CHAPTER 2

Background, Youth, and Early Union Activities: 1880–1913

Richard Louis Müller was born on 9 December 1880 at two o'clock in the afternoon in the village of Weira in what is now the German state of Thuringia. Then, as now, Weira was an agricultural town with about 500 residents. Müller’s parents, Otto Friedrich Müller (born 1848) and Wilhelmina Albina Müller (born 1853), managed an inn while maintaining a farm on the side. Richard was the fourth of seven children born into the family between 1875 and 1884; his brother Friedrich, born in 1882, died within a few weeks of his birth.1

The family received a blow shortly before Richard’s eighth birthday: his mother, Wilhelmina, died on 25 November 1888. The seventh child, a boy named Franklin Arno, had been born two weeks earlier on 8 November and it is not unlikely that Wilhelmina died due to labour complications. Otto Friedrich Müller was left alone with his six children for two years until he married a nineteen-year-old girl named Ulrike Zimmermann, the daughter of a bricklayer from the village. We can only guess at how the older siblings got along with a stepmother who was only six or seven years older than they were and at how the young woman felt about suddenly having to run a household with six children. By the end of her first three years of marriage, Ulrike Müller had two children: one in 1893 and one in 1896, bringing the family to ten members. Misfortune struck the Müllers again in the summer of 1896: the father died on 26 July, leaving the family facing bankruptcy. The inn had to be sold in October of the same year. That the family faced bankruptcy so soon after Otto’s death, along with the existence of the farming sideline, allow us to surmise that the inn had long failed to yield enough for the family and that the family’s financial situation had already been shaky.2

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1 All information about Richard Müller’s parents, siblings, and childhood comes from the Weira parish register, and I am very grateful to Father Dieter Wolf of Neunhofen for his kind support.

2 Although the parish register lists a ‘landowner’ (Gutsbesitzer) as Richard Müller's godfather, it is unlikely that he was very well-off given the circumstances, and the bankruptcy in particular.
From Farm to Factory

It must have been clear to Richard Müller from his earliest childhood that, as the fourth of eight siblings in a financially precarious family, there was no substantial inheritance waiting for him. We can be reasonably certain that he had to work at the inn and on the farm from a young age to contribute to the family income. While it is not clear whether Richard Müller began his apprenticeship as a lathe operator at this time or earlier, his father’s death and subsequent family bankruptcy, which occurred when he was 16, must have given him and his three older siblings final confirmation that they would have to fend for themselves from then on. And this meant leaving Weira: its rural economy could not offer them a secure future, while Germany’s rapidly accelerating industrialisation following the establishment of the Empire in 1870 offered them new opportunities.3

His brothers, Franz Otto (born 1877) and Franklin Arno (born 1888), also left Weira; both were employed by different railroad companies. Franz Otto Müller was able to finish school, going so far as to earn an engineering degree in Graz. Hugo Müller also left, following his brother Richard to Berlin and working for the fire department there.