

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

Susanne Korbel

Living conditions and home labor in Vienna in the early 20th century

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

In 1928, the Vienna publishing house “Arbeit und Wirtschaft” published a social science study on the “living and working conditions of home workers in Vienna” on behalf of the Chamber of Laborers. It was written by the activist, editor, sociologist and social democrat Käthe Leichter (born Käthe Marianne Katharina Pick in 1895, murdered in 1942). The study is based on around 4,000 questionnaires sent out in March 1927, “at the time of the strongest growth in home labour [zur Zeit des stärksten Anwachsens der Heimarbeit]” (p. 7). Of the 4,000 questionnaires, 1,500 were returned filled out, of which 500 were deemed unusable. Leichter interpreted and statistically evaluated the results and presented them in a didactic manner on display boards. This was the largest study of its kind to date [1]. The total volume comprises 145 pages, which are divided according to thematic aspects and the conditions of home labor in various occupational groups (clothing manufacture, chemical industry, paper manufacturing, etc.). In the introduction, Leichter discusses the structure of the study and methodological shortcomings, such as the fact that child labor was downplayed while other abuses were exaggerated. Among many important findings, Leichter concludes that home labor in Vienna was “a problem of women's work [ein Problem der Frauenarbeit]” (p. 5). The excerpt selected and presented in more detail below (four pages) covers the discussion of the living conditions of home workers in the first part of the study (pp. 43 to 46).

Around 1900, Vienna was characterized by enormous population growth. Between 1880 and 1900, the population of the Habsburg capital doubled from 880,000 to 1.6 million. This was accompanied by an enormous housing shortage. One of the most important factors affecting daily life was privacy in living spaces, which was less restricted to family life than we can imagine today: one fifth of the population could not afford to rent an apartment or even a room of their own. This twenty percent of the Viennese population paid for a bed in which they could sleep (or work) for a few hours before the next so-called bed-goer would take it. Thirty-two percent of available flats were occupied by bed-goers.

This “housing misery [Wohnungselend]”, as the housing situation was called in contemporary discourse, was compounded by the phenomenon of home-based labor. Home-based labor meant the production of factory goods by individuals in loose and freelance production groups in private homes/households. This form of production was to shape the first decades of the 20th century and increasingly posed challenges for policymakers.

In particular, apartments that also served as production facilities were affected by cramped living

conditions, above-average population density, and poor hygiene. While other European cities also had relatively dense housing, the scale in Vienna was unique – both in terms of the number of households affected and the average number of people living in a shared space.

This situation created a multitude of opportunities for Jewish-non-Jewish encounters in “private” settings. The lack of small flats, the difficult economic situation and the need for living space brought Jewish and non-Jewish city dwellers into contact with each other in supposedly private spaces. Contacts outside the family did not only take place in public, but above all in apartments: Jews lived together with non-Jews in apartments, they produced factory goods in private groups, they rented beds and met each other in kitchens, bedrooms and other areas of residential buildings.

The scientific and social democratic pioneer Käthe Leichter

The activist, editor, social democrat and sociologist Käthe Leichter (1895–1942) dedicated herself to improving these harsh living conditions. As a social democrat with a scientific education and background in social sciences, she took up the study of the working and living conditions of the lower classes, especially women. Through her research and her involvement in setting up a new department for women's work at the Vienna Chamber of Labor, she sought to improve the professional and private lives of women as workers and mothers.

Käthe Leichter was born Katharina Pick on August 20, 1895 into a Jewish family in Vienna. From her autobiography, which Leichter wrote in 1938 while imprisoned in Gestapo cell E125 in Vienna and which was published posthumously, we learn about her childhood, her convictions and her political awakening. She was a scientist (she obtained her enrollment at the University of Vienna through the courts; she obtained her doctorate in Heidelberg because women were not allowed to do so in Vienna), a pioneer in women's and social policy, and was the first woman to be elected to the works council of the Chamber of Labor. From 1919, she conducted research as an assistant to Otto Bauer in the State Commission for Socialization and as a consultant in the Ministry of Finance. The February Uprising of 1934 in Austria forced her into political exile and she became a member of the Revolutionary Socialists. For a long time, Leichter's Jewish identity did not play a role in her life. Her family was secular and only observed religious rituals on the most important holidays. Leichter spoke out early on for the rights of domestic workers and rebelled against parental authority.

The National Socialists first imprisoned her in the Gestapo headquarters in Vienna, then in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, and finally murdered her in 1942 as part of the National Socialist euthanasia program in the Bernburg/Saale psychiatric institution.

“The living conditions of home workers [Die Wohnverhältnisse der Heimarbeiter[:innen]]”

In March März 1927, Käthe Leichter began her study on the living conditions of home workers. In a novel move, she sent out 4,000 questionnaires and received a considerable number of 1,000 responses that could be used for scientific purposes, enabling Leichter to present the largest study of its kind to date (pp. 1–3). She worked intensively with the extensive quantitative and qualitative data and was thus able to gain important insights into the professional situation of working women (outside industrial work).

One of the key conclusions that Leichter drew in her study was that home-based labor contributed significantly to the deterioration of living conditions, as the homes also served as production spaces. A considerable number of people carried out production work at home in extremely cramped conditions. Workers who could not find other employment made shoes, clothing and commercial goods such as decorative blankets and boxes in their homes, working in groups to sell their products to traders.

Perhaps their most important finding was that “home labour is women's work [Heimarbeit ist Frauenarbeit]”, as ninety-four percent of home workers were women (p. 5).

Living conditions

Leichter was also keen to emphasize that her findings showed how urgent political action was needed to improve the housing conditions of the population. In her study, she found that “[...] the normal dwelling of home workers is the Viennese proletarian dwelling, which consists of a room and a kitchen [i.e. two small rooms][dass die normale Wohnung der Heimarbeiter[:innen] die Wiener Proletarierwohnung ist, die aus Zimmer und Küche [also zwei kleinen Räumen] besteht]” (p. 43). Leichter explicitly emphasized the problem of living and working spaces overlapping. In the classic one-bedroom apartment, the room next to the kitchen had to be “everything: bedroom, living room and workroom [freilich alles: Schlaf-, Wohn- und Arbeitsraum sein.]” (p. 43). Three-room apartments were rare, mostly only found in the laundry and clothing manufacturing industries.

“This makes the cases of extreme housing deprivation all the more frequent. Families of home workers who live in only one room, with only a kitchen, whose refuge is a cellar or the poorhouse, female home workers who pursue their profession as lodgers or bed-and-boarders. [Um so häufiger sind die Fälle krassesten Wohnungselends. Heimarbeiterfamilien, die nur einen Raum, nur eine Küche bewohnen, deren Zuflucht ein Keller oder das Armenhaus ist, Heimarbeiterinnen [,] die ihrem Beruf als Untermieterinnen oder Bettgeherinnen nachgehen]” (p. 44) It seems particularly tragic that many of those who worked as lodgers were trying to earn a living as home workers. They had to rent not only a place to sleep, but also a bed as a production space: “The number of female home workers who are subtenants is particularly high in the embroidery industry. Lodgers, who sit on their rented beds during the day doing their home labor, are often found among seamstresses, knitters and felt shoe stitchers.” (p. 44)

Käthe Leichter's goal of giving home workers a voice and overcoming their social inequality was achieved not only by drawing attention to the enormous housing misery, but also by trying to show the general public the living conditions in these rooms.

“The housing conditions in the individual branches of home labor are further exacerbated by the circumstances of production. In the clothing and linen manufacture and knitwear production, the noise of the sewing or knitting machines, dust and wool fibers, in felt shoe production, felt dust, in paper manufacture and chemical industry, the smell of rubber and adhesives, in leather goods manufacturing, the smell of hides and leather fill the air. In all cases, there is material that takes up a lot of space [...] [Die Wohnungsverhältnisse werden in den einzelnen Zweigen der Heimarbeit noch verschärft durch die Begleitumstände der Erzeugung. In der Kleider- und Wäschekonfektion und der Strickwarenerzeugung erfüllen der Lärm der Näh- und Strickmaschine, Staub- und Wollfasern, in der Filzschuherzeugung

Filzstaub, in der Papierkonfektion und chemischen Industrie der Geruch von Gummi und Klebstoffen, in der Lederwarenerzeugung der von Häuten und Leder die Luft. Bei allen liegt Material, das viel Raum verbraucht, umher [...]” (p. 46)

Home labor is women's labor

According to Leichter, the fact that the vast majority of home workers were women was not least due to the fact that women hoped that this career choice would enable them to cope with the double burden. Hoping that they would not have to leave the family home and would thus be able to look after their children, many women ended up in these exploitative working conditions.

“In these dwellings, women have the hopeless task of keeping the household in order, alongside their professional work – usually more difficult than if they were to work outside the home – to provide the children with a place to play or study, and ensure they get a good night's sleep. This is precisely what many women hope to gain from working at home: to combine household and motherly duties with their professional work, which is being made impossible through the narrowness of the flats as well as the combination of work, sleeping and living spaces for adults and children. [In diesen Wohnungen haben Frauen die hoffnungslose Aufgabe, neben ihrer Berufsarbeit den Haushalt in Ordnung zu halten – in der Regel noch schwerer, als wenn sie ihrer Arbeit außer Haus nachgehen würden –, den Kindern einen Winkel zum Spielen oder zum Lernen, ihre Nachtruhe zu sichern. Gerade was sich viele Frauen von der Heimarbeit erhoffen: Haushalt- und Mutterpflichten mit der Berufsarbeit leichter vereinigen zu können, wird durch die Enge der Wohnungen, die Vereinigung von Arbeits-, Schlaf- und Wohnräumen für Erwachsene wie für Kinder unmöglich gemacht.]” (p. 46)

She substantiates these conclusions more easily with meticulously collected and statistically evaluated results that have been prepared for educational purposes. In the selected excerpt, she provides an overview of living conditions within individual occupational groups: How many people lived in apartments of what size, and what was their productive capacity? What were the differences between unskilled workers and the so-called “pieceworkers” who handled the transfer of goods to buyers?

Leichter's conclusions

In her study to the late 1920s, Leichter critically notes that it seems astonishing that the situation was even better in 1901 and that living conditions were less cramped. She therefore concludes that “only by considering the living conditions can we gain a complete picture of the social conditions under which home workers live and work [[e]rst die Betrachtung der Wohnverhältnisse vervollständigt das Bild der sozialen Verhältnisse, unter denen die Heimarbeiterinnen leben und arbeiten]” (p. 46). However, in her examination of the living conditions of workers, Leichter also recognized that home-based labor enabled many encounters outside the family in supposedly private living spaces. Although religious affiliation was not the focus of her study, she showed that interethnic contacts, including between Jewish and non-Jewish home workers in Vienna, were part of everyday life.

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Notes

[1] A current research project is investigating the circumstances, consequences and nature of such encounters between Jews and non-Jews in “private” spaces in Budapest and Vienna, the two cities where the Habsburg monarchy had its residence. FWF ESP 120: Entanglements of Jews and non-Jews in Private Spaces, Budapest and Vienna 1880-1930.

About the Author

Susanne Korbel is a researcher at the Center for Jewish Studies at the Karl-Franzens-University Graz and heads the FWF project “Entanglements of Jews and non-Jews in private spaces in Budapest and Vienna, 1900-1930” (FWF ESP120). Her research focuses on Jewish-non-Jewish relations, gender history, popular culture and migration history.

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