

Franz Meyers, *Daily Town Life in 1918* (Retrospective Account, 1990)

Abstract

Franz Meyers (1908–2002) rose to prominence as a politician with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party in West Germany after World War II, serving as the Minister-President of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia from 1958 to 1966. Born in 1908 in the western German city of Mönchengladbach, not far from the Belgian border, he was active in Catholic organizations for his entire life, including as a law student in Freiburg and Cologne during the later years of the Weimar Republic.

In this passage, Meyers recalled his experiences in 1918 working in the stables where his uncle kept the horses used by the town's streetcar system, prior to its electrification. In addition to recounting memorable moments from the immediate postwar period, such as the arrival of the Belgian occupation soldiers, he also shared his observations of daily life in his own middle-class family—his father and uncle worked as civil servants—and in the homes of his working-class friends and neighbors.

Source

[...]

When Chancellor Max von Baden handed over the reins of power to Friedrich Ebert on November 9, 1918, and Philipp Scheidemann declared the foundation of the German Republic, I was ten years old and lived with my aunt. A few years earlier, when they were expecting the birth of my brother, my parents had brought me to the childless, married sister of my mother, who lived on the other side of the street in the municipal wagon yard in my hometown of München-Gladbach (now spelled Mönchengladbach). My uncle was an equerry and director of the municipal horse stables. At the time, the trams were still pulled by horses; the tracks led into our courtyard, where the sheds for the wagons also stood.

The best days of the wagon yard, however, were already over. Father and uncle, employees and horses had gone off to the war. The stalls were empty. Women were doing the remaining tasks. There was a strange stillness about the large ensemble, which included a house, the horse stables, and the wagons, hay and straw sheds, in addition to workshops for the different crafts, a fire pond, and large open spaces.

Starting around Easter 1918, I attended fifth grade at the private humanist high school [*Gymnasium*]. Since the male teachers were all on the front, only the women were left as our teachers. Among them was the wife of the director, who was less concerned with covering the school subjects with us, and more interested in what our mothers were cooking during these difficult times. When she learned of a particularly intriguing dish—for example, stinging nettles vegetables, she could not rest until she had the recipe necessary to prepare it. We naturally learned little in this time.

From our apartment, we witnessed the retreat of the German troops. For me it was a colorful scene. Some formations marched in military formation with their officers at the front. But others were walking along, totally out of order. They had ripped off their epaulets and badges and wore red scarves or arm bands.

In early December, the scene changed. Now it was Belgian soldiers going by. This military show attracted the residents out to stand along the streets. My grandfather, who lived with us, joined them. To protect his bald head, he wore a cap like always. As the black-yellow-red flag of Belgium went by, he did not

acknowledge it, perhaps because he was not accustomed to showing respect to foreign flags, perhaps because as a former Düsseldorf uhlán and pig-headed Pomeranian, he did not want to do so. A Belgian gendarme then swept the cap off his head. When he wanted to fight back, a few level-headed workers from the yard held him back and brought him, despite his resistance, to safety. It was his luck, for a life was not worth much at that point if there was resistance against the occupation.

Since there was no war damage, life gradually got back to normal. I was allowed to help the coachmen, who, when the weather was good, had nearly fifty horses to brush in the yard and harness up. It was just a joy when I was allowed to lead a horse to the coach to which it was to be harnessed. My father^[1] who rhymed of himself: "It was his life's deed, a policeman on his steed," had his horse in the yard. I thus saw him every day when he came to work.

I played with the children of the other workers who lived in the area. We had so many possibilities within those grounds! We went everywhere. We drifted about the stables and beleaguered the groomsmen until they told us which horses had ripped themselves loose at night and wandered through the stable. We especially enjoyed keeping the craftsmen company. We watched the carpenter, Schroer, build entire wagons. He always had something left over for us, whether wood for sabers and lances or slats for kites. When it was rainy or cold, it was the nicest at the blacksmith's, Classen. We were allowed to pump the bellows for the forge fire and drew in the peculiar odor of the singed hooves when the horseshoes were fitted. When Blacksmith Classen installed the iron rims on Carpenter Schroer's wagon wheels with a great racket, we had to take shelter from the sparks.

Through our interactions with the workers, we learned about how they lived. In general they were content. Their wages provided them with a modest life. Thanks to their social security, they were protected in case of illness and old age. Their residences included kitchens and living- and bedrooms; they did not have bathrooms. They bathed in a tub which was in the kitchen for precisely this purpose, or, like in the wagon yard, in a out-of-the-way wash house. In apartment buildings with multiple floors, the toilets were between the floors and shared by several families.

Despite their simple life, there were some special aspects that are basically unknown today. While we take it for granted that every man shaves himself, my uncle used to go get a shave several times a week at the barbershop, where his mustache was also groomed. My aunt had a washerwoman, and three times a week a hairdresser came and they exchanged all the news at length. We had more food than many comparable households. That might be because my uncle was from Kleve, near the Dutch border, and my aunt trained as a cook in the hotel there. For the same reason, we also had coffee at every possible opportunity.

I learned that families with higher incomes could lead significantly easier lives when I befriended a fellow pupil who was the son our mayor, Gielen. At their house, however, there were six children at the table alongside the parents. I had to eat pumpernickel and dark bread with the family, and carrots and cabbage. That was an important experience for me.

My father and uncle had been civil servants under the emperor. They did not understand the downfall of the empire. They had no use for the republic, which was strange to them. They performed their duties loyally and conscientiously. Since nothing changed in their professional lives, and they earned their salaries just like always, they were content.

We pupils did not understand politics. Even less did we understand the financial developments. One day on the way home from school, I found a 50 Mark bill. I brought it home joyously and was very disappointed when I was told that it was not worth anything anymore. I might have heard the word "inflation" in this context, but I did not understand it. It was only later that I became conscious of what it meant.

My father and uncle were greatly affected by the currency's loss of value. Their salaries were thus converted into material goods as soon as they were received; in fact they lost considerably in value just between the time when they were due and when the sum was paid out. While most families suffered from the shortages of supplies caused by inflation, this was not the case for our family. My grandfather had already made provisions during the war by planting a large garden with potatoes and vegetables and raising chickens, geese, and even a goat. We were even able to share with acquaintances and relatives. Occasionally my father even harnessed the goat to a handcart and drove through the area. I was proud when I was allowed to steer the goat.

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NOTES

[1] The author's father was a mounted policeman.

Source of original German text: Franz Meyers, „Zu Fuß von Köln nach München-Gladbach“, in *Alltag in der Weimarer Republik: Erinnerungen an eine unruhige Zeit*, ed. Rudolf Pörtner. Düsseldorf: ECON Verlag, 1990, pp. 200–204.

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Recommended Citation: Franz Meyers, Daily Town Life in 1918 (Retrospective Account, 1990), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-5396>> [March 16, 2026].