Why Did Bread Suddenly Become So Expensive?

Rising prices and hunger in the Ore Mountains, 1770–1772 – historical background for kindergarten and school.

Why this background knowledge?

Volume 02 is set in a period when repeated poor harvests, scarce grain and sharply rising prices brought severe hardship to many families in the Ore Mountains. To understand Carl's world, it helps to know not only that people went hungry, but how bad weather could develop into a food-supply crisis.

From bad weather to hunger

The central chain of effects can be explained simply:

Bad weather → poor harvest → less grain → higher prices → bread becomes difficult for poor families to afford → hunger, disease and migration.

A poor harvest did not automatically mean famine. Stores, family income, grain prices and the possibility of bringing food in from other regions also mattered.

Why was the Ore Mountains region vulnerable?

In the Ore Mountains, arable land was limited by altitude, forests, valleys and soils. Many families therefore combined several kinds of work rather than living from farming alone. Grain was also brought in from outside the region. When harvests failed over a wide area or trade was disrupted, this dependence became especially important.

What does "rising prices" mean here?

In this context, everyday necessities – especially grain and bread – became much more expensive. It is not useful to convert historical prices directly into modern euros. The more important question is how much of a family's income had to be spent on food.

Scheffel, taler, groschen and pfennig

- A Scheffel was a historical dry measure used for grain. Its exact size could vary by region.
- Taler, groschen and pfennig were historical monetary and accounting units.
- For children, the key idea is simple: when grain prices rise sharply, bread becomes increasingly difficult for low-income families to afford.

How sharply did prices rise?

Pietzonka reports major price increases during the crisis. In July 1771, one Scheffel of rye cost 10 talers; in January 1772 it was already 12 talers. For June 1772 he gives 13 talers 15 groschen. Bread prices also rose considerably.

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When grain could no longer simply enter Saxony

For January 1772, Pietzonka reports that Bohemia blocked grain exports to Saxony. This shows that food supply depended on more than local fields. Trade and political decisions could make the situation worse.

What did people eat in extreme hardship?

For 1772, field greens, stalks, grass, tree bark and roots are described as emergency foods. Such reports show how severe the crisis became for some people. For younger children, it is enough to explain that some families sometimes had hardly any ordinary food left.

People did not all live in the same conditions

Even during the crisis, people were affected differently. Property, occupation, stores, income, family circumstances and place of residence all mattered. Households with little money and few reserves were particularly vulnerable. Historical hardship should therefore neither be generalised nor romanticised.

What does this have to do with Carl?

Carl was a child during these years, so the crisis formed part of his real world. It helps explain the insecurity, poverty and social differences that shaped his childhood. Specific conversations, thoughts and individual scenes in the children's book are artistically constructed.

For kindergarten and school

- Kindergarten: talk about bread, weather, having enough, sharing and helping.
- School: also explore cause and effect, prices and income, trade and source evidence.
- At both ages: explain difficult history factually without overwhelming children with graphic detail.

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