

# THE SOCIAL SITUATION OF GLASSMAKERS IN THE WEST BOHEMIAN GLASSWORKS IN THE 18th AND 19th CENTURIES

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Thus far not enough research has been done on the social conditions under which glassmakers worked in the West Bohemian glassworks during the 18th and 19th centuries, but it is nevertheless clear that — with only a few exceptions — they had more than ample grounds for complaint. Wages were too low (and, what is more, were paid out in „inferior“ money), excessively high prices were calculated for payments in kind, journeymen and apprentices were exploited and mistreated, and so on.

The journeyman glassmaker Johann Thomas Lenk addressed a complaint along these lines to Empress Maria Theresa in 1766. The result was the publication on 5 October 1767 of a set of regulations on glassmaking aimed at putting the situation on a more orderly basis. Continuing complaints, however, show that the stipulations of these regulations were not obeyed, nor were they even put up on display in the glassworks, as required. Again and again there were conflicts between glassmakers and glasswork masters over the latter's refusal to adhere to the wage regulations or to pay out wages in full.

Health conditions in the glassworks were extremely bad; safety precautions during the arsenic crushing process, for example, were wholly inadequate. The blazing ovens were a constant hazard for the eyesight, and by the age of forty, many glassmakers were suffering from gray cataracts. Respiratory ailments at the same age were also common.

Despite the threats of the Bohemian *gubernium* to apply penal sanctions if the glassmaking regulations were not enforced, the situation at the beginning of the 19th century was by no means better. Some extremely interesting proposals — all too revolutionary for the time, to be sure — were advanced by the Kaltenbach glassworks owner Johann Mayer for improving the social conditions under which the glassmakers worked but were not realized.

Lack of work opportunities, mistreatment by the employers and inadequate wages prompted many glassmakers to emigrate. Bans on emigration (the oldest known one dating back to 1723) were designed to put a stop to this, but they were not observed, for the officials were not in a position to go to the root of the evil and improve the unsatisfactory social conditions.