Introduction

In the two generations before World War I, Germany emerged as Europe's foremost industrial power. The basic facts of increasing industrial output, lengthening railroad lines, urbanization, and rising exports are well known. Behind those facts, in the historical shadows, stand millions of anonymous men and women: the workers who actually put down the railroad ties, hacked out the coal, sewed the shirt collars, printed the books, or carried the bricks that made Germany a great nation. This book contains translated selections from the autobiographies of nineteen of those now-forgotten millions. The thirteen men and six women who speak from these pages afford an intimate firsthand look at how massive social and economic changes are reflected on a personal level in the everyday lives of workers. Although some of these autobiographies are familiar to specialists in German labor history, they are virtually unknown and inaccessible to the broader audience they deserve. My hope is that these translations will prove at once useful, interesting, and entertain-
ing to a wide range of historians, students, and general readers. The purpose of this introduction, which is aimed primarily at those nonspecialists, is to enrich the reading of these autobiographies by placing them in their historical context and by sketching some of the major themes in the secondary literature.

The first question usually asked of workers’ autobiographies is: Are they representative of the lives of the working class as a whole? In the narrowest sense the answer to this question must

be no. Anyone of any class—but particularly the working class—with the time, talent, and ambition to complete an autobiography is almost by definition exceptional. Out of millions of working-class lives we have only about a hundred autobiographies for this period, all but a handful of them by men. (Given the difficulties of defining who is, or still is, a worker, no precise count is possible.) Moreover, at the time that they wrote, some of these men and women had left behind the world of work—if not the working class—and become writers, trade union or party functionaries, or even state officials. There is, then, a gray area where the working-class autobiography meets the proud story of the self-made bourgeois. Only one of the authors (Otto Krille) in this book falls into the latter category. Four others (Franz Osterroth, Franz Rehbein, Ottilie Baader, and Adelheid Popp) had moved into the world of working-class politics and journalism when they wrote—though they still considered themselves part of the working class. As for the other fourteen, they were either still working, retired, or ill when they wrote.

But representativeness is not a single category of analysis. The appropriate questions are: Representative of what? Of a range of industries? Of working conditions? Of wages? Of living conditions? Of family situations? Of regions? To these more precise questions, we may fairly answer: yes, taken as a group, the selections in this book are representative of the wide range of experiences of the working class. We encounter traditional industries and modern industries; wretched working conditions and toler-

able ones; and wages up and down the scale. There are people from all different parts of Germany (and Austria), living in all kinds of housing—both rural and urban—in a variety of family situations. All the "typical" working-class experiences are present in these selections: unemployment, high job turnover, long hours, low wages, grinding drudgery, child labor, crowded housing, alcoholism, sexual abuse, illegitimacy, home work for women, and so on. And in every case the autobiographies put a dramatic personal edge on the statistical reality.

Representative experiences are fairly easy to establish empirically. Determining representative attitudes is another matter. Our authors are acutely conscious of how typical their work and living conditions are, but they usually set themselves apart intellectually. Moritz Bromme, for example, talks about "we enlightened"—in contrast to the inert masses. There is an element of snobbery here, to be sure. Yet there can be no doubt that those who wrote autobiographies were more educated and informed than the vast majority of their fellow workers. The very fact that all but one of the men (Karl Fischer, the oldest) and three of six of the women were class-conscious Social Democrats suggests an unusual degree of awareness, as well as the ability to see beyond their immediate personal situations. Nonetheless, is there any reason to assume that those who are better able to articulate will therefore articulate idiosyncratic attitudes and emotions? Surely, the coal hewers next to Max Lotz, the women sewing collars next to Ottile Baader, or the threshers choking in dust alongside Franz Rehbein would recognize their own distress in the descriptions of their more articulate neighbors. As individuals, those millions who had similar experiences to our authors are forever mute. If they are to be anything more than anonymous statistical objects, we must allow these few authors to speak for them. In short, there is no more reason to dismiss these autobiographies than there is to dismiss those of the upper classes. All autobiographies are the products of unusual individuals. Lower-class people certainly write less, but the greater uniformity of life imposed by poverty warrants wider generalization from each single work.
Although the genre of workers' autobiographies is rather small, the reader deserves a word of explanation about why these particular selections were chosen. Above all, I have been guided by the desire to provide the greatest possible diversity. Further, I have sought autobiographies that lend themselves to excetration—that is, books with chapters or long passages that can stand on their own. Some authors, who might otherwise merit inclusion, simply eliminate themselves because of the structure of their narratives: these may be either disorganized chronologically or topically, or else too heavily dependent on references to other parts of the text. Interest and liveliness have also been major considerations; given a choice, there is no point in including a dull selection when an exciting one on the same topic is available. When feasible, I have given preference to the more personal narratives and have avoided works whose real center is the party or union. These latter works are significant in their own right, but with their submergence of the individual into the workers' movement, they are only marginally autobiographical. The reasons why someone became politically involved are obviously of great interest; but I prefer to document the development of political consciousness in the more subjective context of individual experience and emotion. In such a context political consciousness reveals its problematic side and appears less an abstract given. Finally, in the case of works by women, there is simply less from which to choose. Were women represented in this book according to their numerical contribution to the genre, there would be only one or two women's selections. I have raised that number to six so that it is more in accord with the proportion of women to men in the work force at any given time. Personal preferences have certainly played their part in the final selections. Nonetheless, I believe that this book provides the reader a good feel for the whole genre of German workers' autobiographies.

I have arranged the translations in chronological order, based roughly on the dates of the central experiences each author is describing. This arrangement (like any other) is somewhat arbitrary, but it does have the advantage of giving the reader a sense of historical development, without obscuring the unevenness
with which historical change is experienced by different individuals.

THE ORIGINS OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Given the obstacles they faced, what prompted these workers to write autobiographies? It is not possible to say in every case, but where we do know something of the origin of these works, we usually detect the influence of either Social Democratic or bourgeois-reformist editors. At least initially, progressive members of the middle class were most instrumental in the development and popularization of the whole genre. Pastor Paul Göhre is the key figure here. As a young theological student in 1890, he had worked “under cover” as a common laborer in a Chemnitz machine factory. His widely acclaimed *Three Months in a Workshop* is one of the finest early descriptions of both factory work procedures and worker attitudes. In a country with little tradition of popular social novels, the book did much to alert the middle class to the psychological, as well as economic, dimensions of the “labor question.” As one conservative reviewer remarked, “we were better acquainted with the condition of life of the half savage African tribes than with those of our own people.” 2 (Only men worked in Göhre’s factory; but his book stimulated Minna Wettstein-Adelt, a middle-class Berlin feminist, to describe her experiences among women workers in several Chemnitz factories.) 3 In 1891, Göhre was elected secretary of Friedrich Naumann’s Evangelical-Social Congress (*Evangelisch-Sozialer Kongress*). 4 The congress counted among its members prominent cler-

gymen and academics (including Max Weber) who were seeking an alternative to Social Democracy. These men believed that the working classes could be integrated into the modern industrial state by means of enlightened social legislation. One of their main concerns, therefore, was to arm themselves with empirical data about the status of the working class. (Naumann himself would later edit a worker's autobiography.) The congress's aims—and to some degree its membership—overlapped with those of the older Social Policy Association (Verein für Sozialpolitik), which sponsored pioneering sociological studies. Weber himself, in his massive study of the status of agricultural laborers in eastern Germany, relied heavily on the testimony of country pastors. For a man like Göhre, who was sympathetic to Social Democracy and stood on the congress's left wing, interest in the lives of workers was a product of the interaction of Christian activism, progressive liberalism, and the newly emerging discipline of sociology.

The boundary between Social Democracy and the cluster of attitudes just described was fluid, and in 1900 Göhre joined the Social Democratic party (SPD). Three years later he was elected to the Reichstag, where his background aroused the suspicion and contempt of the Social Democratic leader, August Bebel. Intellectuals, Bebel warned, were "marauders who attack the party in the rear." Surely Göhre did not mean to be a traitor to Social Democracy when, in 1903, he edited a sizable autobiography by Karl Fischer, a sixty-two-year-old unskilled laborer. Fischer had been moved by Göhre's book to record his own experiences in a variety of industries, including steel and railroads. But Göhre's choice of publisher, the new Eugen Diederichs Verlag, was revealing. Diederichs was making a name for himself

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7 Ibid., 108.
publishing conservative *völkisch* material, and in contracting with Göhre he was certainly not intending to advance the cause of Social Democracy. In fact, Diederichs instructed Göhre to de-emphasize Social Democracy in the introduction, and to stress instead “the need to fulfill our social duties.”¹⁸ The main purpose of the book, in Diederichs’s view, was to promote a true folk community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) by introducing bourgeois readers to an “unknown folk comrade.”¹⁹

Diederichs need not have worried. Fischer was a man of patriarchal, preindustrial outlook. When he learned—to his dismay—that Göhre was a member of the SPD, he feared that his book would be turned into a piece of Social Democratic propaganda.¹⁰ Actually, the whole book was primitively written (“First I did this, then I did that”), and gave the impression that Fischer was simply a passive victim of his milieu. The reviewers liked the book, seeing in it the genuine voice of a little man struggling against adversity.¹¹ Göhre had clearly succeeded in his aim of informing the bourgeoisie without alarming them with calls for social revolution. He rummaged through Fischer’s voluminous manuscript and issued a sequel.¹²

Emboldened by the success of Fischer’s book, Göhre was now on the lookout for more manuscripts. In 1905 he edited the life story of Moritz Bromme, a tubercular woodworker whose articles for Social Democratic newspapers had caught the pastor’s eye. Bromme was an avid Social Democrat, but Göhre called the book simply *The Autobiography of a Modern Factory Worker*. As he admitted frankly in the introduction, the words *Social Democrat* in

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³ Ibid., 110; see also Trommler, *Sozialistische Literatur in Deutschland*, 342.

⁴ Trommler, *Sozialistische Literatur in Deutschland*, 343–44.

⁵ The sequel caused less of a stir. Many probably sympathized with Marie Soslich, who reviewed Fischer’s original volume for the *Preussische Jahrbücher*; Fischer is interesting, she said, but enough is enough! See the review in the *Preussische Jahrbücher* 114 (1903): 336–38.
the title might scare off bourgeois buyers! Similar concerns were on his (and probably Diederichs’s) mind when he followed with two more autobiographies in 1909. Both authors—Franz Rehbein, a north German farm laborer, and Wenzel Holek, a Bohemian brickyard worker—were Social Democrats. But once again Göhre presented their stories as factual reports rather than propaganda. This pretense of objectivity, as well as the high price tags, angered Franz Mehring, the SPD’s chief cultural critic. “A book for the bourgeoisie” was his contemptuous label for Holek’s autobiography.\textsuperscript{13} Mehring’s judgment reflected a deep-rooted suspicion in Marxist circles that “bourgeois” publishers distorted the true voice of the proletariat by depicting workers as victims of their milieu. Victims of a bad environment (like the characters in naturalist literature, also a target of Mehring’s wrath) could only wait passively for the liberating reforms of well-meaning liberals.\textsuperscript{14} Whatever the merits of this argument, Mehring was at least right about the readership of the autobiographies edited by Göhre: it consisted largely of politicians, professors, students, and pastors.\textsuperscript{15}

In the same spirit, \textit{Die Neue Zeit}, the SPD’s official theoretical organ, also attacked Adolf Levenstein, a factory foreman turned amateur sociologist. From 1907 to 1911, Levenstein conducted a huge opinion survey of workers in the textile, metal, and mining industries. In the eyes of the party, he was an outside meddler, exploiting his connections in the working class. \textit{Die Neue Zeit} urged workers not to return Levenstein’s extensive questionnaire.\textsuperscript{16} Despite the opposition, Levenstein published the tabulated results of some 5,000 questionnaires, as well as some lengthy selections gleaned from his correspondence with the more articulate workers. Max Weber, who was perhaps slightly jealous, dismissed the ex-foreman as a rank amateur sociologist;

\textsuperscript{13}Trommler, \textit{Sozialistische Literatur in Deutschland}, 346.
\textsuperscript{14}Bollenbeck, \textit{Zur Theorie und Geschichte der frühen Arbeiterlebenserinnerungen}, 11.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 248.
\textsuperscript{16}Kern, \textit{Empirische Sozialforschung}, 107.
nonetheless, Levenstein’s *The Labor Question* (1912) is a gold mine of information and is justly considered one of the pioneering works of modern sociological research. It was, incidentally, Levenstein who discovered Max Lotz, the extraordinarily gifted coal miner whose story appears in this volume. The Eberhard Frowein Verlag, the publisher of Levenstein’s correspondence with workers, saw as its task not the spread of Social Democracy but rather the discovery of hidden talent among the lower classes. By “finding the path into the human soul” on a “psychological basis,” the press hoped to “contribute to the understanding of our social conditions.” Similar sentiments informed the work of other middle-class editors and publishers. In their eyes the autobiographies were “tales of woe” about “victims of the environment.”

As might be expected given their complaints about Göhre and Levenstein, Social Democrats viewed workers’ autobiographies as part of the literature of agitation. It was not enough to use them as documentary evidence for socially committed scholarship, as did Göhre, Levenstein, and later Eugen Rosenstock, who published the autobiography of Eugen May, an itinerant turner. Rather, Social Democratic editors were frankly seeking educational and inspirational works by dedicated party people whose conversion to Social Democracy had been the central experience in their lives. Never were these workers presented to the reader as mere victims of the environment. One might call this the “If

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18 Trommler, *Sozialistische Literatur in Deutschland*. 348.

only everyone were as aware as Comrade X!” literature. These works were published by either Dietz or Vorwärts (the two major Social Democratic publishing houses) and were aimed largely at proletarian, rather than bourgeois, readers. Short excerpts often appeared in Social Democratic newspapers. As books, however, they rarely reached their intended working-class audience, attracting at most a few middle-class readers. Among the works in this book, those by Ottilie Baader, Aurelia Roth, and Franz Osterroth are the most notable examples of such Social Democratic agitation. Overall it would be fair to say that the autobiographies had a modest influence on the progressive bourgeoisie but virtually no influence on the working class.

THE WORLD OF WORK

For the men and women who speak in these pages, work was the great, overwhelming reality of life. When we say that these people lived during the Industrial Revolution, we may be prone to conjure up images of homogeneous urban masses mindlessly tending machines in huge factories. While there is a tiny kernel of truth to these images, they are for the most part misleading. These autobiographies serve as a useful reminder of how complex and variegated the Industrial Revolution really was. In the lives of actual workers we repeatedly run across the older realities of work—the rural and small-town flavor, the small scale, the personal relations, and the mix of muscle power and craftsmanship. Even a self-styled “modern factory worker,” like Moritz Bromme, had deep roots in the past, and the pattern of his life confounds any simple model of radical change during the Industrial Revolution.20

20 There is a huge literature on German industrialization. For a general overview, see W. O. Henderson, The Rise of German Industrial Power, 1834–1914 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975); Knut Borchardt, “The Industrial Revolution in Germany, 1700–1914,” in The Emergence of Industrial Societies, pt. 1, ed. Carlo M. Cipolla, vol. 4 of The Fontana Economic History of Europe (London
give an accurate picture of the world of work. According to the
census of 1907, some 72.5 percent (17,836,000) of all those
employed in agriculture, industry, and commerce and transpor-
tation were classified as workers (Arbeiter). 21 (The figure does not
include the 1,736,000 servants.) Now this seems like a lot of
workers in a total population of about 62 million in the Second
Reich. But what is really being counted here are wage earners,
over 40 percent of whom (7,283,000) were in agriculture. These
Landarbeiter made up nearly three-quarters of those employed in
the agricultural sector. 22 Given the immense regional diversity,
generalizations about them are dangerous, but our two agricul-
tural autobiographies (those by Franz Reinbein and Orto, the con-
tract laborer) suggest two salient points. First, especially in the
lands east of the Elbe River, landless workers lived in a distinctly
premodern relationship with the landowners. Though nominally
free, such workers were still subject to the old Servants Code
(Gesindeordnung), which contained numerous feudal vestiges: pay-
ments in kind, service obligations, restrictions on mobility, in-
formal employer police powers, and the like. Second, the impact
of farm machinery was only just beginning to be felt at the turn
of the century. The steam thresher had come to the countryside,
but most farm labor was still the human (and animal) muscle
work that was little different from previous centuries. Thus, in
the daily life of the millions still working on the farm, the Indus-
trial Revolution marked no radical departure from the past. 23

Of the remaining 10,553,000 workers counted in the 1907

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21Gerd Hohorst, Jürgen Kocka, and Gerhard A. Ritter, Sozialgeschichtliches
Arbeitsbuch. Materialien zur Statistik des Kaiserreichs 1870–1914 (Munich,
1975), 67, 69.
22Ibid., 67, 70.
23On agriculture, see Frieda Wunderlich, Farm Labor in Germany 1810–
1945: Its Historical Development within the Framework of Agricultural and Social
census, 1,960,000 were in commerce and transportation and the other 8,593,000 in the industrial sector proper (which also included mining, construction, and handicrafts). Although the number of industrial workers had more than doubled since the 1882 census (population had increased in the period by about one third), the impact of modern industry was uneven geographically. For the Reich as a whole in 1907, 42.8 percent of the population was supported by the industrial sector (up from 32.8 percent in 1882). In Saxony, the old industrial heartland, 59.3 percent depended on the industrial sector; whereas in rural East Prussia the figure was only 20.4 percent. Moreover, industry should not automatically be equated with either large firms or large cities. Giant firms predominated only in the mining industry, where by 1907 the majority of miners worked for companies employing more than one thousand people. (It's no accident that the miner Max Lotz is one of the few workers to complain about being "just a number.") Elsewhere, the small and medium-sized firms held their own. In the 1907 census, firms with five or fewer employees still accounted for 31.2 percent of the industrial workforce. A majority (57.6 percent) worked for firms with fewer than fifty employees, and a mere 4.9 percent for firms with more than one thousand employees. City growth was far more spectacular than firm growth, but even as late as 1905 only 19 percent of all Germans (and even of those in the industrial sector, only about one-quarter) lived in cities of over 100,000 in population. Industry remained predominantly a rural and small-city

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25 Ibid., 73.
26 Ibid., 75.
27 Ibid., 52; Barrington Moore, Jr., Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt (White Plains, N.Y., 1978), 180.
phenomenon. And, as the autobiographies reveal, many of those who worked in cities lived on, or maintained contact with, the surrounding countryside, sometimes working part of the year in agriculture. To be sure, one was never far from a railroad line, but well into the twentieth century much of Germany looked, sounded, and smelled as it always had.

Nor should increasing mechanization obscure the continuing importance of brute strength. A great deal of traditional heavy labor was scarcely affected by the Industrial Revolution. As one historian has aptly remarked, “A vast amount of wheeling, dragging, hoisting, carrying, lifting, digging, tunneling, draining, trenching, hedging, embarking, blasting, breaking, scouring, sawing, felling, reaping, mowing, picking, sifting, and threshing was done by sheer muscular effort, day in, day out.” The truth of this observation is brought home to the reader repeatedly in this book. Think only of the rail lines, the symbol of the new age. They were laid out by labor gangs using picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows. And, as Max Lotz so poignantly depicts, coal, the fuel of the industrial age, was mined not by power machinery but by sweating hewers and haulers. To the unskilled in particular, work still meant what it always had—exhausting drudgery.

For skilled workers, the impact of industrialization was more complex and differentiated. Some crafts, like the making of wallpaper, hats, buttons, umbrellas, canes, soap, and light fixtures, were displaced by the new technologies and largely disappeared. Others, like the construction trades, were little affected by new machinery; while still others, like shoe making, shifted from production to repair. Moreover, new, specialized skills, especially in the metal industry, emerged in response to the need to

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produce, maintain, and repair the vast array of industrial machines. Overall, the number of artisans (Handwerker) actually rose (both absolutely and relative to population) during the Industrial Revolution.\textsuperscript{31} Of the 8,593,000 industrial workers in 1907, about 4,900,000 were classified as skilled.\textsuperscript{32} Most of these workers had artisanal skills that had survived the Industrial Revolution either intact or as ancillary processes to machine work.

The survival of some artisanal skills, however, is not the same as the survival of artisanal status. By the end of the nineteenth century, the word Arbeiter was often applied casually to a Handwerker.\textsuperscript{33} It had not always been so. Traditionally, the artisan was a proudly independent member of the petty bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{34} As a young apprentice he could look forward to becoming a journeyman at about age twenty. After two years of traveling around and seeing the world (Wanderjahre), he could settle down with a real chance of eventually becoming a master with his own shop. Snug within the legally protected monopoly of the guild, the artisan did more than work and run a business—he defended a way of life with all its cliquish traditions and provincial rectitude. The modern world, with its stress on innovation, acquisitiveness, and individuality, was a foreign intrusion. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the craft guilds entered a long period of crisis and decline as they were sucked inexorably into the modern market economy. As fewer and fewer journeymen could realistically aspire to becoming independent masters, large segments of the artisan class slipped into wage dependency. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the craft guilds fought a rearguard action against their perceived enemies—new machinery and industrial freedom (Gewerbefreiheit). But by about 1860, Gewer-

\textsuperscript{31}Henning, Die Industrialisierung in Deutschland 1800 bis 1914, 131–32; Nipperdey, Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866, 210–19.
\textsuperscript{33}Bollenbeck, Zur Theorie und Geschichte der frühen Arbeiterlebenserinnerungen, 31.
\textsuperscript{34}Nipperdey, Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866, 210–19.
befreiheit had triumphed in all the German states. Some informal vestiges of the old guild influence (the pride, the cliquishness, the Wanderjahre) persisted into the twentieth century. Nonetheless, most artisans who came through the Industrial Revolution unscahed had been reduced to skilled workers competing in the free market.

Whatever the industry or skill level, hours were typically long, wages meager, and working conditions unpleasant or unhealthy. None of this was new, of course. In fact, all the evidence suggests that workers' lives were gradually improving during the Second Reich. Moritz Bromme is probably right that few workers of his generation (he was born in 1873) would have put up with the endless drudgery that had been routine for the older generation. In the 1870s, the typical workday outside of agriculture was about twelve hours. Although regulation of hours for adult men was excluded from the social legislation of the 1880s, the length of the workday drifted downward—to about 10½ hours in 1900 and to about 9½ hours in 1913. With a six-day workweek, this trend meant a reduction from a 72-hour week to a 57-hour week over a period of forty years. Of course these are averages. Hours for those who worked irregularly or in particular industries (like coal mining) might be shorter; while hours for many workers (especially women—see below) could be much longer.

As the workweek shortened, average wages rose, going from roughly 500 marks yearly in 1871 to roughly 1,100 marks yearly in 1913. What this meant in terms of real wages is a matter of dispute. The best recent estimate is that real wages rose by 79 percent in this period, although older studies peg the increase as

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35 Sixteen of the thirty male autobiographers examined in one study had gone on Wanderungen; see Jochen Loreck, Wie man früher Sozialdemokrat wurde. Das Kommunikationsverhalten in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung und die Konzeption der sozialistischen Parteipublizistik durch August Bebel (Bonn-Bad Godesberg, 1977), 133.

36 Gerhard Bry, Wages in Germany, 1871–1945 (Princeton, 1960), 45.