, and only one was by himself, a privilege for which he had, of course, to pay correspondingly more. How widespread this custom was is shown by the fact that when, in my search for lodgings, I expressed a desire to sleep alone—meaning in a room by myself—I was almost always understood to mean alone in a bed.

But the most wretched lodgings which I saw were those of another of our workmen. Here, the arrangements were actually unfit for human beings. The man was a machinist of long standing in the factory; no longer so young, well over fifty, an honest, good-natured little fellow with whom I liked to talk. His wife was sickly and half decrepit, subject to hemorrhage. He told me the story of their life and love in endless detail, as the people do, yet not without a certain touch of romance, and with the absolute ingenuousness and friendly confidence that springs up so quickly in such places between comrades young or old. Their children were already grown up and married. They had with them only one grandchild, affectionately cared for, but, on the other hand, they lodged five strangers. This man's dwelling-place was as follows: one "room," one alcove, a chamber with one window and a loft. In the small chamber were two beds, in one of which a horse-cardriver slept, and in the other two masons, Bohemians. The invalid wife slept in the alcove alone; for years she had been unable to have anyone lie beside her, and her husband slept, therefore, on a sofa in the living-room, which was used by all the members of that household for talking, eating, and smoking, from early morning until ten o'clock in the evening, which, for these people, means late into the night and into their time for sleep. The two masons having drunk their coffee prepared in this same room, left the house at half-past four in the morning, and the cardriver came home from his hard work at half-past nine in the evening, and must then have his supper. How was a really refreshing night's rest possible for the husband and wife? Yet the worst remains to be told. In the garret were also two beds, one of them sublet to a young newly-married pair who were

out at work all day, and had literally nothing they could call their own; in the other slept the grandchild, a girl twelve years of age. The condition of affairs in this and other similar households, even with the best intention on the part of all the members, may easily be imagined.

If, in addition to the regular inhabitants, relatives or friends came on a visit, their accommodation was coupled with almost incredible crowding. The workman last mentioned, whose condition was so distressing, once had a visit from a daughter married in Thuringia; she brought two children with her, “a snake who wants to squeeze her parents to death,” her father impatiently said. The two children slept in the garret with the other twelve-year-old grandchild, three in one bed, while the daughter was lodged with relatives in the neighbourhood. And this is the state of things in that class of wage-earners which I have felt bound to call comparatively well-to-do!

The greatest and worst factor of evil is undoubtedly the keeping of lodgers and boarders. This is the bane of the German working man’s home, but in the large majority of cases it is an economic necessity. The trifling profit which results from it is an ardently desired addition to the housekeeper’s fund. It is not to be supposed that the working men trouble themselves about strangers for pleasure only. On the contrary, numerous instances convinced me that whoever could do so kept his house free from outsiders. But when it was not to be avoided, young men were always taken in preference to young women.

The sleeping accommodations were of distinct kinds, both the better and the worse. The most pernicious and the most dangerous sort from a moral and sanitary point of view, has happily been prohibited by the Chemnitz Chief of Police, a just regulation, well worthy of imitation. By this ordinance a minimum of space, defined in terms of cubic metres, is prescribed for each sleeper, and private families are strictly forbidden to lodge young men and young women at the same time. During my visits and investigations I found about the following results:

a) Sleeping places in the rooms partitioned off in the garret, as I have before described them. Here almost every family was in the habit of keeping from one to three beds, so that often no storey of the house was more thickly crowded at night than this one under the eaves, whose steep ceiling consisted of the bare rafters and tiles. In the old houses, and especially during the heat of summer, they must have been places of nightly martyrdom; in the more solidly built of the modern houses they were, however, among the best bedrooms. In any case, this kind of sleeping-quarters had the great advantage of isolating the lodgers from the family at night, and it was also the more frequent kind, more or less expensive according to its degree of goodness. The cheaper sort were taken by the poor masons and ditchers from Bohemia, who worked here only in the months of summer. The weekly charges averaged two marks, which included coffee in the morning. Apprentices were lodged by the small master-mechanics, acquaintances sometimes, but often all strangers to one another. In the case of lesser officials, small tradesmen and similar households where a servant is usually kept and space is scanty, the maid’s bed alone occupies the garret. With the exception of the bedstead and a few pegs in the walls, there is ordinarily no furniture in the room, unless, indeed, the lodger brings with him either a commode, which seldom happens, or a chest, which is often seen. The few clothes which such a child of humanity possesses are hung upon the pegs, the linen and other trifles laid away in the chest, and the extra pair of boots put by in the corner. Whoever, from choice or necessity, sought the very cheapest shelter, rented such a garret with a single bed, in common with a friend.

b) The second kind of lodgings is in the dwelling-rooms of the family. The most undesirable among them, namely, those in a family occupying but a single room, and such as are forbidden by the city ordinance to which I have alluded, if not wholly done away with, are yet very seldom found. He who sleeps with several others in an alcove (in the city even the kitchen is sometimes used for this purpose) pays about a mark, he who has an empty alcove, furnished, that is, only with one bed, pays at least two marks weekly. Finally we come to the two best, but most infrequent lodgings of all, small, plainly furnished rooms with

two or three beds, rented by young apprentices, usually friends, from well-to-do families, for which each pays two marks, and similar rooms with a single bed, which are naturally in less demand, owing to their high cost (three marks weekly) and which form the transition to the ordinary plain bachelor quarters of the student class.

The prices which I have quoted are, of course, taken in the mean, but are fairly accurate. They always include coffee in the morning, and often in the evening. They are not high; indeed for the young bachelor who usually earns as much as a married man, and has no one to provide for, they are among the smallest of his necessary expenditures. Notwithstanding, it often happens that the lodger absconds with the rent. The Chemnitz *Local Advertiser* contained, almost daily, a notice to this effect, and it must be remembered that only a small proportion of such cases is brought to public attention. When it happens there is usually a box locked, but empty, or filled with stones, left behind as security. Especially is this the expedient of the unemployed. They make a pretence of working in order to mislead their new landlord, they leave the house at the regular hour in the morning, spend the day partly in the public-houses, partly in aimless wandering, partly in looking for employment; at the hour of quitting work they come back to their lodgings. At last the convenient moment arrives and the bird flies—not to return. The family always suffers a heavy loss.

Source of English translation: Paul Göhre, *Three Months in a Workshop. A Practical Study*. New York: Arno Press, 1972, pp. 21–27. An English translation from 1895 is available online at:
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiuo.ark:/13960/t6d21vq9b&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021>.

Source of original German text: Paul Göhre, *Drei Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche. Eine praktische Studie*. Leipzig: Grunow, 1891, pp. 20–26. Available online at:
<https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN1701936127>.

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