

## CHAPTER IX: THE GERMAN LABOUR PARTY

One day I received an order from my superior officer to investigate the nature of an association which was apparently political. It called itself 'The German Labour Party' and was soon to hold a meeting at which Gottfried Feder would speak.

I was ordered to attend this meeting and report on the nature of the association. The spirit of curiosity in which the army authorities then regarded political parties can be very well understood.

The Revolution had granted the soldiers the right to take an active part in politics and it was particularly those with the smallest experience who had availed themselves of this privilege, but not until the Centre and the Social Democratic Parties were reluctantly forced to recognise that the sympathies of the soldiers had turned away from the revolutionary parties towards the national movement and the national reawakening, did they feel obliged to withdraw from the Army the right to vote, and to ban all political activity among the soldiers.

The fact that the centre and Marxism had adopted this policy was instructive, because if they had not thus curtailed the 'rights of the citizen'—as they described the political rights of the soldiers after the Revolution—the government which had been established in November 1918 would have been overthrown within a few years and the dishonour and disgrace of the nation would not have been further prolonged.

At that time the soldiers were on the point of ridding the nation of the vampires and fawners who served the cause of the Entente in the interior of the country, but the fact that the so-called 'national' parties voted enthusiastically for the doctrinaire policy of the criminals who organised the revolution in November 1918 also helped to render the Army ineffectual as an instrument of national restoration, and thus showed once again what might be the outcome of the purely abstract notions imbibed by these most gullible people.

The minds of the bourgeois middle classes had become so fossilised that they sincerely believed the Army could once again become what it had previously been, namely, a rampart of German valour, while the Centre Party and the Marxists intended only to extract the poisonous tooth of nationalism,

without which an army must always remain just a polite force, but can never be in the position of a military organisation capable of fighting against an outside enemy.

This truth was sufficiently proved by subsequent events. Or did our ‘national’ politicians believe, after all, that the development of our army could be other than national? This belief might be possible and could be explained by the fact that, during the war, they had been not soldiers, but merely talkers.

In other words, they were parliamentarians, and, as such, they did not have the slightest idea of what was going on in the hearts of those men who remembered the greatness of their own past and also remembered that they had once been the first soldiers in the world.

I decided to attend the meeting of this party which had hitherto been entirely unknown to me. When I arrived that evening in the guest-room of the former Sterneckerbräu—which has now become a place of historical significance for us—I found some twenty or twenty-five persons present, most of them belonging to the lower classes.

The theme of Feder’s lecture was already familiar to me, for I had heard it in the lecture course of which I have spoken. I could, therefore, concentrate my attention on the society itself.

The impression it made upon me was neither good nor bad. I felt that here was just another one of those many new societies which were being formed at that time. In those days everybody felt called upon to found a new party whenever he felt displeased with the course of events and had lost confidence in all the parties already existing.

Thus it was that new associations sprouted up all round, to disappear just as quickly, without exercising any effect or making any impression whatsoever. Generally speaking, the founders of such associations did not have the slightest idea of what it means to bring together a number of people for the foundation of a party or a movement.

Therefore, these associations disappeared because of their woeful lack of anything like an adequate grasp of the essentials of the situation.

My opinion of the ‘German Labour Party’ was not very different after I had listened to their proceedings for about two hours. I was glad when Feder finally came to a close. I had observed enough and was just about to leave

when it was announced that anybody who wished was free to take part in the discussion.

Thereupon, I decided to remain, but the discussion seemed to proceed without anything of vital importance being mentioned, when suddenly a ‘professor’ commenced to speak.

He began by throwing doubt on the accuracy of what Feder had said, and then, after Feder had replied very effectively, the professor suddenly took up his position on what he called ‘the basis of facts, but before this he recommended the young party most urgently to introduce the secession of Bavaria from Prussia as one of the leading points in its programme.

In the most self-assured way, this man kept on insisting that German-Austria would join Bavaria and that the peace would then function much better. He made other similarly extravagant statements.

At this juncture I felt bound to ask for permission to speak and to tell the learned gentleman what I thought. The result was that the honourable gentleman who had last spoken slipped out of the room, like a whipped cur, without uttering a sound.

While I was speaking the audience listened with an expression of surprise on their faces. When I was just about to say good-night to the assembly and to leave, a man came after me quickly and introduced himself. I did not grasp the name correctly, but he placed in my hand a little book which was obviously a political pamphlet, and asked me very earnestly to read it.

I was quite pleased, because, in this way, I could get to know about this association without having to attend its tiresome meetings. Moreover, this man, who had the appearance of a workman, made a good impression on me. Thereupon, I left the hall.

At that time, I was living in one of the barracks of the 2nd Infantry Regiment. I had a little room which still bore unmistakable traces of the Revolution.

During the day I was mostly out, at the quarters of the Light Infantry Regiment No. 41, or else attending meetings or lectures, held at the quarters of some other unit. I spent only the night at the barracks where I lodged.

Since I usually woke up about five o’clock every morning, I got into the

habit of amusing myself with watching little mice which scampered about my small room.

I used to place a few pieces of hard bread or crust on the floor and watch the funny little creatures playing around and enjoying themselves with these delicacies. I had suffered so many privations in my life that I well knew what hunger was and could only too well picture to myself the pleasure these little creatures were experiencing.

On the morning after the meeting I have mentioned, it happened that about five o'clock I lay fully awake in bed, watching the mice playing and vying with each other. As I was not able to go to sleep again, I suddenly remembered the pamphlet that one of the workers had given me at the meeting. It was a small pamphlet of which this worker was the author.

In his little book he described how his mind had thrown off the shackles of the Marxist and trade-union phraseology, and how he had come back to the nationalist ideals. That was the reason why he had entitled his little book, *My Political Awakening*.

The pamphlet secured my attention the moment I began to read, and I read it with interest to the end. The process here described was similar to that which I had experienced in my own case twelve years previously.

Unconsciously, my own experiences began to stir again in my mind. During that day my thoughts returned several times to what I had read, but I finally decided to give the matter no further attention.

A week or so later, however, I received a postcard which informed me, to my astonishment, that I had been admitted to the German Labour Party. I was asked to answer this communication and to attend a meeting of the party committee on Wednesday next.

This manner of getting members rather amazed me, and I did not know whether to be angry or laugh at it. I had no intention of entering a party already in existence, but wanted to found one of my own.

Such an invitation as I had now received, I looked upon as entirely out of the question for me. I was about to send a written reply when my curiosity got the better of me, and I decided to attend the gathering on the date assigned, so that I might expound my principles to these gentlemen in person.

Wednesday came. The tavern in which the meeting was to take place was the Altes Rosenbad in the Herrnstrasse, into which apparently only an occasional guest wandered.

This was not very surprising in the year 1919, when the bill of fare even at the larger restaurants was very modest and scanty and thus not very attractive to clients, but I had never before heard of this restaurant.

I went through the badly-lighted tap-room, where not a single guest was to be seen, and searched for the door which led to the side room, and there I found the 'meeting.'

Under the dim light shed by a grimy gas-lamp, I could see four young people sitting around a table, one of them being the author of the pamphlet. He greeted me cordially and welcomed me as a new member of the German Labour Party.

I was somewhat taken aback. On being informed that, actually, the 'Reich chairman' of the party had not yet come, I decided that I would keep back my own explanation for the time being.

Finally the chairman appeared. He was the man who had been chairman at the meeting held in the Sterneckerbrau, when Feder had spoken.

My curiosity was stimulated anew and I sat waiting for what was going to happen. Now I got at least as far as learning the names of the gentlemen present. The Reich chairman of the association was a certain Herr Harrer and the chairman for the Munich district was Anton Drexler.

The minutes of the previous meeting were read out and a vote of confidence in the secretary was passed. Then came the treasurer's report. The society possessed a total fund of seven marks and fifty pfennigs, whereupon the treasurer was assured that he had the confidence of the members. This was now inserted in the minutes. Then letters of reply, which had been drafted by the chairman, were read; first, to a letter received from Kiel, then to one from Dusseldorf and finally to one from Berlin. All three replies received the approval of all present.

Then the incoming letters were read—one from Berlin, one from Dusseldorf and one from Kiel. The reception of these letters seemed to cause great satisfaction. This increasing bulk of correspondence was taken as the best and most obvious sign of the growing importance of the German Labour

Party.

And then? Well, there followed a long discussion of the replies which should be given to these newly received letters, It was all very awful. This was the worst kind of parish-pump clubbism. And was I supposed to become a member of such a club?

The question of new members was next discussed that is to say, the question of catching me in the trap. I now began to ask questions. But I found that, apart from a few general principles, there was nothing—no programme, no pamphlet, nothing at all in print, no card of membership, not even a party stamp, nothing but obvious good faith and good intentions.

I no longer felt inclined to laugh; for what else was all this but a typical sign of the most complete perplexity and deepest despair concerning all other political parties, their programmes, views and activities?

The feeling which had induced those few young people to join in what seemed such a ridiculous enterprise was nothing but the call of the inner voice which told them—though more intuitively than consciously—that the whole party system as it had hitherto existed was not the kind of force that could restore the German nation or repair the damage that had been done to the German people by those who had hitherto controlled the internal affairs of the nation.

I quickly read through the list of principles laid down by the party. These principles were stated on typewritten sheets. Here again I found evidence of the spirit of longing and searching, but no sign whatever of a knowledge of the conflict that had to be fought.

I myself had experienced the feelings which inspired these people. It was the longing for a movement which should be more than a party, in the hitherto accepted meaning of that word.

When I returned to my room in the barracks that evening, I had formed a definite opinion on this association and I was facing the most difficult problem of my life. Should I join this party or refuse?

From the common-sense point of view, I felt I ought to refuse, but my feelings troubled me. The more I tried to prove to myself how senseless this club was, on the whole, the more did my feelings incline me to favour it.

During the days which followed I was restless. I began to consider all the pros and cons. I had long ago decided to take an active part in politics. The fact that I could do so only through a new movement was quite clear to me, but I had hitherto lacked the impulse to take concrete action.

I am not one of those people who will begin something to-day just to give it up the next day for the sake of something new. That was the main reason which made it so difficult for me to decide to join something newly founded; for this must become the real fulfilment of everything I dreamt, or else it had better not be started at all.

I knew that such a decision would bind me for ever and then there could be no turning back. For me there could be no idle dallying, but only a cause to be championed ardently. I had already an instinctive feeling against people who took up everything, but never carried anything through to the end.

I loathed these Jacks-of-all trades, and considered the activities of such people to be worse than if they were to remain entirely quiescent.

Fate herself now seemed to point a finger that showed me the way. I should never have entered one of the big parties already in existence and shall explain my reasons for this later on.

This ludicrous little formation, with its handful of members, seemed to have the unique advantage of not yet being fossilised into an 'organisation' and still offered a chance for real personal activity on the part of the individual.

Here it might still be possible to do some effective work, and, as the movement was still small, one could all the more easily give it the required shape.

Here it was still possible to determine the character of the movement, the aims to be achieved and the road to be taken, which would have been impossible in the case of any of the big parties already existing.

The longer I reflected on the problem, the more my conviction grew, that just such a small movement would best serve as an instrument to prepare the way for the national resurgence, but that this could never be done by the political parliamentary parties which were too firmly attached to obsolete ideas or had an interest in supporting the new regime.

What had to be proclaimed here was a new *Weltanschauung* and not a

new election cry. It was, however, infinitely difficult to decide on putting the intention into practice. What were the qualifications which I could bring to the accomplishment of such a task?

The fact that I was poor and without resources would, in my opinion, be the easiest to bear, but the fact that I was utterly unknown raised a more difficult problem. I was only one of the millions whom chance allows to exist or to cease to exist, whom even their next-door neighbours will not consent to know.

Another difficulty arose from the fact that I had not gone through the regular school curriculum. The so-called 'intellectuals' still look down with infinite superciliousness on anyone who has not been through the prescribed schools and allowed them to pump the necessary knowledge into him.

The question, What can a man do? is never asked, but rather, what has he learned? 'Educated' people look upon any imbecile who is plastered with a number of academic certificates as being superior to the ablest young fellow who lacks these precious documents.

I could therefore easily imagine how this 'educated' world would receive me and I was wrong only in so far as I then believed men to be for the most part better than they proved to be in the cold light of reality.

Because of their being as they, are, the few exceptions stand out all the more conspicuously. I learned more and more to distinguish between those who will always be at school and those who will one day come to know something.

After two days of careful brooding and reflection I became convinced that I must take the contemplated step. It was the most fateful decision of my life. No retreat was possible.

Thus I declared myself ready to accept the membership tendered me by the German Labour Party and received a provisional certificate of membership which bore the number seven.





