22.4 A Factory Girl: Countering the Stereotypes

Adelheid Popp (1869–1939) was the fifteenth child of weavers. Her alcoholic father died young, and she went to work early. At age 16, she became a social-democrat and in time became the editor of *Working Women's News* in Austria and an important member of the social-democratic party. In 1909, she published her autobiography in order to inspire other working-class women and to inform the middle classes about working conditions.

Source: Adelheid Popp, *Die Jugendgeschichte einer Arbeiterin,* ed. Hans J. Schutz, (Berlin/Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz Verlag, 1980), 48–60. Originally published with a preface by August Bebel, (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, 1909); reprinted and trans. Alfred Kelly, *The German Worker: Working-Class Autobiographies from the Age of Industrialization,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 122–26, 130, 132, 134.

FINDING WORK

It was a cold, severe winter, and the wind and snow could come unhindered into our room. In the morning when we opened the door we first had to hack away the ice on it in order to get out, because the entrance to our room was directly on the courtyard, and we had only a single glass door. My mother left the house at five-thirty because she had to start work at six. An hour later I went out to look for work. "Please, I need a job"—it had to be repeated countless times. I used to be on the street for almost the whole day. We couldn't heat our room—that would have been extravagant—so I wandered around the streets, into churches, and to the cemetery. I took along a piece of bread and a few kreuzers to buy myself something at noon. I always had to hold back the tears forcibly when my request for work was denied and I had to leave the warm room. How gladly I would have done any work, just so I wouldn't have to freeze. My clothes got wet in the snow, and my limbs were stiff from the hours of walking around. What's more, my mother was getting more and more resentful. My brother had found work; snow had fallen, so he was busy*—of course the pay was so low that he could hardly support himself. I was the only one still without work.

I couldn't even get work in the candy factories, where I had assumed they would need more help at Christmastime. Today I know that almost all of the Christmas work is done several weeks before the holidays; the factory women have to work day and night for weeks, and then right before the holidays they are dismissed without consideration. At that time I still had no idea how the production process was carried out. How piously and faithfully I used to pray for work in church. I sought out the most celebrated saints. I went from altar to altar, kneeled down on the cold stones, and prayed to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven, and many other saints who were said to have special power and compassion.

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My new workplace was on the third floor of a building that was used exclusively for industrial purposes. Not having known the bustle of a factory, I had never felt so uncomfortable. Everything displeased me—the dirty, sticky work; the unpleasant glass dust; the crowd of people; the crude tone; and the whole way that the girls and even married women behaved.

The owner's wife—the "gracious lady," as she was called—was the actual manager of the factory, and she talked just like the girls. She was a nice-looking woman, but she drank brandy, took snuff, and made unseemly rude jokes with the workmen. The owner was very ill, and when he came himself, there was always a violent scene. I pitied him. He seemed to me to be so good and noble, and I gathered from the behavior and whole manner of his wife that he must be unhappy. At his instructions I received a different, much more pleasant job. Up to then my job had been to hang the papers, which were smeared with glue and sprinkled with glass, onto lines strung rather high across the workroom. This work exhausted me greatly, and the owner must have noticed that it wasn't suitable for me, because he instructed that from then on I was to keep count of the papers that were ready for processing. This work was clean and I liked it a lot better. Of course when there wasn't anything to count, I had to do other kinds of work.

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They often spoke of a Herr Berger, who was the company's traveling representative and was expected back about then. All the women raved about him, so I was curious to see the man. I had been there for two weeks when he came. Everything was in a dither, and the only talk was of the looks of the traveler they so admired. Accompanied by the owner's wife, he came into the room where I worked. I didn't like him at all. That afternoon I was called into his office; Herr Berger sent me on an errand and made a silly remark about my "beautiful hands." It was already dark when I returned; I had to pass through an empty anteroom that wasn't lighted; it was half-dark since it got light only through the glass door leading into the workroom. Herr Berger was in the anteroom when I came. He took me by the hand and inquired sympathetically

about my circumstances. I answered him truthfully and told of our poverty. He spoke a few words, taking pity on me and promising to use his influence to get me higher wages. Of course I was delighted with the prospect opening up to me, for I was getting only two and a half guilders a week, for which I had to work twelve hours a day. I stammered a few words of thanks and assured him that I would prove myself worthy of his solicitude. Before I even knew what was happening, Herr Berger had kissed me. He tried to calm my fright with the words, "It was just a fatherly kiss." He was twenty-six years old, and I was almost fifteen, so fatherliness was out of the question.

Beside myself, I hurried back to my work. I didn't know how I should interpret the incident; I thought the kiss was disgraceful, but Herr Berger had spoken so sympathetically and had held out the prospect of higher wages! At home I did tell of the promise, but I said nothing about the kiss because I was ashamed to talk about it in front of my brother. But my mother and brother were happy that I had found such an influential protector.

The next day I was overwhelmed with reproaches from one of my coworkers, a young blond girl whom I liked most of all. She reproached me for having taken her place with the traveler; up to now, if he had something to do or an errand to run, she had done it; he loved her, she protested through tears and sobs, and now I'd put an end to everything. The other girls joined in too; they called me a hypocrite, and the gracious lady herself asked me how I'd liked the kisses of the "handsome traveler." The incident of the previous evening had been observed through the glass door, and they interpreted it in a way very insulting to me.

I was defenseless against their taunts and sneers and longed for the hour when I could go home. It was Saturday, and when I received my wages, I went home with the intention of not returning on Monday.

When I spoke of the matter at home, I was severely scolded. It was strange. My mother, who was always so intent on raising me to be a respectable girl, who always gave me instructions and warnings not to talk to men ("You should only allow yourself to be kissed by the man you're going to marry," she used to impress upon me)—in this instance my mother was against me. She said I was going too far. A kiss was nothing bad, and if I was getting more wages as a result, then it would be silly to give up my job. In the end she held my books responsible for my "overexcitement." My mother got so mad about my "pigheadedness" that all the splendid things I'd been lent—*The Book for Everyone [Das Buch für Alle], Over Land* and *Sea [Über Land und Meer]*, and Chronicle of the Times [Chronik der Zeit] (that's how far advanced I was in literature)—were thrown out the door.* I collected them all again, but I didn't dare read in the evening, although I'd usually been allowed to read longer on Saturdays.

That was a sad Sunday! I was depressed, and what's more I was scolded the whole day.

On Monday my mother awakened me as usual and impressed upon me as she left for work not to do anything stupid, but rather to remember that in a few days it would be Christmas.

I went out intending to control myself and go to the factory; I got as far as the door and then I turned around. I had such a dreadful fear of unknown dangers that I preferred to go hungry than to suffer disgrace. Everything that had happened-the kiss and the reproaches of my coworkers-seemed a disgrace to me. Besides, I had been told that one of the girls always enjoyed the traveler's special favor. But he was changeable; if a new girl came who pleased him more, then she would take the place of the previous one. All indications were that I had been chosen as the new favorite. That scared me a lot. I'd read so much in books about seduction and fallen virtue that I imagined the most hideous things happening. So I didn't go in.

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[She eventually found a factory job paying 4 guilders a week. After six months, pay was raised to 5 guilders.]

It seemed to me that I was almost rich. I figured out how much I'd be able to save over a few years, and I built castles in the air. Since I was used to extraordinary deprivations, I would have considered it extravagant to spend more now on food. As long as I didn't feel hungry I didn't take into account what I was eating. All I wanted was to dress nicely. When I went to church on Sunday no one should recognize me as a factory girl; I was ashamed of my work. Working in a factory always seemed to me to be degrading. When I was still an apprentice, I'd often heard it said that factory girls were bad, loose, and spoiled.* They were spoken of in the most insulting words, and I too had picked up this false notion. Now I myself was employed in a factory where there were so many girls.

The girls were friendly; they instructed me in my work in the most amiable manner, and they introduced me to the customs of the business. The girls in the sorting room were considered the elite of the personnel. The owner himself chose them, whereas the hiring for the machine room was left to the foremen. Men and women were together in the other rooms; but in my room there were only female employees. Men were used as extra help only when the heavy packages of sorted, counted, and labeled goods were moved to the courtyard.

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In general, the only girls who ate well were those supported by their families. But there were only a few of them. More often the working girls had to support their parents or pay for baby-sitting for their children. How self-sacrificing these

mothers were! They saved kreuzer after kreuzer to better the lot of their children and to enable them to make gifts to the baby-sitter so that she would take good care of the children. Many women often had to provide for their unemployed husbands; they underwent double deprivation because they had to meet the household expenses alone. I also got to know the much-maligned frivolousness of factory girls. To be sure, the girls went dancing and they had love affairs; others stood in line at a theater at three o'clock in the afternoon so that they could see an evening performance for thirty kreuzers. In the summer they went on outings and walked for hours in order to save a couple of kreuzers of tram fare. For a few breaths of country air they had to pay with days of tired feet. If you want you can call all that frivolity, or even pleasure-seeking or debauchery, but who would dare to?

I saw among my coworkers—the despised factory women-examples of the most extraordinary sacrifices for others. If there was a special emergency in one family, then they chipped in their kreuzers to help. Even though they had worked twelve hours in the factory and many still had an hour's walk home, they mended their own clothes, without ever having been taught how. They took apart their old dresses to fashion new ones from the separate pieces, which they sewed at night and on Sundays.

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"A good boss"—that was the general opinion of our employer. But in the case of this very factory owner, one can see how profitable is the exploitation of human labor. He, who really did grant his workers more than most other entrepreneurs; he, who would continue for weeks to pay the wages of men and women who were sick; he, who in case of a death made a considerable contribution to the survivors; and he, who almost never rejected a request if someone turned to him in need—despite all this, he had gotten rich through the productive labor of the men and women working in his factory.

Question:

1. If you had been a worker in the nineteenth century, what would work have been like for you? Consider hours, conditions, types of work, relations with other classes, family life, etc.