

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Bd. 35

2013

Nr. 2

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*PETITIONS TO THE COUNCIL OF THE FREE
IMPERIAL CITY OF FRANKFURT AM MAIN,
1765–1809*

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It is not only since the founding of the European Central Bank in 1998 that Frankfurt am Main has been Germany's most important financial centre. As the home of a trade fair, it has a documented tradition going back to the eleventh century. Its favourable location at the heart of the continent allowed the city to assume an important position in European trade from an early date, one which was sealed by its political significance as the place where German kings and emperors were elected and later crowned, and where the stock exchange was founded in 1585. Around the mid eighteenth century the business of lending money flourished, especially to Austria and Prussia, but also to other German and European states. The status of imperial immediacy (*Reichsunmittelbarkeit*), royal elections, and its trade fairs were ultimately what gave the city its particular status. And although Frankfurt was 'among the happiest cities in Europe' until the end of the Holy Roman Empire,¹ its Institut für Stadtgeschichte holds a wealth of sources providing insights into the lives of those who did not benefit from the city's prosperity, indeed, could not even support themselves. Anyone who was poor and too old or sick to work, or widowed with family members to look after, or incapable of supporting themselves for any other reason, was dependent on the help of friends and relatives.² Where there was no social network, the

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL).

¹ Rainer Koch, 'Vorwort', in Andreas Hansert (ed.), *Aus Aufrichtiger Lieb Vor Franckfurt: Patriziat im alten Frankfurt* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 10–11, at 10.

² Robert Brandt, 'Frankfurt sei doch eine "Freye=Reichs=Statt, dahin jedermann zu arbeithen frey stünde": Das Innungshandwerk in Frankfurt am Main im 18. Jahrhundert—zwischen Nahrungssemantik und handwerklicher Marktwirtschaft', in id. and Thomas Buchner (eds.), *Nahrung, Markt oder Gemeinnutz: Werner Sombart und das vorindustrielle Handwerk* (Bielefeld, 2004), 155–99; and Ulrich Niggemann, 'Craft Guilds and Immigration: Huguenots in German and English Cities', in Bert de Munck and Anne Winter (eds.),

last resort in many cases was to turn to the authorities. In order to receive poor relief, application had to be made to Frankfurt council.

These petitions for support, in which the poor described their situation and explained why they were asking for help from the city's charities, are the sources on which my Ph.D. thesis is based. It is being undertaken within the framework of the project 'Pauper Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770–1914', which is supported by the German Research Foundation and the British Arts and Humanities Research Council. These petitions are for outdoor relief; those who received this sort of assistance as a rule continued to live at home and were given money. Recipients of indoor relief, by contrast, were required to enter an institution, such as the poorhouse. For the period under consideration, we have around 1,300 petitions. Entitled 'Applications for Support from the Town Council of the Imperial City of Frankfurt am Main, 1765–1809', my thesis asks how those who found themselves in acute poverty as the result of their individual circumstances coped with their daily lives and explained their ideas, perceptions, and conduct to justify their request for support from the authorities. These petitions provide the closest possible approach to ordinary people 'from below', that is, not via the authorities. For those who depended on physical labour for their livelihood, the transition from making a modest living to finding themselves in a situation of acute distress was, in many cases, fluid.³ The Frankfurt petitions, therefore, are not representative testimonials of a closed group of urban poor. Rather, they allow us to hear the voices of some of those who, with no one to turn to but themselves and in urgent need, applied for outdoor relief from the city's authorities. The few documents produced by the lower classes that have survived from this time cannot be regarded as reflecting the poor in general. Rather, they add a few tiles to the mosaic pieced together by social history and the history of mentalities.

Social history research on Frankfurt am Main has so far essentially approached the subject 'from above' (that is, by looking at government files, political writings, reports, pamphlets, legislation, regula-

Gated Communities? Regulating Migration in Early Modern Cities (Aldershot, 2012), 45–61.

³ Thomas Sokoll, 'Selbstverständliche Armut: Armenbriefe in England 1750–1834', in Winfried Schulze (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente: Annäherungen an den Menschen in der Geschichte* (Berlin, 1996), 227–71, at 228.

Solidarity and Care

tions, statutes, court records, etc.). In the context of this previous research, my thesis investigates to what extent its findings have been confirmed, and asks whether new insights can be gained into the life worlds of the lower classes. By concentrating on the institutional circumstances, my work will allow the specificities of the various social groupings to emerge. Further, the thesis asks whether the various political turning points which Frankfurt experienced during the period under investigation, for example, repeated occupation by French troops, are reflected in the sources, and to what extent they can be evaluated as poverty factors. This article will begin by briefly explaining Frankfurt's system of poor relief, and then provide a brief overview of the practice of petitioning. The case studies that follow are drawn from two groups that are especially strongly represented in the sources, namely, widows and craftsmen. Three representative cases will be presented to show the wealth of information that can be gleaned from the petitions, and to demonstrate the strategies which the petitioners used to achieve their ends.

Poor Relief in Frankfurt

In the Middle Ages, poor relief was primarily the concern of the church. In the late fourteenth and especially the fifteenth century, responsibility for the regulation of poor relief passed more strongly to municipalities right across Europe.⁴ After the Reformation, Frankfurt's system of social care underwent profound changes which the city's patrician upper classes were involved in shaping. In 1531, poor relief was put under the control of the General Alms Box (*Allgemeiner Almosenkasten*), which was administered by the council.⁵ Later, cultural work was added to the General Alms Box's social

⁴ For the state of research on this topic see esp. Sebastian Schmidt and Alexander Wagner, ' "Gebt den Hußarmen umb Gottes willen . . .": Religiös motivierte Armenfürsorge und Exklusionspolitik gegenüber starken und fremden Bettlern', in Andreas Gestrich and Lutz Raphael (eds.), *Inklusion/Exklusion: Studien zu Fremdheit und Armut von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 479–509, at 481–6.

⁵ Harry Gerber, Otto Ruppensperg, and Louis Vogel, *Der Allgemeine Almosenkasten zu Frankfurt am Main 1531–1931* (Frankfurt am Main, 1931), 10.

functions.⁶ Its re-establishment was mainly intended to curb begging. The General Alms Box was essentially an umbrella organization administering funds from foundations and money from industry and commerce.

Previously, alms had been distributed mainly by the Nicolai Church, but the seat of poor relief administration now shifted to the Franciscan Monastery. When responsibility for poor relief passed to the municipality, attitudes towards poor relief as a duty also changed. In the Catholic tradition, doing good deeds for the poor was seen as rendering a service unto God, and having the right intention was the main criterion on which it was judged. Now drawing a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor and the need to check this distinction was the basis on which the usefulness of alms-giving was defined.⁷ During the Middle Ages, Scholastic doctrines and the duty to alleviate acute and visible want had shaped the face of charitable giving. Now the focus changed from religiously motivated alms-giving to receiving alms, and to the recipient.⁸ From now on, the poor had to prove that they were worthy of support by providing a reference, generally from a doctor, pastor, or teacher, attesting to their regrettable situations and upright lifestyles. Thus the poor repeatedly and actively renegotiated their membership of the community and their positions within its social hierarchy, while at the same time participating in shaping its moral code of values and ethics.⁹

⁶ Wolfgang Klötzer, 'Frankfurt am Main von der Französischen Revolution bis zur preußischen Okkupation 1789–1866' in Frankfurter Historische Kommission (ed.), *Frankfurt am Main: Die Geschichte der Stadt in neun Beiträgen* (Sigmaringen, 1991), 303–48, at 316.

⁷ See Schmidt and Wagner, 'Gebt den Hußarmen umb Gottes willen . . .', 483–5; Andreas Gestrich, 'Trajectories of German Settlement Regulations: The Prussian Rhine Province, 1815–1914', in Steven A. King and Anne Winter (eds.), *Migration, Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500–2000: Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford, 2013), 250–68, at 251–2; Andreas Hansert, 'Patriziat im alten Frankfurt', in id. (ed.), *Aus Aufrichtiger Lieb Vor Franckfurt*, 13–32, at 22–3.

⁸ Robert Jütte, *Obrigkeitliche Armenfürsorge in deutschen Reichsstädten der Frühen Neuzeit: Städtisches Armenwesen in Frankfurt am Main und Köln* (Cologne, 1984), 23.

⁹ Larry Frohman, *Poor Relief and Welfare in Germany from the Reformation to World War I* (New York, 2008), 4.

Solidarity and Care

Most of Frankfurt's petitioners were craftsmen and their dependents. Frankfurt city council, dominated by patricians, had been involved in a centuries-old dispute with the craft guilds, whose members did not hesitate to appeal to the emperor in the case of a quarrel. Craftsmen had participated in the city government since the second half of the twelfth century; in the fourteenth century their influence was strengthened with the codification of guild statutes.¹⁰ This situation, however, gave rise to tensions. In order to increase the city's wealth, the patrician majority on the council protected wholesale trade. While asserting their interests, members of the council exploited urban benefices and financial mismanagement occurred. Furthermore, resentment of the Jews grew as, condoned by the council, they circumvented the laws that regulated the life and trade of the Jewish community. Various instances of unrest and disturbances culminated in the Fettmilch revolt, named after its leader, Vincenz Fettmilch. Revolutionary clashes between the guilds and civic associations on the one side, and the council on the other, lasted from 1612 to 1616, mostly concerning the disclosure of old privileges, the regulation of the corn market, and the restriction of Jewish participation in trade and the economy. After the suppression of the organized resistance, an imperial decree of 8 March 1616 prohibited guilds and societies (with the exception of the academic *Frei-Gesellschaft* and the aristocratic *Geschlechter der Frauensteiner und Alten Limpurger*) 'on pain of physical punishment and loss of honour and worldly goods'.¹¹ Koch sees the subsequent appropriation or transfer of all the capital previously controlled independently by the guilds, the handing out of all contracts, documents, records, and articles of association, and the fine of 25,000 Gulden plus half the cost of setting up a commission for the purpose, to be paid within just six weeks, as the 'political death of the city's citizens active in trade, commerce, and

¹⁰ Rainer Koch, *Grundlagen bürgerlicher Herrschaft: Verfassungs- und sozialgeschichtliche Studien zur bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in Frankfurt am Main (1612–1866)* (Wiesbaden, 1983), 9.

¹¹ 'Decretum Commissionis de dato Höchst d. 8. Mart 27. Feb. Anno 1616 die Abschaffung der Zünfte und das Verhalten der Handwerker betreffend', in Christoph Sigismund Müller (ed.), *Vollständige Sammlung der kaiserlichen in Sachen Frankfurt contra Frankfurt ergangenen Resolutionen . . . 1. Abteilung*. Quoted from Koch, *Grundlagen bürgerlicher Herrschaft*, 11.

the crafts'.¹² The abolition of the guilds and the loss of guild law deprived craftsmen of the chance of self-government. From now on, they were completely subject to the council's laws.

Master craftsmen and the committee of citizens who were not guild members thus lost their function as representatives of the citizenry, as well as their social and political power. Unlike in other cities, where the craft guilds played a large part in taking care of their impoverished members, the Frankfurt craftsmen were therefore dependent on the urban institutions controlled by the council. Craftsmen in distress and their widows found themselves in an awkward situation, both dependent on the goodwill of the council, and traditionally in conflict with it. Moreover, the sweeping changes in the system of poor relief did nothing to prevent corruption and mismanagement. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the council and its administration were inspected on the orders of the emperor. It transpired that the poor and sick had been deprived of their food, clothes, and belongings. Although the citizens' influence on the council's financial administration (*Kastenamt*) increased as a result of the inspection, the welfare system was not reformed until almost a century later.¹³

Petitions and Petitioners

The archive of the Institut für Stadgeschichte in Frankfurt am Main (ISG Frankfurt a. M.), despite heavy losses during the war, has rich holdings of applications and petitions to the city council. Unlike private correspondence, whose preservation and transmission is, in many cases, problematic,¹⁴ submissions addressed to the council, primarily applications for citizenship or the right of residence, marriage announcements, and petitions for support or financial assistance, are

¹² Koch, *Grundlagen bürgerlicher Herrschaft*, 11.

¹³ Friedrich Bothe, *Geschichte der Stadt Frankfurt am Main in Wort und Bild* (Frankfurt, 1913), 205.

¹⁴ On this see e.g. Benigna von Krusenstjern, 'Schreibende Frauen in der Stadt in der Frühen Neuzeit', in Daniela Hacke (ed.), *Frauen in der Stadt: Selbstzeugnisse 16.-18. Jahrhunderts* (Ostfildern 2004), 41-58. Although this essay deals mainly with women, it also discusses the general condition of private records preserved from the early modern period.

Solidarity and Care

tidily filed by date in thick folders.¹⁵ While members of the middle and upper classes are visible in their correspondences, diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies, the lower classes rarely left documents behind. These mostly took the form of civil and court records, minutes of interrogations, complaints, and petitions. The right to lodge petitions has a long tradition. Derived from the Latin verb *supplicare* (request, plead), the German word *supplizieren* began to shift in meaning from the thirteenth century, when what were initially subjective letters began to give way to documents drawn up according to strict rules. From the Middle Ages it was thus usual to submit supplications or petitions in the standardized form of a *stilus curie*. If this custom was not observed, long waiting times could result, or the petition might even be rejected.¹⁶ External form was therefore crucial to the success of a petition, just as communications with the authorities in general were highly ritualized in the eighteenth century.¹⁷ Among the Frankfurt petitions are very few that were drawn up by petitioners themselves, and these are distinguished with a special mark. In the extremely rare cases in which petitioners actually presented the documents in their own handwriting, the authors were, as a rule, scribes who had fallen on hard times. These documents similarly follow the rules. Examples from other areas often do not allow us to say whether they were written by the petitioners themselves, and their form may vary. English poor letters of this period, for example, were not generally written by scribes, thus testifying to a certain degree of literacy.¹⁸

Whether ego-documents and personal testimonies are a reliable source for researching the history of everyday life is a recurring topic

¹⁵ ISG Frankfurt a. M., Ratssupplikationen, period covered: c.1600–1809.

¹⁶ Alexandra Kathrin Stanislav-Kemenah, 'Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit: Supplikationen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts zur Aufnahme in das Dresdner Jakobshospital – eine linguistische Analyse', in Philipp Osten (ed.), *Patientendokumente: Krankheit in Selbstzeugnissen* (Stuttgart, 2010), 80–97, at 82.

¹⁷ Claudia Ulbrich, 'Zeuginnen und Bittstellerinnen: Überlegungen zur Bedeutung von Ego-Dokumenten für die Erforschung weiblicher Selbstwahrnehmung in der ländlichen Gesellschaft des 18. Jahrhunderts', in Schulze (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente*, 207–26, at 208–9.

¹⁸ Sokoll, 'Selbstverständliche Armut', 227.

of debate among scholars.¹⁹ The question of whether petitions can be regarded as personal testimonies is also controversial, as they were always to some extent the forced outcome of an emergency, and mostly composed by scribes. Unlike other classic personal testimonies, such as autobiographies or diaries, petitions mostly reveal only those facts about the lives of supplicants that were relevant to their request and most likely to lead to its fulfilment. Although they were not 'sites of self-observation, self-description, and a medium for constituting identity', as Brigitte Schnegg, for example, describes the diary of Henriette Stettler-Herport from Berne,²⁰ petitions do reveal an 'explicit I' that self-referentially creates a relationship between its own self and the textual object, and thus occupies the position of an individual.²¹ Even if petitions were prompted by a situation of distress and often not composed by supplicants themselves, they did arise out of everyday life situations.²² Unlike interrogation records, for example, they therefore record the supplicants' wishes, demands, and statements about how they felt. Stanislaw-Kemenah describes petitions as "'free acts" that only revealed as much "private" information as was deemed necessary for achieving their immediate

¹⁹ On the concept of ego-documents see the definition by Schulze: 'All texts that can be described as ego-documents should contain statements or partial statements which, even in the most rudimentary or disguised form, provide information about the voluntary or enforced self-perceptions of people within their family, their community, their country, or social class, or reflect their relationship with these systems and changes in them. They should justify individual and human conduct, reveal fears, demonstrate stocks of knowledge, cast light on values, and reflect life experiences and expectations.' Winfried Schulze, 'Ego-Dokumente: Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte? Vorüberlegungen für die Tagung "Ego-Dokumente"', in id. (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente*, 11-30, at 28.

²⁰ Brigitte Schnegg, 'Tagebuchschreiben als Technik des Selbst: Das "Journal de mes actions" der Bernerin Henriette Stettler-Herport (1738-1805)', in Hacke (ed.), *Frauen in der Stadt*, 103-30, at 105. In this context, she suggests, writing a diary can serve 'self-observation, self-presentation, and self-control'.

²¹ Benigna von Krusenstjern, *Selbstzeugnisse der Zeit des Dreissigjährigen Krieges: Beschreibendes Verzeichnis* (Berlin, 1997), 18.

²² Gesa Ingendahl, ' "Eigen-Sinn" im "Fremd-Sinn": Ravensburger Witwen in städtischen Verwaltungsakten des 18. Jahrhunderts', in Hacke (ed.), *Frauen in der Stadt*, 165-85, at 166.

Solidarity and Care

goal'.²³ The focus is on the request itself, but demonstrative feelings are expressed appropriately for the letter form.²⁴

The Frankfurt petitions had to follow a strict scheme. As a prerequisite for the request, the supplicant's situation of crisis or want is described with the aim of alleviating or remedying it. The process of asking, aspiring to a partnership, is located between the directive action of instructing and the consultative act of recommending or advising. In different cultural areas, petitions presenting complaints, requests, or wishes had long been established as a form of communication between subjects and the authorities or their representatives.²⁵ As petitioning spread throughout the Holy Roman Empire from the sixteenth century, the emperor was the ultimate authority to whom petitions were addressed. This means that in principle it was possible for an individual, regardless of social class, to have direct access to the ruler, the state, or the authorities. Although not legally codified, the traditional practice was generally accepted. In order to buttress the petitioner's credibility, reports, written intercessions, or certificates were required.²⁶

Unlike in a letter, that is, a conversation between two spatially separated interlocutors, petitions to the council contained no 'sermo absentis ad absentem'.²⁷ Rather, what took place was a correspondence in multiple parts, in which petitioners first told a scribe of their request. The scribe wrote it down and submitted it to the council. The vast majority of petitions were written down by scribes of this sort who were, in general, school teachers or pastors, lawyers, procurators or notaries, town clerks or stewards, or other respected members of the community acting in this capacity. They made sure that the letters were given the appropriate form.²⁸ In this context, Ulbrich describes 'writing as an occupation, literacy embedded in a function-

²³ Stanislaw-Kemenah, 'Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit', 81.

²⁴ Ulrike Gleixner, 'Familie, Traditionsstiftung und Geschichte im Schreiben von pietistischen Frauen', in Hacke (ed.), *Frauen in der Stadt*, 131–63, at 138.

²⁵ Stanislaw-Kemenah, 'Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit', 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 85.

²⁷ Beatrix Bastl, 'Der Begriff des Friedens in der Ehe', *Wiener Geschichtsblätter*, 52/4 (1997), 221–555, at 225.

²⁸ Stanislaw-Kemenah, 'Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit', 83.

ing system of text-production and communication based on a division of labour'.²⁹

Today, we cannot establish to what extent scribes might have shaped individual petitions. While in most cases they would merely have written down an oral communication in adequate form, conforming to the rules of style, it was possible for them to modify the petitioners' message for their own ends. After the petition was read out at a council meeting and a decision had been reached, the *Armen-diener* (Servant of the Poor or Deacon, who administered funds for the poor) was instructed how to proceed in each case. Thus there was no direct written or personal communication between the parties, but various intermediaries were employed. Like other petitions, those to the Frankfurt council were hierarchically structured from bottom to top,³⁰ clearly expressing the petitioners' dependence on the goodwill of the authorities.³¹ When interpreting the petitions, therefore, the difference in power as well as the social and cultural differences between the authorities, the scribes, and the poor must be taken into account.

According to classical tradition, a petition begins with the *Intitulatio* or introduction, in which the addressee is addressed in formulaic expressions.³² The *Narratio* explains the background to the request. This is followed by the *Petitio*, which precisely formulates the request. The petition closes with the *Conclusio* or *Subscriptio* which, as a rule, contains information about the date (and perhaps the place) of composition. It may name the addressee and sender again, and bears the petitioner's signature. The introductory and concluding formulae are visually highlighted, as is the name. As calls for action which intend to influence the recipient positively, petitions thus typically display a quadripartite structure. By comparison with their equivalents in other German towns, the Frankfurt petitions are especially highly formalized, and all follow this quadripartite scheme. This by no means applies to the same extent everywhere. Applications for a place in the Fuggerei, the Fugger family's highly traditional social

²⁹ Ulbrich, 'Zeuginnen und Bittstellerinnen', 209.

³⁰ Stanislaw-Kemenah, 'Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit', 81.

³¹ Ingendahl, "'Eigen-Sinn" im "Fremd-Sinn"', 168.

³² Stanislaw-Kemenah, 'Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit', 83.

Solidarity and Care

housing complex in Augsburg, for example, display a variable degree of formalization.³³

Apart from what is found in the petitions, we generally know little about the petitioners. In most cases, the appeal was made by the male head of the family. As a rule, women acted as petitioners only if their husbands, fathers, or brothers had died, or were absent or too ill to petition in person. The overwhelming majority of women petitioners, therefore, were the widows of craftsmen, but we also find officials' and soldiers' widows. Without the husband's income, the surviving dependents often did not have enough to live on. Added to this was the social decline faced by widows of officials and officeholders in particular.³⁴ We can assume that those who made an active appeal to the council did not have access to the social network that was still so important for the poor at this time, and could have supported them in their plight.³⁵ In fact, a lack of friends and relatives was one of the arguments used to justify the request for assistance. Many petitions refer to the fact that there was no chance of obtaining money or support in kind from their social environment. Petitioners had to demonstrate their own sense of justice and honour by asking for support adequate to their situation while also showing that they had some idea of what someone in their situation of need could appropriately ask for.

Widows

One group that features frequently among the widows is mothers with young children to support. The multiple tasks which a single mother was confronted with often placed widows in a complicated situation. In addition to bringing up their children, they had to look after their households and earn money at a time when women were paid

³³ On this see Anke Sczesny, *Der lange Weg in die Fuggerei: Augsburger Armenbriefe des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Augsburg, 2012), esp. 19–29 and Andreas Gestrich, 'Das Leben der Armen: "Ego-Dokumente" als Quellen zur Geschichte von Armut und Armenfürsorge im 19. Jahrhundert', in Anke Sczesny, Rolf Kießling, and Johannes Burkhardt (eds.), *Prekariat im 19. Jahrhundert: Armenfürsorge und Alltagsbewältigung in Stadt und Land* (forthcoming 2013).

³⁴ Gleixner, 'Familie, Traditionsstiftung und Geschichte', 145.

³⁵ Frohman, *Poor Relief and Welfare in Germany*, 3.

much less than men and their wages were barely enough to survive on. Anna Sybilla Gräfin, widow of the citizen and master brewer Gräf, found herself in this sort of situation when, on 16 January 1805, she explained to the council that not only had she lost her husband, but that her six children were suffering badly from the loss of their father. As a widow without means she was completely unable to provide even the bare necessities for herself and her children. The reasons she mentioned were lack of time, opportunity, and ability to work. She further made clear that she did not lack diligence or a willingness to work, but that all her energy went on bringing up her children.³⁶

As the children of the widow Gräfin were young and unable to contribute to the family's income, she explained, she had already asked the council for assistance. But the weekly amount of one Gulden which had been granted, and which she acknowledged as a respectable sum, was not enough to feed a family of seven. Despite her efforts, her children were starving and she could no longer keep them alive on her own. The last resort for a single mother was to beg the council for further alms from other charities. The request expressed explicitly at the end of the petition, which mentioned St Catherine's Convent and the White Women's Convent, makes clear that petitioners were aware of the internal workings of the support system, and clearly indicated the agencies responsible for them. Public charitable institutions administered the city's poor relief. As all petitions had to go to the council first, it was not possible to petition the charities directly. After the council had decided whether a request should be granted or not, the petition was passed on to the relevant charity with the appropriate instructions. In addition to the *Allgemeine Almosenkasten*, which administered public poor relief, the most important charities in the period under investigation were the Holy Ghost Hospital which was responsible for indoor relief; the poorhouse, workhouse, and orphan's house; and St Catherine's Convent and the White Women's Convent, whose main function was to look after women, but who also gave scholarships to especially talented but impoverished students of medicine. The administration was undertaken separately by various offices.³⁷

³⁶ ISG Frankfurt a. M., Ratssupplikationen 1.805 vol. i. 216–18: petition of 16 Jan. 1805, read out in the council on 22 Jan. 1805.

³⁷ On this see H. Graab, 'Die öffentlichen milden Stiftungen in Frankfurt am Main' (diploma thesis, University of Frankfurt am Main, 1939), 4, held by ISG

Solidarity and Care

Widows were especially vulnerable to falling into poverty when they lost their husbands in old age, even if, as in the case of Susanna Catharina Söllnerin, née Rechwelin, they no longer had children to provide for. Söllnerin, widow of an administrative official in a supply office, *Proviantschreiber* Söllner,³⁸ described a problem that, while not exclusive to old age, appeared more frequently then. Her late husband had been ill for more than a year before his death. This meant not only that he could not work, but also that the couple's meagre savings had been used up to cover the costs of daily life as well as to pay the doctor's bills and buy medicine. Söllnerin presented this as the reason for her dismal situation. Her case illustrates that many petitioners had not spent their lives in poverty, but that they could quickly be propelled into distress by everyday circumstances such as old age, illness, the death of relatives, and inability to work. Söllnerin was able to live on her savings for a while after her husband's death, but ultimately had no choice but to petition the council for adequate charitable support. She finished her letter in the hope that the councillors, as gracious city fathers, would charitably take care of wretched and afflicted widows and take them to heart in their needy condition.

This case illustrates a pattern of argument that recurs frequently in the Frankfurt petitions. By reminding the council of its paternal duty of care towards widows and orphans who, with the head of the family, had also lost their male breadwinner, Söllnerin addresses a topos, widespread during the early modern period, that goes back to Biblical times and was frequently used as an argument by women in pursuing their interests.³⁹ 'Poor widows and orphans' stood for those

Frankfurt a. M., Manuskripte S6a/17Bl./S.63.BI. See also Ernst Moritz Arndt, *Constitution der freien Stadt Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt am Main 1814), 22; online at < http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10550854_00044.html?contextType=scan&contextSort=score%2Cdescending&contextRows=10&context=Verm%C3%B6gensstand%2C+Verwaltung+und+Verwendung+s%C3%A4mtlicher+Frankfurtischen+milden+Stiftungen+&zoom=0.7000000000000002>, accessed 16 June 2013.

³⁸ ISG Frankfurt a. M., Ratssupplikationen 1.765 vol. iii. 348–50: petition of 16 July 1765, read out in the council on 18 July 1765.

³⁹ On this, see the petition from a button maker's widow, Elisabetha Jordanin, to the city's craftsmen's court in Ravensburg in June 1765. In the matter of a dispute, she appealed to 'Einen Hochedlen und Hochweisen Magistrat, als

who had fallen into indigence through no fault of their own and were in need of special protection. Thus widows and orphans had a God-given right to the goodwill of those in power, who, in turn, could expect divine as well as worldly esteem for their graciousness towards the most vulnerable. In addition, they had certain expectations to fulfil in the matter of their duty of care.⁴⁰ The expression 'poor widow' thus reflects the state of mind as well as the status of petitioners who, by applying it to themselves, could underline their divinely given right to protection without mentioning it explicitly. The council legitimized its leadership role and claim to exercise power by its responsibility towards the destitute who, in return, were supposed to include the council in their prayers. Nevertheless, not all widows were successful with their petitions. They still had to prove their neediness and irreproachable lifestyle, and could be declined if they were found to be capable of working.

Craftsmen

The case of Johann Michael Ahles, citizen and master cooper, illustrates that the poor had to account for their situation and demonstrate that they were worthy of support.⁴¹ In his letter, read to the council on 12 March 1765, we hear of three blows of fate he had suffered. He began by reporting tax arrears for four and a half years, which were not his fault, but the result of a harsh fate imposed by God. Added to the financial burden to his house were various misfortunes, which caused hardship and poverty. Right at the beginning of his petition Ahles pointed out that his unfavourable starting point was not his fault as it had been imposed by God. The external circumstances were portrayed almost as a divine test, which the council could thus hardly consider illegitimate. In his letter he went on to explain that he had tried to work off his mountain of debt with the

Vätter der Wittwen und Weysen, auf das flehentlichste anzuruffen und zu bitten, mier unter denen Knopfmachern Fride zu Schaffen'. Quoted from Ingendahl, "'Eigen-Sinn" im "Fremd-Sinn"', 177.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 179–80.

⁴¹ ISG Frankfurt a. M., Ratssupplikationen 1.765 vol. ii. 47–50: petition of ? Mar. 1765, read out in the council on 12 Mar. 1765.

Solidarity and Care

labour of his own hands in order to gain God's mercy. Just as he had stepped up his efforts, a serious accident had made him an invalid when a wine barrel had smashed his right arm. The ensuing protracted and expensive treatment could not prevent his arm from being paralysed. To his mountain of debt was added the fact that he could no longer work.

Shortly thereafter he suffered a third blow when he lost his property to a fire which destroyed his house. Ahles could rescue only very few belongings. In extreme distress, all he could do was turn to his daughter, but she was responsible for his ultimate ruin. Although she acknowledged his miserable situation and took him in, she sold his few remaining belongings for less than their value to Jews. Ahles punished her for this, whereupon she fled to Mainz, leaving him alone. He was now totally dependent on the help and goodwill of others, finding himself in a situation in which he had to call on strangers to care for him, including such private and intimate tasks as dressing him, which should have been the duty of a close relative. Ahles, however, must have had a close social network of good friends who provided financial assistance in the form of alms. This may be why he petitioned the council merely to waive his back taxes. His application mentioned neither regular support, a one-off hand-out, nor any other form of assistance, such as help in kind. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Ahles had enough support, presumably from other members of his trade.⁴²

After giving a touching portrayal of his life shaped by these blows of fate, Ahles, like the widow Söllnerin, concluded that there could be no doubt that he would find consolation from the council in his pitiful condition. He therefore did not ask for his back taxes to be waived, but implicitly assumed this outcome as a citizen under the protection of the council. Further, he underlined the council's responsibility towards him by pointing out that the only way of earning money left to him was begging. This, however, was impossible because of restrictive laws and the moral proscription against it.⁴³ In

⁴² After the guilds were dissolved in 1616, craftsmen organized themselves in loose corporations without their own administrations. Anton Schindling, 'Wachstum und Wandel vom Konfessionellen Zeitalter bis zum Zeitalter Ludwigs XIV.: Frankfurt am Main 1555–1685', in *Frankfurter Historische Kommission* (ed.), *Frankfurt am Main*, 205–60, at 238.

⁴³ Koch, *Grundlagen bürgerlicher Herrschaft*, 129.

return, Ahles promised those who helped him that their good deed would move him to pray for them. Ahles's petition met all the requirements and, as a petitioner, he described a pitiful situation. But if we read closely, it becomes apparent that he was aware of certain strategic arguments which he could use to make the council acknowledge its responsibility for him.

Conclusion

The three examples of the widows Gräfin and Söllnerin and master cooper Ahles show that the Frankfurt petitions, like other ego-documents, while leaving out many aspects, provide insights into the lives, work, everyday problems of illness, old age, and parenting, as well as the anxieties and feelings of the petitioners created by their situation of distress.⁴⁴ Of course, the circumstances under which these specific sources were created must always be taken into account. A poor person petitioning the council for support, while leaving out other aspects, would clearly emphasize the circumstances that favoured a positive outcome. Yet we must also remember that the petitions, like the testimonials and references submitted with them, were, as a rule, composed by respected members of the community who knew the petitioners personally and could vouch for them. If the council had any doubts about the credibility of a submission, a further investigation of the case was ordered, and sometimes more evidence had to be provided. If we compare the Frankfurt petitions with those from other places, it is surprising that external form played such an important part in Frankfurt, in contrast, for instance, to petitions in Aurich. There we find petitions such as the one which the settler Gerd Folker from Aurich sent to the king of Prussia on 6 January 1806, in which he addressed the king directly, using a relatively short form of address.⁴⁵ The contrast between Frankfurt and other cases stands out even more clearly in a letter by the widow Ysobele Behrens (also from Aurich).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Gleixner, 'Familie, Traditionsstiftung und Geschichte', 158.

⁴⁵ Staatsarchiv Aurich, Preußische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer (1744-1808) no. 2503 vol. vii. 1-3: petition of 6 Jan. 1806.

⁴⁶ Staatsarchiv Aurich, Preußische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer (1744-1808) no. 2500 vol. iv. 54: petition of 14 Feb. 1784.

Solidarity and Care

Her petition lacks all punctuation, many words are missing, and the structure seems to follow her flow of thought or speech. It describes her distress, but does not formulate a request.

Although the Frankfurt petitions are rigidly structured and their language strongly hierarchical, close analysis reveals that, while aware of the requirements, petitioners were able to express themselves and were aware of their room for manoeuvre. Only at first glance do the petitions seem relatively uniform. In fact, they display a marked degree of individuality in their arguments and linguistic expression. In terms of content, the Frankfurt petitions differ from others in the sort of support requested, which is often connected with the difference between town and country. Gerd Folker, mentioned above, wrote in his petition that neither he nor his old, sick wife were in a position to earn money. Although he owned a small piece of land, it was of such poor quality that he could not grow anything on it. He added that in his home village of Moorsdorf he could not buy milk for money, and therefore asked for a grant to buy a cow. In rural areas, support often took the form of help in acquiring livestock, clothing, or firewood, which was especially frequent in Erbach, Hesse, for example. In Frankfurt, by contrast, almost only monetary assistance was requested.

The lives of the poor have not been of special interest to historians for a long time, and have therefore been hidden in the darkness of an anonymous mass. These pauper letters provide us with important information not only about the biographical data of the poor, but also about the strategies, embedded in the political and geographical context, that they used to cope with everyday life. They thus help us to identify the life paths of individuals.

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