

Self-Supply or Factory Food? A Lecture on the History of Home Preservation

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On Tuesday, September 14, 2016, Uwe Spiekermann gave a lecture on “Glas in den häuslichen Alltag! Zur Geschichte des Einkochens im 20. Jahrhundert” at the Glasmuseum Boffzen (near Höxter). What seems as a side episode of today’s eating patterns, indeed tackles some crucial problems of modern economic and social history: When did industry took over command in the conservation of food, when did households lost its capacity (and ability) for self-supply? Spiekermann’s answers demonstrated that such linear thinking is more than questionable. Industrial conservation, especially canning, started quite late in Germany, due to high costs of production. From 1890 tinned food became affordable, but per head consumption was less than two kilograms in 1913. At that time, home preservation has gained ground: From 1895, new equipment and preservation glasses, normally linked with the name of Weck company, offered reliable methods of heat sterilization. This mechanization of first bourgeois and, from the 1920s, worker households, became a common everyday practice: In 1941 93% of all households did preserve their own food; and during the 1930s households produced more than twice as much preserved food (in glass but also in tin cans) than the industry. Part of this rise was the bad image of tinned food, driven by their low vitamin content. The lecture gave an instructive example for the relevance of households for 20th century economic history, which normally is ignored in economic analysis. Spiekermann’s talk was part of the accompanying program of an exhibition on the history of the Boffzen-based Noelle + von Campe glass factory, which was founded in 1866, 150 years ago (<http://www.glasmuseum-boffzen.de/>).

