

CHAPTER I

Ante-Bellum Period

I.—THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MOVEMENT

IN the early part of the last century the thirty odd countries composing the German fatherland had apparently little attraction for their sons. The political decimation and economic backwardness of the country caused a flow of emigration which only diminished after the formation of the Empire. It is estimated on insufficient data that over 3,000,000 Germans left their fatherland during the first half of the nineteenth century. The bulk of this emigration was made up of journeymen and mechanics, but a considerable portion of it consisted of men of culture and education, with which Germany has always been overstocked; and finally the ill-fated revolutions of 1830 and 1848 added a new and numerous element to it, that of the political refugees.

The German emigrants formed large settlements in France, England, Switzerland, and Belgium, and many of them ultimately landed on the shores of this country. Around 1830 the German population was well represented in almost every State and Territory of the Union, and was especially numerous in the States of Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, and Maryland.

The radicalism of these emigrants in Europe, as well as in America, fostered by the political and economic conditions of their fatherland, found additional support in the theories of the French utopian socialism, and soon resulted in a widespread movement among them. They formed secret revolutionary societies and organized working-men's educational clubs for the discussion of social problems, and many of the "intellectuals" among them took an active and leading part in the movement, notably Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and the distinguished coterie of their friends and cooperators.

It was thus that the Communistic Club originated, at whose request Marx and Engels drew up the famous "Communistic Manifesto." The "Manifesto" contains the first complete exposition of Marxian or Scientific Socialism, and contemporary socialism may be said to date from the time of the publication of that document, February, 1848, altho the movement was for a long time thereafter almost wholly confined to the *élite* of the German emigration.

The general movement among the German emigrants could not fail to find some echo in the United States. The society "Germania" was founded in the city of New York in the early thirties for the avowed purpose of gathering the political refugees and holding them in readiness to return to the fatherland as soon as the next political revolution would break out.*

When the Free-Soil Party appeared on the arena of American politics, the German working men were among the first to respond; they organized numerous Free-Soil clubs, and in 1846 they published a weekly magazine, called *The Tribune of the People* (*Volkstribun*), in the interests of that party.

Many thousands of the German immigrants were, besides, organized into debating societies, cooperative associations, gymnastic unions, and trade organizations of a somewhat rudimentary character. But the movement was rather disjointed, and did not attain any appreciable power and influence until the arrival of the famous German communist, Wilhelm Weitling.

II.—WILHELM WEITLING AND THE GENERAL WORKING-MEN'S LEAGUE

WILHELM WEITLING was born in Magdeburg in 1808 as the illegitimate child of a woman in humble circumstances.

As a youth he learned the tailoring trade, and, according

* "In der Neuen Heimath von Anton Eickhoff," New York, 1884.

to the custom of the German journeymen of his day, he traveled extensively during the period of his apprenticeship.

The young man combined extraordinary mental gifts with a veritable thirst of knowledge, and during his travels he managed to master the French language and to fill many gaps in his neglected education.

He became an enthusiastic apostle of communism very early in life, and devoted himself entirely to the work of organization and propaganda among the German working men sojourning abroad. He organized a number of cooperative restaurants for journeymen tailors in Paris and Switzerland, and a communistic working-men's educational society in London. He took an active part in various secret revolutionary societies which were then in vogue in Paris, and in 1846 he joined the German Working-Men's Society at Brussels, of which the youthful Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were the leaders.

Weitling's first literary production to attract wide attention was a book printed by the secret revolutionary press in Paris in 1838. It was entitled, "The World as It Is, and as It Should Be," and contained the first exposition of the author's communistic theories.

His best-known work, "The Guaranties of Harmony and Freedom," was published four years later, and met with a decided and spontaneous success. It was widely read and commented on, and was translated into French and English.

These two books, together with the "Evangel of a Poor Sinner," published in 1846, compose his principal works.

In his social philosophy Weitling may be said to have been the connecting-link between primitive and modern socialism. In the main he is still a utopian, and his writings betray the unmistakable influence of the early French socialists. In common with all utopians, he bases his philosophy exclusively on moral grounds. Misery and poverty are to him but the results of human malice, and his cry is for "eternal

justice" and for the "absolute liberty and equality of all mankind." In his criticism of the existing order, he leans closely on Fourier, from whom he also borrowed the division of labor into the three classes of the Necessary, Useful, and Attractive, and the plan of organization of "attractive industry."

His ideal of the future state of society reminds of the St. Simonian government of scientists. The administration of affairs of the entire globe is to be in the hands of the three greatest authorities on "philosophical medicine," physics, and mechanics, who are to be reinforced by a number of subordinate committees. His state of the future is a highly centralized government, and is described by the author with the customary details. Where Weitling to some extent approaches the conception of modern socialism, is in his recognition of class distinctions between employer and employee. This distinction never amounted to a conscious indorsement of the modern socialist doctrine of the "class struggle," but his views on the antagonism between the "poor" and the "wealthy" came quite close to it. He was a firm believer in labor organizations as a factor in developing the administrative abilities of the working class; the creation of an independent political labor party was one of his pet schemes, and his appeals were principally addressed to the working men.

Unlike most of his predecessors and contemporaries, Weitling was not a mere critic; he was an enthusiastic preacher, an apostle of a new faith, and his writings and speeches breathed of love for his fellow men and of an ardent desire for their happiness.

Weitling's magnetic personality and affable manners won the hearts of his fellow workers for him, and the persistent persecutions of the Swiss and German governments against him still augmented his popularity.

In the forties of the last century he was, beyond doubt, the most influential figure in the numerous colonies of Ger-

man working men in Switzerland, France, Belgium, and England.

Weitling's first visit to the United States was undertaken toward the end of 1846 upon the invitation of a group of German Free Soilers to take editorial charge of the *Volks-tribun*, already alluded to. But, upon his arrival, he found that the magazine had suspended publication, and when, one year later, the rumor of the approaching revolution in his fatherland reached the shores of this country, he hurriedly returned to Germany. The "glorious revolution of 1848" was nipped in the bud in very short order, and Weitling, disappointed but not discouraged, came back to the United States in 1849. Here he found a wide and fruitful field of activity.

As already mentioned, the German immigrants had at that time formed a number of labor organizations of different kinds, but there was little organic connection and still less unity of aim and purpose among these organizations, and Weitling immediately undertook the task of centralizing the movement and directing it into definite channels. For this purpose he published *The Republic of the Working Men* (*Die Republik der Arbeiter*), a magazine which appeared monthly during the year 1850, and was converted into a weekly in April, 1851.

Under Weitling's influence also a "Central Committee of United Trades" was formed in New York in 1850. This was a delegated body of labor organizations, representing from 2,000 to 2,500 members. Similar bodies were organized in other cities of the Union, and a lively agitation soon sprang up among the German working men, especially in the East.

Mass-meetings were held, leaflets distributed, and numerous clubs organized. The movement attracted the attention of the American press, and was made the subject of much favorable and unfavorable criticism, with the result that it soon spread beyond the bounds of the purely German labor

organizations, and enlisted the sympathies and cooperation of working men of other nationalities, including native Americans.

Every issue of the *Republik* of that period contains glowing reports of progress. In March, 1850, a mass-meeting of negroes in New York declared itself in accord with Weitling's ideas of a "labor-exchange bank," and a similar stand was taken in April of the same year by a convention of American working men in Philadelphia. On May 10th the *Republik* published a letter from Cabet, in which the famous French utopian expressed himself in favor of a harmonious cooperation between the Icarian colony at Nauvoo and Weitling's movement, and the same issue of the paper contained the news that a number of American farmers at Weedport, N. J., had organized under the name of "Farmers' and Mechanics' Protective Association," for the purpose of establishing a labor-exchange bank on Weitling's plan. On the twenty-first day of September a call for a general workingmen's convention, a subject long agitated by Weitling, was published in the *Republik*, and the convention was actually held in Philadelphia in October, 1850.

This was the first national convention of German working men on American soil, and is of great interest to the students of the labor movement, and especially of the socialist movement, in this country. The convention was opened on October 22d, and completed its labors on October 28th.

The basis of representation was one delegate for every one hundred organized members, and the number of members represented was 4,400. These were distributed among forty-two organizations in the following ten cities: St. Louis, Louisville, Baltimore, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, New York, Buffalo, Williamsburg, Newark, and Cincinnati.

The subjects discussed at the convention were:

1. Labor-Exchange Banks.
2. Associations.
3. Political Party Organization.

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4. Education and Instruction.
5. Propaganda.
6. Colonies.
7. Conventions.

And the views of the convention on these subjects were set forth in resolutions published in the *Republik* and other newspapers.

The "Exchange Bank" of Weitling was, in the main, identical with Owen's "Equitable Bank of Labor Exchange." It was to be an institution where every producer of a useful commodity could deposit his product and receive in exchange a paper certificate of an equivalent value, with which in turn he could purchase any article contained in the bank store at cost. The difference between Owen's plan and that of Weitling was that the latter insisted upon cooperative industries as an indispensable complement to the bank.

The Exchange Bank was Weitling's pet idea; through its operations he hoped to gradually displace the capitalist mode of production, and he never tired extolling the beauties of his theory.

The convention adopted his views on the subject without modification, and prescribed minutely the mode of administration and practical workings of the institution.

The political views of the convention were summed up in the motto, "Equal Rights and Duties," and the platform consisted of twelve demands, almost all of them borrowed from the platform of the Free-Soil Party.

The delegates also provided for a central political committee of seven in each city, who were to act in conjunction with each other in cases of state and national elections, and they also adopted resolutions in favor of an extension of educational facilities and the organization of communistic settlements.

The convention appointed the "Exchange Commission" of New York as the temporary executive organ of the movement, and provided for the time and manner of holding the

next convention. But, singularly enough, the delegates failed to designate an official name for the combination of organizations represented at the convention, and the body was for some time thereafter vaguely referred to as "the movement," "the association," "the union of cities," until the name "General Working-Men's League" (*Allgemeiner Arbeiterbund*) was settled upon it by common consent.

The period immediately following the Philadelphia convention marked the zenith of power and influence in Weitling's public career, and was followed by a period of rapid decline. His Exchange Banks never materialized. Altho some money was occasionally subscribed for the enterprise and some shares issued for it, the amount realized was altogether insufficient for even a very modest experiment, and Weitling reluctantly abandoned his favorite dream.

His followers made one attempt to realize his colonization scheme by founding the settlement "Communia" in Iowa in 1849, but the attempt proved a disastrous failure and involved its originators in financial losses and unpleasant litigations over the title to its land.

In the mean while Weitling's methods and his self-asserting conduct provoked the antagonism of many prominent members of the League, and after a brief but intense quarrel, Weitling, irritated and disgusted, withdrew from public life.

The remainder of his years he passed as a clerk in the Bureau of Immigration in New York. Toward the close of his life his notions of the value of his own achievements became morbidly exaggerated. He wrote a book on astronomy which, he asserted, contained discoveries by far excelling those of Newton, and he also claimed to have invented many valuable devices in sewing-machines, all of which were stolen from him by men who made immense profits out of them.

His attitude of listlessness toward the succeeding phases of the labor movement was broken but once, when he appeared at a joint meeting of the New York Sections of the

International on January 22, 1871. Three days later he died.

The General Working-Men's League continued in existence for some years after Weitling's withdrawal, but it never attained the significance of which its bright beginnings gave promise.

In 1853 a call for a second convention of trade organizations to be held in New York was issued, but the only trade represented in the convention was that of the typesetters.

Some new life was infused into the movement around the middle of the fifties by the activity of Joseph Weydemeyer. Weydemeyer was a personal friend of Marx and Engels and well versed in the theories of scientific socialism. He came to New York at about the same time as Weitling. In the spring of 1852 he published a monthly magazine entitled *The Revolution*, in the second and last issue of which Marx's famous historical essay, "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," was printed for the first time. Weydemeyer strove to inculcate the doctrines of Marxian socialism in the Working-Men's League, and delivered many lectures on the subject in German and English before the members.

Toward 1856 Weydemeyer settled in Chicago, and remained there until the outbreak of the civil war.

In 1858 the League established a new weekly magazine under the title *Social Republic*, and elected as editor of the magazine the well-known German revolutionist, Gustav Srue, a romantic phrasemonger and confused mind, under whose influence the League soon succumbed. To characterize the spirit and mental caliber of the League at that time, we quote the following resolutions on the obligations of its candidates for political office: *

* For these quotations and many other details of the movement of that period the author is indebted to Sorge's excellent articles on the Labor Movement in the United States. F. A. Sorge, "Die Arbeiterbewegung in den Vereinigten Staaten," 1850-1860. *Neue Zeit*, No. 31, 1890-1891.

For other details of Weitling's career in the United States the

“*Resolved*, That the following questions be asked of each candidate for office in the presence of the executive or ward officers:

“1. Are you prepared, on life and death, to break the chains which tie labor to capital, and generally to defend the rights of the poor to the best of your abilities?”

“2. Are you prepared, on life and death, to maintain the absolute rights of labor before the law and to combat every injustice to immigrants through nativistic tendencies, etc.?”

Here follows a long string of similar questions, culminating in the following emphatic declaration:

“*Resolved*, That any candidate who may break his vows by acting contrary to the above principles be delivered to the judgment of the people.”

The *Social Republic* suspended publication in 1860, and the General Working-Men’s League was heard of no more.

III.—GYMNASTIC UNIONS

OF some significance in the spread of socialist teachings during the fifties were also the German Gymnastic Unions (*Turnvereine*).

At that time the importance of physical culture by means of regular gymnastic exercises for the development of the entire human organism had just commenced to be appreciated. In Prussia gymnastics had been recognized as a part of the regular school exercises by a cabinet order of June, 1842. Other countries followed the example, and, as is apt to happen with every new and inexpensive sport, things were at first somewhat overdone. Gymnastics became the fashion, especially among the poorer classes, and working-men’s gymnastic societies cropped up in all parts of Germany and in many other European countries.

student is referred to the files of the *Republik der Arbeit*, and for Weitling’s biography to Emil Kaler’s booklet, “Wilhelm Weitling. Seine Agitation und Lehren,” Gottingen-Zurich, 1887.

In the United States most of these societies set apart some of their meetings for the discussion of social and political problems, an exercise which they styled "mental gymnastics." The early Turners were, as a rule, very radical in their political views. In 1850, the year of Weitling's convention in Philadelphia, they held a convention in the same city. The convention was attended by delegates from seventeen different locals and a National Union was formed under the name "United Gymnastic Unions of North America" (*Vereinigte Turnvereine Nordamerica's*). In 1851 the name of the organization was changed to "Socialistic Gymnastic Union" (*Socialistischer Turnerbund*).

The Turners affiliated politically with the Free-Soil Party, but declared it to be their aim to establish a Socialist Party in the United States. Professor Ely, in his work on the American Labor Movement, already cited, and after him Sartorius von Waltershausen, the German historian of the socialist movement in the United States, ascribe considerable importance to the part played by the gymnastic unions in the early stages of modern socialism in this country, but F. A. Sorge, who has had the advantage of personal observations and recollections, disagrees with them on that point. At any rate, it does not appear that the gymnastic unions had any direct influence on the labor movement before the civil war, and after the war the Turners modified their political and social creed very considerably in the direction of conservatism, and changed the name of their national organization to North American Gymnastic Union, altho some individual locals still retain the word "Socialistic" as part of their name, and are still in sympathy with the socialist movement.

IV.—THE COMMUNIST CLUB

THE next organization of pronounced socialist tendencies to make its appearance in the United States was the Communist Club, organized in New York in 1857. But little is

known of the history of that club. Its membership seems to have been composed principally of men of the middle class who had received a good education in Germany. Their communism was based on philosophic rather than economic grounds, and their aim and views were set forth in a printed copy of their constitution, dated in October, 1857,* in the following language:

“The members of the Communist Club reject every religious belief, no matter in what guise it may appear, as well as all views not based upon the direct testimony of the senses. They recognize the perfect equality of all men, regardless of color and sex, and therefore they strive above all to abolish private property, inherited or accumulated, to inaugurate in its place the participation of all in the material and intellectual enjoyments of the earth. They pledge themselves with their signatures to carry out their aims in the present state of society as far as possible, and to support each other morally and materially.”

Their constitution also provided for the formation of branches of the club, but none appear to have been organized.

The only time the club attracted considerable attention was when it arranged a well-attended mass-meeting in 1858, in commemoration of the Paris insurrection of 1848.

V.—GERMAN SOCIALISTS IN THE CIVIL WAR

THE German socialists of the early period were, of course, in full accord with the abolition movement, and the abolition of chattel slavery was always one of their political demands. But as the impending contest drew nearer, the issue assumed greater practical importance for them, and when the war was finally declared it absorbed their attention to the exclusion of all other political interests.

*“Statuten des Kommunisten-Klubs in New York,” New York, October, 1857.

Each of the various groups of socialist organizations then in existence furnished its full quota of soldiers for the Union army. "The Turners from every quarter," relates Professor Ely, "responded to Lincoln's call for troops, some of the unions sending more than half of their members. In New York they organized a complete regiment in a few days, and in many places they sent one or more companies. There were three companies in the First Missouri Regiment, while the Seventeenth consisted almost altogether of Turners. It is estimated that from forty to fifty per cent. of all Turners capable of bearing arms took part in the war."

The proportion of soldiers furnished by other socialist organizations probably fell below the above figures, but was nevertheless quite considerable, and embraced some of the most energetic leaders of the young socialist movement. Joseph Weydemeyer served during the war on the Union side with great distinction, and was appointed to a post of responsibility in the municipal administration of St. Louis immediately after the termination of the war.

August Willich, who in 1848 was a member of the London Communist League, together with Marx and Engels, and who had come to the United States in 1853, enlisted in the army immediately upon the outbreak of the war, and having been rapidly advanced to the ranks of lieutenant and colonel, he was commissioned brigadier-general in 1862.

Robert Rosa, an ex-officer of the Prussian army and a member of the New York Communistic Club, served in the Forty-fifth New York Regiment, and achieved the rank of major. He died in 1901.

Fritz Jacobi, one of the brightest and most promising young members of the Communistic Club, enlisted in the Union army as a private. He was advanced to the rank of lieutenant, and fell in the battle of Fredericksburg.

Dr. Beust, Alois Tillbach, and many more socialists of less prominence were to be found in the ranks of the German

volunteers.* In fact, the war had thinned the ranks of the incipient socialist organizations to such an extent as to paralyze their activity, and it was not before 1867 that the movement commenced to recover.

*For the greater part of this information the author is indebted to the courtesy of Mr. F. A. Sorge.