CHAPTER 2

Children at Work and War

At Home

‘Over-population’ and the hunger and misery associated with it, are not products of nature but products of men, or rather of social relationships which preclude such a social organization of production and of life generally as would abolish with the problem of hunger that of ‘over-population’.¹

Paul Mattick’s family was part of the vast urban migration that swept across Europe during the early 1900s. It was a family on the move and eager for what the world could offer. Mattick was born in 1904 in northeast Germany.² At the time, the entire region was governed by the province of Prussia; today it is located in Poland. Mattick’s father worked as a farmhand, while his mother performed domestic chores as a maid and laundress. Both were determined to escape the poverty characteristic of the area. Their trajectory was typical for those who sought social mobility by leaving the countryside for the city. For the Matticks, this meant an initial move to Stettin, about halfway towards the capital of Berlin, with resettlement there not long afterwards. Their dogged pursuit of a better life led them in many new directions.

Mattick was one of eight children born over an eleven-year period, a family size atypical for city dwellers and one that showed no signs of the ‘domestic feminism’ and voluntary limitation of fertility which accompanied the processes of industrialisation and modernisation.³ When they married, his father was twenty-four, his mother a year and a half younger.⁴ Mattick was born three years later as their third child.⁵ Three of his siblings died young, in infancy or early childhood. As the oldest and only surviving son, he had the same first

³ Smith 1979.
⁴ Paul Johannes Mattick, born 16 June 1878; Adeline Auguste-Alwine Kantz, born 17 December 1877; married 28 December 1900 in Stettin. Information from the father’s death certificate; Standesamt Mitte von Berlin.
⁵ 13 March 1904.
name as his father. Together with his remaining siblings, one older and three younger sisters, they shared a single room. The children went barefoot in the summer, an indication that the newly developed urban areas had yet to be paved over or cobblestoned in their entirety. The children also wore clogs during the winter months and their socks were darned, with other tell-tale signs of their poverty always in evidence. Nonetheless, the differences between them and children born and bred in the city were more cultural than material.

Berlin itself was undergoing immense changes due to the influx of population. The Matticks changed apartments frequently, as did many newcomers to the city in their quest for better accommodation. Inside an apartment, renters were mindful of the amount of sunlight, access to fresh air, the size of rooms, and heat in the winter. The nearness to public transportation, work, food shopping, and outdoor space, especially for the children, was also important. All of these considerations were tempered by overriding financial constraints. Decent apartments that were affordable were difficult to find and in great demand. Mostly, though, newcomers took whatever they stumbled upon, and not until Mattick was school age was there some sense of stability regarding living quarters. A five room apartment, replete with leaky roof, accommodated the seven-member Mattick family.6

If Mattick’s father had been a farmhand before, in the city this meant employment as an unskilled laborer, performing the kinds of repetitive, physical tasks for which lower class men are so eagerly sought. He worked initially as a stone-hauler with a horse-drawn cart. Around the time Mattick entered primary school, his father began new employment at the huge Siemens manufacturing complex, where he was assigned to the division that produced metal cables and pipes. With over 20,000 employees in Berlin alone, Siemens was a major telecommunications firm, known for its production of telegraph and telephone equipment and made famous by its installation of entire inter-city systems. It was one of the leading firms in the use and transmission of electrical power, pioneering the development of overhead ‘electrified’ urban street car networks.

Widely celebrated for its progressive policies towards employees, Siemens offered a range of benefits not typical of smaller firms in more competitive areas of the economy.7 The pension system was funded through workplace fines imposed upon errant employees. Other services included survivor benefits, health insurance (but not for family members), a canteen that provided

6 Address: Christstrasse 18, a six-storey building in the Charlottenburg district, where the family remained for many decades.