

Into the Darkness: An Uncensored Report from Inside the Third Reich at War

by Lothrop Stoddard



1940

Chapter 8: A Berlin Lady Goes to Market

If we are really to understand conditions in strange lands, it's well to get down to cases. So let me tell the tale of the housewife in wartime Germany. She is a composite lady, the combined result of several studies I made into the daily life of families living in Berlin. Two of them had kept house in America. In that way I got intelligent comparisons between German and American standards. All these families are financially well-off; able to pay for everything they really need. I chose such families deliberately, because I wanted to eliminate the factor of financial worry from the picture. What I tried to find out was how, and to what extent, the everyday life of these Berlin homes is affected by wartime conditions.

On the day in question our composite lady sallies forth to do her marketing in the middle of the forenoon. This is her regular market day, and she should have started earlier, but couldn't because of home work due to lack of servants. She goes at once to a nearby grocery. Of

course she is a regular customer there, as she is with her butcher and other tradespeople. That is the only way she can cope with the food-card situation.

Let's follow her in and take a look around the place. The first thing that strikes our American eye is the meagerness of the stock. In part, this impression is due to the fact that there are no canned goods on display. They are all being kept off the market until green vegetables and autumn fruits are exhausted. Then the Government will release canned goods for public sale to bridge the gap until the next fruit and vegetable crops are available. We should also understand that, in Germany, grocery stores are more specialized than ours. They sell chiefly staple food and dairy products, together with lines such as jams and jellies, condiments, smoked meats, and light table wines. Still, the stock is not large and the store is a small place, though with several clerks — all women.

As she enters the store, Milady catches the eye of the head clerk and gets immediate service. That's a bit of good luck, for the woman is much quicker than the others, which means a saving of precious time. As soon as she reaches the counter, Milady opens a pocketbook containing several compartments, each bulging with folded papers of various colors. These are food-cards-sheets of paper about a foot square, on which are printed many coupons that can be torn or cut off, stamped, or punched, as the case requires.

Let us assume that this lady shops for a good-sized family — say, herself, husband, and four children. Each of these six individuals needs seven food cards; so Milady has to carry forty-two cards with her whenever she goes to market. I may add that she has still other cards at home — clothing cards for each member of the family, and special milk cards if any of her children are young. But, as Kipling would say, that is another story.

Let's take a look at those cards as Milady unfolds them and lays them on the counter. That's what everybody has to do in Germany before one can even start buying anything. The saleswoman has to make sure the customer hasn't exceeded her quota, while the customer has to

find out if what she wants is in stock that day. In big cities like Berlin there are, as I have said, many temporary shortages of foodstuffs. In the smaller towns there is no such trouble.

The cards are now spread out. First the bread card. This covers not only baked bread but also flour of various kinds. No difficulty here; the bread ration is ample. Secondly the sugar card, which includes jams, jellies, etc. Again no trouble. Thanks to a big sugar-beet crop, this is well taken care of. Now the meat card. This is chiefly for the butcher; but Milady happens to want a bit of sausage and smoked ham, so she uses it in the grocery store. The saleswoman informs her that she is getting the last of the ham, because it has been decreed a luxury, so farmers have been ordered not to smoke any more for the delicatessen trade.

Now the fat card. Here we run into a sore spot. Germany is short on fats; so butter, margarine, and lard are very strictly rationed. However, Milady does pretty well here, because she has three young children, who rate much more fats than do adults. Incidentally, they get some chocolate, reserved for child consumption. Next comes the soap card — another sore point which we will investigate when Milady gets home. Now the adult milk card. Grown-ups rate only skimmed milk, which, to my American taste, is an unpleasant substance that I never use. Neither, apparently, do Germans except for cooking or sparingly in their imitation coffee or tea. Last comes a card entitled Naermittel, best translated by our word “*victuals*.” It’s a sort of catch-all, covering a wide variety of rationed items ranging from macaroni and noodles to packaged cereals, Ersatz tea and coffee, and certain kinds of game.

We can now understand what a prolonged huddle Milady goes into with the saleswoman. Each food-card has to be taken up separately, since quotas vary for adults, half-grown children and small children. When a quota is calculated to the last gram, that particular card is punched, stamped, or snipped, and another card is investigated. The varied rations are jotted down on a slip of paper for adding up when the list is completed. As before stated, all this rigamarole has nothing to do with price. It’s just a preliminary canter to find out how much

bread, butter, lard, sugar, or other foodstuffs the buyer is entitled to. Only when that has been ascertained are the actual prices of the goods figured out and written down on another slip.

Let's try to translate those prices into our money. After considerable investigation, I reckon the purchasing power of German currency to Germans at a trifle over four Reichsmarks to the dollar, thus making the Reichsmark roughly equivalent to our quarter. On that basis, staple groceries average only a trifle higher than they do in America. Some items, especially bread, are cheaper. Fats are distinctly higher. Butter, for instance, is over fifty cents a pound. However, German housewives have the satisfaction of knowing that these prices are fixed by law and cannot be raised except by a new official edict.

By this time Milady's purchases have been duly assembled on the counter. Only when strictly necessary are they sparingly wrapped in paper, because paper is scarce. String is even scarcer, so it is seldom used. Instead of paper bags, the goods are placed in containers which look like sections of fish-nets. These mesh bags must be furnished by the customer, who is supposed likewise to carry away the purchases under a general "*cash and carry*" rule. However, should they be too heavy and bulky, the store will usually oblige a regular customer by sending along one of the women clerks, if she can find a moment to spare.

The most notable aspect of Berlin marketing is the time it takes. Often, a bill of goods coming to only a few dollars will keep saleswoman and customer engrossed for a full hour. When our synthetic lady leaves the shop, the business is over so far as she is concerned. Not so with the grocery store. Those coupons from Milady's food-cards go to swell multicolored piles which have to be sorted out, pasted on big sheets of paper, and fully accounted for before they are turned over to the food-control authorities. These jigsaw-puzzle economics are usually done after business hours and sometimes last far into the night.

However, our Berlin lady is too busy with her own affairs to think about the extra work she has made for grocery clerks. Laden with her

fish-net bags, she deposits them at her apartment and hurries off to do more marketing at a nearby butcher's shop. Luck is with her when she notes a good line of meats on display, for meat distribution is uncertain. Luck is with her again when she points to a badge worn in her coat lapel and marches to the counter ahead of a line of waiting customers. That badge shows she is the mother of at least four offspring. She is thus Kinderreich — rich in children. A Kinderreich matron has many privileges, among them the right to immediate attention at any store; the theory being that she should be helped to save time for her family duties in every way. It certainly comes in handy this morning, for Milady is very anxious to get home, where she is already long overdue.

Her meat purchases are soon made — veal cutlet at 45 cents a pound, and some pork chops at 30 cents. Then a quick dash to the vegetable market a couple of blocks away where she doesn't need food-cards. But of the limited oranges and lemons there aren't any for sale today.

At last Milady can go home. She is anxious to see how the washing is progressing and how her younger children are getting on. Both those worries are due to a crowning ill — lack of a servant.

“Ah!” the reader may exclaim, “*here is one familiar feature in wartime Berlin.*” In the larger sense, however, you'd be wrong. While Germany had a shortage of competent servants even before the war, wartime conditions have intensified this shortage into an acute famine. It is no longer a question of money. No matter how good wages one may be willing to pay, servants are often unobtainable at any price.

Here's how it happened. The instant war broke out, the Government “froze” domestic service. No servant could thenceforth leave her employer except for self-evident reasons like non-payment of wages or genuine mistreatment. Neither could the servant demand a raise. That regulation prevented “*servant-stealing*” by wealthier employers and a consequent skyrocketing of wage scales.

This was fine if you happened to have a city-bred servant or one that was middle-aged. However, Berlin servants, particularly the general-

housework variety, are apt to be young women from the country. Of course the Government had them all ticketed. So, when mobilization called the young peasants to the colors, their sisters were summoned back from domestic service to remedy a labor shortage on the farms.

Let us suppose that our Berlin lady's general-housework maid was thus taken away from her a couple of months after war broke out. She went promptly to an official employment agency to see what could be done. The woman in charge smiled at her sadly. "*My dear lady,*" she remarked, "*we already have so many cases like yours ahead of you that I can't give you much hope.*" So there was our good housewife, left single-handed with a sizeable apartment, a hard-working professional or business husband, and four children to care for. Certainly a tough break for a well-to-do woman who has always had competent servants.

However, since our Berlin lady is a German, she has presumably had a thorough domestic training before her marriage, that being the custom even for girls of wealthy families. So she knows how, not merely to superintend her household, but actually to do the work herself. Furthermore, since she has young children, she has first call on whatever domestic service there is to be had. That is another of her Kinderreich privileges. So we may assume that, by the time our story opens, she has been able to get the temporary services of a part-time woman to come in, say, a couple of days a week to do the washing and heavy cleaning.

Furthermore, being Kinderreich, she is almost sure that her servant problem will be solved with the spring. Next April ist, multitudes of young girls will graduate from school. Those girls are thereupon subject to a year's Dienst, which means National Service. On the one hand, they can go into Hilfsdienst, which usually means domestic service in a family with young children. That is where our Berlin lady comes in. She is virtually certain to get one of those girl recruits. For city girls, especially, such tasks may be more congenial than Arbeitsdienst, which means work on the farm.

There are no exemptions from this compulsory service. Rich or poor, all are alike subject. During my stay in Berlin, I dined one night with some aristocratic and wealthy Germans who introduced me to their charming daughter, just returned from getting in the potato crop on a farm a hundred miles from Berlin.

As far as the servant problem is concerned, our Berlin lady's first winter will presumably be the hardest, and if she is a strong, healthy young matron she probably won't be much the worse for it. Still, it isn't easy. She has to be up early and get breakfast for six. The husband is at the office all day, while the older children take their lunches with them and don't get back from school until mid-afternoon. Her younger children are the hardest problem. They can't be left alone, so Milady is tied to her home except on the days when her part-time servant is there. Those are the precious hours she takes for marketing and other necessary shopping. She gives the youngsters an airing when she can, but the little tots do lack outdoor exercise.

Let us now see what Milady does when she gets home from market and takes her purchases to the kitchen. That kitchen will almost certainly have a gas or electric stove and other modern conveniences. But it will probably lack American specialties like an electric icer or a washing-machine. And right there we touch upon another very sore point in wartime Germany's domestic life. That point is soap.

We have already noted how short Germany is in butter, lard, and kindred products. But this shortage goes beyond edible fats. It applies to soap-products as well. Nowhere are Germans more strictly rationed. Each person gets only one cake of toilet soap per month. The precious object is about as large as what we call a guest-cake size, and it has to do the individual not only for face and hands but for the bath as well.

The same strict rationing applies to laundry soap and powder. Furthermore, the fat content of both is so low that, though it takes the dirt out, the clothes are apt to look a bit gray. And bleaches must be used sparingly, since they tend to wear out clothes. That is why most families have their washing done at home instead of sending it out to commercial laundries. Incidentally, when the washing is done, the

sudsy water is not thrown away. It is carefully saved for washing floors or other heavy cleaning.

Let us assume that Milady finds the washing going well and that the little ones haven't got into too much mischief during her absence. It's now about time for her to get lunch. The children's meal brings up the interesting point of juvenile milk. Only children get "*whole*" milk in Germany today. They are issued special milk cards and are rationed according to age. Infants up to three years get one liter per day — a trifle over a quart. Children between three and six years get half a liter, and those between seven and fourteen one-quarter liter — half a pint. Thereafter they are considered adults and can have only skimmed milk. Those juvenile milk quotas seem pretty stiff, but they are the winter ration. I understand that they are substantially increased when the cows are turned out to grass in the spring. I may add that I have tasted children's milk and found it good — fully equal to what we in America know as Grade B.

When luncheon is over, disposal of the scraps introduces us to another notable feature in wartime Germany's domestic economy. Every family is in duty bound not to waste anything. So each German kitchen has a covered pail into which goes all garbage that can be served to pigs. This pail is taken downstairs and dumped into a large container which is collected every day. Meat bones are usually taken by the children to school as a little patriotic chore.

What we in America call "*trash*" must be carefully segregated into the following categories: (1) newspapers, magazines, or other clean paper; (2) rags; (3) bottles; (4) old metal; (5) broken furniture or about anything else that is thrown away. City collectors come around for this segregated trash at regular intervals. There are no private junk dealers. An all-seeing paternal state attends to even this petty salvage. Wartime Germany overlooks no details.

Version History

Version 1: Published Nov 27, 2014

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