**Heinrich Hauser “With the Unemployed in Germany”**

The Great Depression struck Germany with greater force than any other country. Unemployment neared 40 percent, and the German economy, which had been recovering from a previous disaster- largely created by the harsh terms of the Versailles treaty-collapsed again in 1923-1924. Facing the second economic catastrophe is less than ten years, the responses of the German people varied. Politically, the fortunes of extremist parties rose, but there were still masses of unemployed who sought stability, from whatever source they could find it. Hauser, a journalist, traveled around Germany writing a series of human-interest pieces for the nationalist magazine Dei Tat. Here he reflects on the despair of those seeking relief, a despair the Nazis would soon exploit.

An almost **unbroken chain of homeless men** extends the whole length of the great Hamburg-Berlin highway.

There are so many of them moving in both directions, impelled by the wind or making their way against it, that **they could shout a message from Hamburg to Berlin by word of mouth**…

There are so many of them moving in both directions, impelled by the wind or making their way against it, that they could shout a message from Hamburg to Berlin by word of mouth.

It is the same scene for the entire two hundred miles, and the same scene repeats itself…All the highways in Germany over which I traveled this year presented the same aspect….

Most of the hikers paid no attention to me. They walked sepa- rately or in small groups, with their eyes on the ground. And they had the queer, stumbling gait of barefooted people, for their shoes were slung over their shoulders. Some of them were guild members,—carpenters with em-broidered wallets, knee breeches, and broad felt hats; milkmen with striped red .shirts, and bricklayers with tall black hats/—but they were in a minority. Far more’ numerous were those whom one could assign to no special profession or craft—unskilled young people, for the most part, who had been unable to find a place for themselves in any city or town in Germany, and who had never had a job and never expected to have one. There was something else that had never been seen before—whole families that had piled all their goods into baby carriages and wheelbarrows that they were pushing along as they plodded forward in dumb despair. It was a whole nation on the march.

I saw them–and this was the strongest impression that the year 1932 left with me–I saw them, gathered into groups, of **fifty** **or a hundred men, attacking fields of potatoes**. I saw them digging up the potatoes and throwing them into sacks while the farmer who owned the field watched them in despair and the **local policeman looked on gloomily from the distance.** I saw them staggering toward the lights of the city as night fell, with their sacks on their backs. **What did it remind me of? Of the War**, of the worst periods of starvation in 1917 and 1918, but even then people paid for the potatoes.

I saw that the individual can know what is happening only by personal experience. I know what it is to be a tramp. I know what cold and hunger are. I know what it is to spend the night outdoors or behind the thin walls of-a shack through which the wind whistles. I have slept in holes such as hunters hide in, in hayricks, under bridges, against the warm walls of boiler houses, under cattle .shelters in pastures, on a heap of fir-tree boughs in the forest. But there are two things that I have only recently experienced—begging and spending the night in a municipal lodging house.

I entered the huge Berlin municipal lodging house in a northern quarter of the city….

There was an entrance arched by a brick vaulting, and a watchman sat in a little wooden sentry box. His white coat made him look like a doctor. We stood waiting in the corridor. Heavy steam rose from the men’s clothes. Some of them sat
down on the floor, pulled off their shoes, and unwound the rags that were bound around their feet.

More people were constantly pouring in the door, and we stood closely packed together. Then another door opened. The crowd pushed forward, and people began forcing their way almost eagerly through,.this door, for it was warm in there. Without knowing it I had already caught the ‘rhythm of the municipal lodging house. It means waiting, waiting, standing around, and then suddenly jumping up.

We now stand in a long hall, down the length of which runs a bar dividing the hall into a narrow and a wide space. All the light is on the narrow side. There, under yellow lamps that hang from the ceiling on long wires sit
men in white smocks. We arrange ourselves in long lines, each leading up to one of these men, and the mill begins to grind….

As the line passes in single file the official does not look up at each new person to appear. He only looks at the paper that is handed to him. These papers are for the most part invalid cards or unemployment certificates. The very fact that the official does not look up robs the homeless applicant of self-respect, although he may look too beaten down to feel any…

Now it is my turn and the questions and answers flow as smoothly as if I were an old hand. But finally I am asked, “Have you ever been here before?” “No.” “No?” The question reverberates through the whole room. The clerk refuses to believe me and looks through his card catalogue. But no, my name is not there. The clerk thinks this strange, for he cannot make a mistake, and the terrible thing that one notices in all these clerks is that they expect you to lie. They do not believe what you say. They do not regard you as a human being but as an infection, something foul that one keeps at a distance. He goes on. “How did you come here from Hamburg?” “By truck.”

Where have you slept the past three nights?’ ‘

I lie coolly.

‘Have you begged?’
I feel a warm blush spreading over my face. It is welling up from the bourgeois world that I have come from.”No.”

A course peal of laughter rises from the line, and a loud piercing voice grips me as if someone had seized me by the throat: ‘Never mind.’ The day will come, comrade, when there’s nothing else to do.’ And the line breaks into laughter again, the bitterest laughter I have ever heard, the laughter of damnation and despair.

Again the crowd pushes back in the kind of rhythm is so typical of a lodging house, and we are all herded into the undressing room. I cling to the man who spoke to me. He is a Saxon with a friendly manner and he has noticed that I am a stranger here. A certain sensitiveness, an al-most perverse, spiritual alertness makes me like him very much.

Out of a big iron chest each of us takes a coat hanger that would serve admirably to hit somebody over the head with. As we undress the room becomes filled with the heavy breath of poverty. We are so close together that we brush against each other every time we move. Anyone who has been a soldier, anyone who has been to a public bath is perfectly accustomed to the look of naked bodies. But I have never seen anything quite so repulsive as all these hundreds of withered human frames. For in the homeless army the majority are men who have been defeated in the struggle of life, crippled, old, and sick. There is no repulsive -disease of which traces are not to be seen here. There is no form of mutilation or degeneracy that is not represented, and the naked bodies of the old men are in a disgusting state of decline….

It is superfluous to describe what follows. Towels are handed out, then nightgowns-long, sack-like affairs made of plain unbleached cotton but freshly washed. Then slippers… Distribution of spoons, distribution of en-ameledware bowls with the words “Property of the City of Berlin” written on their sides. Then the meal itself. A big kettle is carried in. Men with yellow smocks have brought it and men with yellow smocks ladle out the food. These men, too, are homeless and they have been expressly picked by the establishment and given free food and lodging and a little poc-ket money in exchange for their work about the house.

Where have I seen this kind of food distribu-tion before? In a prison that I once helped to guard in the winter of 1919 during the Ger-man civil war. There was the same hunger then, the same trembling, anxious expectation of rations. Now the men are standing in a long row, dressed in their plain nightshirts that reach to the ground, and the noise of their shuffling feet is like the noise of big wild ani-mals walking up and down the stone floor of their cages before feeding time…

My next recollection is sitting at table in an-other room on a crowded bench that is like a seat in a fourth-class railway carriage. Hun-dreds of hungry mouths make an enormous noise eating their food. The men sit bent over their food like animals who feel that someone is going to take it away from them. They hold their bowl with their left arm part way around it, so that nobody can take it away, and they also protect it with their other elbow and with their head and mouth, while they move the spoon as fast as they can between their mouth and the bowl….

We shuffle into the sleeping room, where each bed has a number painted in big letters on the wall over it. You must find the number that you have around your neck, and there is your bed, your home for one night. It stands in a row with fifty others and across the room there are fifty more in a row….

… Only a few people, very few, move around at all. The others lie awake and still, staring at their blankets, wrapped up in themselves, but not sleeping. Only an almost sol-dierly sense of comradeship, an inner self-control engendered by the presence of so many people, prevents the despair that is written on all these faces from expressing itself. The few who are moving about do so with the torment-ing consciousness of men who merely want to kill time. They do not believe in what they are doing.

Going to sleep means passing into the un-conscious, eliminating the intelligence. And one can read deeply into a man’s life by watch-ing the way he goes to sleep. For we have not always slept in municipal lodgings. There are men among us who still move as if they were in a bourgeois bedchamber. …

…The air is poisoned with the breath of men who have stuffed too much food into empty stomachs. There is also a sickening smell of lysol. It seems completely terrible to me, animals die, plants wither, but men always go on living.

From Heinrich Hauser, “With Germany’s Unemployed,” The Living Age 344 (Mar. 1933), pp. 27-28.