



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 Poverty among the Rural Elderly (1906)

Although the state guaranteed a modicum of social security for its citizens, local communities were often responsible for the care of the poor, destitute and mendicant. Here, we see a conflict among local officials, the state, and local citizens themselves over the entitlement of an impoverished family to communal support.

The parish poor man Specht in Kunzendorf near Marienburg, who lives with his wife and daughter in the poor house and collects 10.55 marks a month disability pension, has repeatedly appeared to ask for aid, though unfortunately without success. The party comrades from Elbingen eventually looked after the poor family and lodged a complaint against the local poor association [*Ortsarmenverband*] with the district committee and, through the latter, finally with the district president [*Regierungspräsident*] in Danzig. The following decision was received from the *Regierungspräsident*:

The *Regierungspräsident*
Submission No. A. 3873.

Danzig, August 19, 1906

According to our investigation, you are not as infirm as you make yourself out to be. Last summer you went on a trip to Westphalia to visit your children, and you endured the strains of that trip well. Your wife is also still quite robust and able to earn an average income of 50 pfennig a day.

You could earn the same yourself, if you so desired, since fully disabled residents of the poor house are currently still earning 70 pfennig a day.

With a pension of 10.55 marks, the earnings from working, and the support of the community through free housing and fire wood, as well as a little gardening plot, you and your wife could most certainly get by, especially since you can easily find suitable work, given the worker shortage in the countryside.

Living with you, and with your consent, however, is your work-shy, adult daughter Christine, who, according to the attestation of seven doctors, is healthy – merely faking – and who lives in the poor house without justification and is supported by you. Should she fail to engage in some kind of work, I will take steps to have her placed in a workhouse.

Moreover, you are not 68, as you indicate in your complaint, but only 63, and your wife is not 65, but 63. For all the above reasons, I therefore reject your complaint against the *Landrat* [district president], the *Amtsvorsteher* [chief district official], and the *Gemeindevorsteher* [parish magistrate] as without merit.

v. Krtozky

[. . .]

The Specht case was discussed in the *Königsberger Volkszeitung* on August 25, 1906. Someone who had made direct observations reported to the paper:

"You can already tell from a distance that Specht is a completely infirm man. He looks a lot older than he is. He is completely blind in one eye; in the other eye he has only foggy perception with the help of glasses. In addition, Specht has a large hernia, bladder problems, and carries around a rubber hose provided by the community to draw off the water. Specht also has kidney problems. As for Specht's wife, the doctor found cataracts in both eyes only fourteen days ago. In other respects, as well, the woman is physically frail.

And Christine Specht? She is suffering from lung disease and has applied for a disability pension for years. And even though she has nearly completed 11 cards, she is not given a pension because she is not unfit to work in the sense of the law. At the oral hearings on May 6, 1904, before the arbitration court in Danzig, her case was postponed to have Christine Specht observed in the hospital for an appropriate period of time. Following this observation, from May 30 to June 29, 1904, Dr. Jacobi and Dr. Freumuth, like the district physician Dr. Arbeit-Marienburg before them on March 23, 1904, determined that she was suffering from lung disease, but that she was not disabled in the sense of the law. The girl claims that she was not medically examined after that time. She further claims that her lung ailment has worsened during the two years following the examination.

The girl looks flaccid and yellowish in her face. She breathes heavily and one hears the same noise as in people who are suffering from asthma. It is not entirely clear to us why the girl is considered work-shy. Living in the poor house can hardly be enticing. It would have been interesting if they had indicated what kind of agricultural work the half-blind, sick man would still be able to perform."

Source: *Sozialdemokratische Partei-Correspondenz* [Correspondence of the Social Democratic Party], Berlin, 1 (1906), p. 140 f.

Original German text reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914* [Source Materials on Everyday Life in Germany 1871-1914]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, pp. 181-83.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap