

# FRIEDRICH KRONER

## Overwrought Nerves

There is not much to add. It pounds daily on the nerves: the insanity of numbers, the uncertain future, today, and tomorrow become doubtful once more overnight. An epidemic of fear naked need: lines of shoppers, long since an unaccustomed sight, once more form in front of shops, first in front of one, then in front of all. No disease is as contagious as this one. The lines have something suggestive about them: the women's glances, their hastily donned kitchen dresses, their careworn, patient faces. The lines always send the same signal: the city, the big stone city will be shopped empty again. Rice. 50,000 marks a pound yesterday, costs 160,000 marks today, and tomorrow perhaps twice as much: the day after, the man behind the counter will shrug his shoulders. "No more rice." Well then, noodles! "No more noodles." Barley, groats, beans, lentils—always the same, buy, buy, buy. The piece of paper, the spanking brand-new bank note, still moist from the printers, paid out today as a weekly wage, shrinks in value on the way to the grocer's shop. The zeros, *the multiplying zeros*! "Well, zero, zero ain't nothing."

They rise with the dollar, hate, desperation, and need—daily emotions like daily rates of exchange. The rising dollar brings mockery and laughter: "Cheaper butter! Instead of 1,600,000 marks, just 1,000,000 marks." This is no joke: this is reality written seriously with a pencil, hung in the shop window, and seriously read.

It rises with the dollar, the haste to turn that piece of paper into something one can swallow, something filling. The weekend markets overflow with people. City police regulate traffic. The lines consume the produce stands. "I'll have two dozen turnips." "There's only one dozen." Once packed away and the money counted into the hand like at the train ticket window, the next pushes forward from behind: "Two dozen turnips." "There's only one...Next!"

Somewhere patience explodes. Resignation breaks. Not at the turnip man, who is a big fellow. One also swallows the butcher's biting remark that all cows have to have bones. One pays and staggers off. But then the girl in the dairy store, the one whose face is always pinched, whose way of speaking becomes ever more finicky the fuller her store—this nervous milk maid—she issues regulations: how one is to behave as a customer, that shoving is rude, that everyone should not shout at once. Otherwise she can not concentrate on the scale. "Come on, when am I finally going to get my butter?" screams a woman. "Your butter? It is not your butter by a long shot. By the time you get to the front of the line, your butter will be all gone." And then comes the umbrella handle, a response crashing through the glass cover on the cream cheese. And the cop standing watch outside pulls a sobbing woman from the store. And there is an uproar. And charges are filed.

### Questions (Kroner)

1. What is the significance of the "umbrella handle" incident?

# HEINRICH HAUSER

## The Unemployed

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.

It is the same scene for the entire two hundred miles, and the same scene repeats itself between Hamburg and Bremen, between Bremen and Kassel, between Kassel and Würzburg, between Würzburg and Munich. All the highways in Germany over which I traveled this year presented the same aspect.

The only people who shouted and waved at me and ran along beside my automobile hoping for a ride during their journey were the newcomers, the youngsters. They were recognizable at once. They still had shoes on their feet and carried knapsacks, like the Wandervögel. [ . . . ]

But most of the hikers paid no attention to me. They walked separately or in small groups with their eyes on the ground. And they had the queer, stumbling gait of barefoot people, for their shoes were slung over their shoulders. Some of them were guild members—carpenters with embroidered 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 to whom one could assign no special profession or craft—unskilled young people for the most part who had been unable to find a place for themselves in a 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 period of starvation in 1917 and 1918, but even then people paid for the potatoes. [ . . . ]

I entered the huge Berlin municipal lodging house in a northern quarter of the city. [ . . . ] Dreary barracks extended to the edge of the sidewalk and under their dripping roofs long lines of men were leaning against the wooden walls, waiting in silence and staring at a brick structure across the street.

This wall was the side of the lodging house and it seemed to blot out the entire sky. [ . . . ] 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 bound 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. [ . . . ] 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. [ . . . ]

What does the man in the white smock want to know? All these fellows in white smocks belong to a very special type of official. The way they let the line flow by while they work so smoothly together is facile, lazy, almost elegant. The way they say "Mr." to the down-and-outers from the street is full of ironic politeness. [ . . . ] The whole impersonal manner of the officials makes them as incomprehensible as a cash register. [ . . . ]

Then come the questions. When and where were you born, and where have you come from? Name of your parents? Ever been in a municipal lodging house before? Where have you spent the last three nights? Where did you work last? Have you begged? The first impression that these questions and answers make on me is that it is just like the army. [ . . . ]

My second impression is the helplessness of the men on my side of the bar and the shocking ruthlessness with which the men on the other side of the bar insult this helplessness. Eight out of every ten men on my side of the bar are young fellows and about a third of these are mere boys. [ . . . ]

The official presses a white card into my hand and tells me to go to the desk of another clerk with the sign, "adjuster," over it. While waiting in line I look at my white card. It is divided into squares and has my name at the top and all kinds of mysterious symbols underneath. [ . . . ] I do not remember what the "adjuster" said to me—there was some inconsistency in my papers. I believe. [ . . . ] [Hauser was sent on to a police examiner, but eventually was cleared.]

When I come out I am holding a check that has been given me for a night's sleep and food in the lodging house. [ . . . ] The bare walls of the room that we have entered are lined with iron bedsteads. There are no windows but a sloping roof with skylights that reminds me of a factory. We sit down on the bedsteads along the middle of the room, closely packed together. A voice near me whispers, "What was the matter with you, buddy?"

"My papers."

“Say, you had luck to get out again. They kept the fellow that went in with you. He spent his dole of eighteen marks [about \$4.30] in two days. Oh, boy, think of it! Eighteen marks! . . .”

I look at the clock again. Our reception ceremony lasted an hour and a half, and we now sit here another half hour, which makes two hours. They do not make it easy for you to get supper and a bed in a municipal lodging house.

#### Questions (Hauser)

1. What is the significance of the inaction of the police while potatoes are being stolen?
2. What do we learn about the bureaucracy here?