

Chapter Twenty-two

DO YE HEAR THE CHILDREN WEEPING?



AFTER the Irish interlude I was ready to go on to Germany to carry out the most important objective of my journey abroad. It had become obvious that progress depended on finding a means of contraception, cheap, harmless, easily applied. Way back in 1914 Havelock had seen in some of the last medical journals to come out of Germany an advertisement of a chemical contraceptive. He had mentioned it to me, and ever since I had been eager to track it down. In pre-War Germany every advertised product had been required to live up to the claims made for it, the public must not be misled. Thus I was convinced that if the notice had stated it was to prevent conception, the assertion was true. No news of it had come since the War, and I wished to ascertain whether it was still being manufactured. Perhaps this formula would be the solution to our problem.

I had a secondary reason also for going to Germany—to investigate the decline in the birth rate. It was said half the married women had become barren during the blockade for lack of proper food. I was always looking for evidence to support and strengthen our arguments, and, consequently, wanted to discover what had been learned of the relation between vitamins and fertility.

Berlin was cold and dark when Rose Witcop and I, about eleven at night, arrived at Neukoln, a special proletarian section of the city. The train was late, an unusual state of things in efficient Germany, but this was the period of her greatest disorganization. The telegram which had been sent to Rose's sister and brother-in-law, Milly and Rudolph

Rocker, had apparently not been delivered, nobody met us. There were no taxis, no carriages, no lamps, no lights in the windows to relieve the pitch blackness. A sleepy, disgruntled porter led us across the street to an insignificant hotel. He knocked at the door, a head popped out of a window above. "Two ladies want to stay overnight." The proprietress said she could give us nothing to eat, but that we could have a room. We accepted gladly, climbed up a ladder into the same bed, piled high with feathered mattresses above and below us, and settled ourselves to comforting sleep after the long and tiresome journey.

In the morning, refreshed, we took a tram to the Rockers' small apartment. Rudolph was a syndicalist, a friend of Portet, and had been interned in a concentration camp near London during the War. Both Milly and Rudolph had suffered great privations after their return. But, although food was very scarce, they were more than prodigal and kind in sharing with us.

Germany was still no place for casual visitors in 1920. She seemed dead, crushed, broken. Street traffic, even in a metropolis the size of Berlin, was slight. I noted particularly the grim silence everywhere, people had forgotten how to smile. They were thankful for the Revolution, but it had not brought much relief, and the winter to come was dreaded. Instead of displaying food or clothing, the windows of shop after shop on street after street were decorated only with streamers of colored paper.

Everybody was ravenous for fresh vegetables, money meant nothing, food everything. I saw old peasant women coming in from the country with bags of potatoes on their backs. Fifteen minutes after emptying them on to pushcarts they were sold out. The only fruit to be had were plums, and that is how I remember it was late summer in Berlin, it is curious how such memories crop up.

Ordinarily I could go without eating if I had plenty of water, but in Berlin I found myself haunting grocery stores like a hungry animal, examining each new article avariciously. I cannot as a rule bear tinned milk and will not give it to babies, yet here when I saw a can of American evaporated milk, I found myself viewing it with glowing eyes. I was disgusted with myself. Nothing satisfied my appetite except eggs, and these, along with milk, could be purchased only on prescription from a doctor. Meat was reduced to half a pound a week for

each person, but I had no ration card. A neighbor of the Rockers obtained some bread for me and gave me her potatoes although she and her three lovely daughters had only rice as a substitute. I was in tears over her generosity.

For months many families had existed on nothing but turnips. They ate turnip soup, turnips raw, turnips mashed, turnip salad, turnip coffee, until their whole systems revolted physically against the sight of turnips. The contact with other persons in trams, halls, churches, even streets, was nauseating, in a few minutes the fumes of turnip from their bodies was so offensive that they became almost unendurable to themselves.

I went into a two-room home, clean but overflowing with ten children, five born since the War, starvation horribly stamped on their faces. The oldest was twelve—still too young to work. The father, a locksmith, had no job. All were living on a hundred marks received every week from Government Unemployment Insurance. It was now Saturday, and not one crumb or morsel remained to tide them over until the next payment on Monday. They had eaten no breakfast, no dinner, and the father had gone to the woods to search for mushrooms to keep them alive.

Even men who had employment were working only three days a week, averaging a hundred and fifty marks for a family, and marks were fifty to the American dollar. The best food had to be given to them because they were the earners. Women were the real sufferers, they had to go without or subsist on what they could scrape together. They nursed their babies beyond two years to supply milk, and all their time was occupied in a constant hunt to find nourishment for the older ones.

I heard countless stories from mothers who had been tortured by watching their children slowly starve to death—pinched faces growing paler, eyes more listless, heads drooping lower day by day until finally they did not even ask for food. You saw a tiny thing playing on the street suddenly run to a tree or fence and lean against it while he coughed and had a hemorrhage. Others like him were dying of tuberculosis from lack of eggs, butter, and milk—so many cows had been sent to France. Yet they came up to me and offered to sell their pre-

scriptions thinking that I, as a foreigner, had money to buy them, they themselves had none for these luxuries

The old-fashioned warrior who entered with the sword and killed his victims outright had my respect after witnessing the "peace conditions" of Germany

The Quaker food stations admitted only children who were ill and only mothers who were more than seven months pregnant or who were nursing babies less than four months old. The spectacle of one of these women bringing two or three of her brood, not sick enough to be regularly fed, to share her own soup was too sad and overwhelming to bear. Those in charge of the distribution wanted each mother herself to eat for the benefit of her unborn child or nursing infant, and were already crowded to capacity, feeding three and four hundred at a time on cocoa and rolls made from white flour. But they could not bring themselves to exclude the little scarecrows with large, starry eyes, pipestem legs, and hands from which the flesh had fallen until they were like claws. On one of my visits the "sister" had them stand up and then asked, "Where have you been?"

"To America," they chorused

"What have you to say?"

"We love America. We thank America."

I did not instantly comprehend, but it was explained to me that they called the station *Amerika* in token of their gratitude.

To account for the sorry state in which they found themselves the Germans were groping to fix the blame either within their country or on some foreign power. All seemed of the opinion that had the United States not entered the War, none would have been victor and none vanquished, this, they said, would have meant a lasting peace. Yet they felt little animosity towards us. What there was had been largely wiped out by the aid of the Hoover Commission. Furthermore, they still hoped we might be an influence in loosening the Treaty chains which kept them helpless and bound. When I asked them why they had accepted the humiliating terms at Versailles of which they complained so bitterly, they replied they had been told that, had they not done so, vast territories which supposedly had been mined would have been blown up and huge populations would have been annihilated.

The military party accused the Socialists of having stabbed them in the back and brought about defeat through the leadership of such pacifists as Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who had paid with their lives, the Socialists and workers regretted they had not united with Russia and, combining their own scientific and technical knowledge with her raw materials, conquered the world and thus molded all civilization to their ideals

Both classes sincerely believed that France wanted to destroy them utterly I saw something of the reason for their feeling one day when a tram stopped to let off passengers, and a French automobile filled with French officers, instead of halting the prescribed number of feet away, plowed right through, knocking down two people and never even pausing to see what havoc it had created The spectators gazed at the bodies lying there waiting for the ambulance They did not dare shake their fists, but anyone could tell from the pitch of their voices, their expressions of passion and anger, how bitter was their resentment

The women broke down all the reserves of my emotion They had been at one time the most advanced in Europe, politically, economically, and socially, and, although they had had to work harder at the gymnasiums than the men because higher marks had been required of them, they had been really on a par But now a frightful retrogression had occurred Working women had been forced down to a state beside the lower animals, they had become drudges in the fields in place of draft horses I saw one who could not have been past twenty-five carrying a huge basket of vegetables strapped to her back, the weight of which threw her forward so that I expected any minute to see her go on all fours

An impressive and tragic poster by Kathe Kollwitz was displayed on various corners It showed a woman with head thrown back, eyes closed, arms crossed over breast, and was captioned simply, "Waiting " The human figures you saw on the streets looked out of eyes dried by suffering and deepened by hunger They had no faith, no hope, no philosophy, they were resigned to love or hatred, peace or war, a living death or a sudden end

Throughout Europe, governments were clamoring for bigger populations, France was offering bonuses for large families "Our babies

are dying, give us more babies" Among European labor groups only the syndicalists of France had recognized excessive population as detrimental to the working classes

The deficiency in Germany of two million lives sacrificed in the War had been made up by the thousands returned from Alsace-Lorraine, from the former province of Posen, and the deportees from England, France, and Italy There were not nearly enough positions to go round Yet the nationalists, who had tried to cover the bitter pill of imperialistic ambitions with a sugar-coating of patriotism, still estimated the world in terms of numerical greatness and women as mere machines in the cradle competition of human production Even the German Socialists, following in the footsteps of Marx, opposed Malthusianism vigorously in and out of season

A Neo-Malthusian congress had been held in Dresden in 1912, but the movement then organized by Maria Stritt had practically gone out of existence and its place taken by a more popular demand for the right to abortion For a single year the statistics of Berlin indicated that out of forty-four thousand known pregnancies twenty-three thousand were terminated by this means, though it was technically illegal Women were now campaigning for a bill before the Reichstag to permit operations to be performed lawfully in hospitals, where fatalities could be reduced by proper sanitary care Not one of those with whom I talked believed in abortion as a practice, it was the principle for which they were standing They were resolved to have no more babies for cannon fodder, nor until they could rear them properly

Most of the doctors whom I interviewed said that what Germany needed was children and lots of them I asked one if the medical profession, as a whole, were doing anything to prevent entrance into the world of those children whose backs were so weak that they could never sit up straight, whose bones were too soft to hold the weight of their bodies He answered abruptly, "By aborting the mothers we are doing our best to cope with conditions as we find them It is not our work to change them"

I was hounding everybody to learn the whereabouts of the contraceptive formula for which I was searching, and was finally given the name of a gynecologist who should know, if anybody did, where it could be found I made an appointment, and he greeted me in the most

cordial way When I questioned him about the reported sterility of German women, he agreed with the argument that, the situation being what it was in the country, the population should be checked for the next five years "Here is a friend indeed," I said to myself

I then gently brought up the subject of abortion "Doesn't this seem a ridiculous substitute for contraceptives?"

The doctor rose, his chest sticking out, he buttoned his coat, bowed formally, and inquired, "Where did you say you came from?"

"New York City"

"Are you sure you are not from France or Belgium?"

"Certainly not"

"Nobody who has the welfare of Germany at heart could talk to me as you have this morning Only enemies could come here to give such information to our women"

I wished he would sit down, he made me nervous But I went on "Why is it such an act of enmity to advocate contraceptives rather than abortions? Abortions, as you know yourself, may be quite dangerous, whereas reliable contraceptives are harmless Why do you oppose them?"

To my horror he replied, "We will never give over the control of our numbers to the women themselves What, let them control the future of the human race? With abortions it is in our hands, we make the decisions, and they must come to us"

That was not the tone of this doctor alone but also that of most of his confreres

Thinking that Dr Magnus Hirschfeld might know about the formula, Havelock had given me a letter to him, and I presented it at the Institute of Sex Psychology, where abnormalities were being studied and treated This most extraordinary mansion, bestowed by a prince of Bavaria who had himself been cured of inversion by Dr Hirschfeld, was furnished sumptuously On the walls of the stairway were pictures of homosexuals—men decked out as women in huge hats, earrings, and feminine make-up, also women in men's clothing and toppers Further up the steps were photographs of the same individuals after they had been brought back to normality, some of them through adaptation of the Voronoff experiments in the transplantation of sex

glands It was not a place I particularly liked, although I was interested to see how a problem which had cropped up everywhere in the post-War confusion was being attacked

Dr Hirschfeld was kind and gave me the address of a firm in Dresden which he believed might be manufacturing the formula, so off I went to that city It was memorable for my meeting with Maria Stritt, a darling little old lady, as quaint in her way as Dr Vickery in hers This tiny aristocrat, like one of the dolls for which her city was famous, had a fine vigorous mind, and spoke English with care and a better choice of words than most Americans Again I made the rounds of the doctors and again found none concerned over birth control, I went to the address where the formula was supposed to be, only to be directed on to Munich

Munich, to me the most lovely city in Germany, seemed the most prosperous of any I had visited I noticed a difference immediately, the streets were cleaner, the people less hungry-looking There was more food, more clothing in the shops, and much greater activity It had always been synonymous in my mind with music and *Liebfraumilch*, and I was delighted to be asked to dine at a hotel which I was told was the smartest and gayest in town "Oh, we envy you You'll have dancing, you'll have wine, you'll have everything " But it turned out to be a night club in the most blatant New York style, one table elbowing another, the people—Germans, not tourists—dancing to last year's jazz, the whole place shrieking nouveaux riches This, too, was part of post-War life

Bavarian *gemutlichkeit* could not be altogether downed On Saturdays the trams were literally jammed with men and women, young and old, who had put on their climbing clothes, donned their packs, and here hieing themselves away to near-by resorts or to the hills With them went their guitars or accordions, and when the singing began everybody knew all the words—no tum-de-tum-de-tum If they did not have their own instruments there was sure to be a wandering musician to play, and the floors of every hostelry or open-air *biergarten* were literally filled with whirling, waltzing figures Everyone seemed able to enter into the folk dances, although to me they appeared complicated—many steps, much precision, and a great deal of dignity

Hunger and poverty existed in plenty, however, in the city. Hospitals were lacking in the simplest and most ordinary articles—no soap, no cod-liver oil, no rubber sheets, insufficient clean linen. Even the babies had to lie all day in wet diapers, and consequently the poor little waifs were a sad, miserable lot. Another tragic thing which gave me nightmare for weeks was to see children's mouths covered with running sores, because the sole available meat and milk came from cattle suffering with hoof-and-mouth disease.

Here at Munich the "birth strike" was most violent. The former medical chief of the Communists told me the women of Bavaria were determined to stop having babies, he himself had given information to thousands and had intended to establish clinics all over the state had the Communist Republic remained in power.

Only the preceding spring the Communist red flag had for three weeks flown from the house tops of Munich. I met representatives from both sides of the political arena. The middle- and upper-class conservatives claimed the revolutionists had not been capable of managing affairs, being good agitators but not good organizers—able to start things but not knowing how to finish them. They had not given up their guns, money had been put aside and peasant costumes and boots were ready for escape, because the existing bitterness made it likely the struggle was not yet settled. Communist leaders, on the other hand, claimed they had allowed their enemies to flee and then had been tricked and fooled, and knew at last they could expect no quarter. Their ideals, their faith in humanity, their consideration, had cost them their lives and liberty, and they would not forget this valuable lesson.

At a meeting of the Communist Party I was introduced to Mrs. Erich Muhsam who, with her husband and their friend Landau, had gone to the front and distributed leaflets to call the boys back home. Landau, a gentle soul who so believed in the goodness of man that he had pleaded with the soldiers to be brothers and not to take life, had been kicked and clubbed to death by the White Guard, which had afterwards marched to the Muhsam apartment and, when they could not find anybody there, had wrecked it with machine guns. Fortunately for the Muhsams they were already in jail.

Though the Revolution was supposed to be over, Erich Muhsam was still imprisoned. In every country during such upheavals thousands

are cast into jail and, unless some other upheaval occurs to get them out, they remain there, many pacifists in the United States were not freed until long after the Armistice

In 1928 I saw Erich Muhsam—every inch a poet, an artistic and delicate organism, almost helpless-looking. In 1935, under Nazi rule, he was returned to a concentration camp—a hangover on the black list

The account of his fellow prisoners ran something like this. One afternoon he had been told to “report at headquarters and bring a rope”

“Where can I find a rope?”

“I don’t know. Get it!”

“They’re going to kill you,” he was warned as he started out, still lacking a rope

“Oh, it’s just one of their jokes—a form of torture”

“You may be right, you’ve scarcely lifted a voice”

But that evening his comrades discovered him dangling by the neck from a beam. They said he could never have climbed up himself and that, furthermore, he had been beaten to death before he had been hung there

Nevertheless, officially he had committed suicide

I met in Germany probably a hundred thorough-going conservatives and only one Muhsam, and yet he it was who stood out spectacularly

My own interests were keeping me busy enough. I finally found that the formula I was seeking was made in Friedrichshaven, on Lake Constance. I initiated a correspondence with the chemist, asking him to come to Munich, and enclosing stamps to make sure of his reply. He could not make the journey but, instead, invited me to Friedrichshaven.

All the passengers on dismounting at the station seemed to have someone to meet them except myself. I noticed a smallish man with what appeared to be bangs under his hat, front and back, standing on the platform and holding a tight bunch of wild flowers wrapped up in a newspaper, a matching one in the buttonhole of his coat, but as far as I could see he was serving no special purpose there. I went to a hotel, and in a very short while the little man himself arrived, having identified me as the American lady he had come to greet. His quaint bouquet was my welcome to Friedrichshaven.

The chemist, with his father and brothers, ran an unpretentious factory which, in addition to other products, was making the contraceptive in the form of a jelly. It had been put out before the War, then dropped, and was now just starting up again and beginning to find a market in Germany. He feared to let me go near his establishment, suspicious that America might steal his formula. But he showed me a picture of it, and gave me a few sample tubes, saying I could obtain others from his sister, who was going to act as his agent in New York. Thus was inaugurated a new phase in the movement—the use of a chemical contraceptive.

I had letters of introduction to several people in Russia, and had hoped to be able to go there, but I had commenced handing out my extra dresses, underwear, stockings, shoes in Berlin, my friends had so little and were so generous that I could not endure it, and now, in the face of an approaching winter of hardship, without wardrobe and no prospect of securing one or even sufficient food, I had to abandon the Russian plan.

I had talked clinic, clinic, clinic while I was in England. Having myself been convinced, I wanted the Neo-Malthusians also to believe that it was a better way than advice through literature. A few of them were assembling to meet me in the Netherlands, and thither I turned my steps. As soon as the train north was over the border, cream was brought and delicious fruit, the contrast between one side and the other was too obviously brutal and awful. It almost made me ill to see so many delicacies in the Dutch shop windows when children in Germany were starving.

With the Drysdales, to Amsterdam came Dr. Norman Haire, Australian born, a gynecologist who had settled in London, sensed the public interest in birth control, informed himself thoroughly on the subject, written a great deal about it, and become prominent in the movement, advocating contraception from his Harley Street office.

As Dr. Haire and I went around visiting clinics we found that the countless stores where contraceptives were sold had fitting rooms in back with midwives in charge. They did not maintain the old Rutgers standards. I was disappointed to see the deterioration which had taken place since 1915. During the reorganization period of Europe the tendency, under Russian influence, was for young laborites to be in

charge of things, and they aimed to turn out Dr Rutgers and the Dutch Neo-Malthusians and put clinics, which were dedicated to the workers, on a strictly utilitarian basis. Here as elsewhere they could agitate and tear apart but lacked executive ability. The new board, composed mainly of laymen, did not realize that such technical knowledge and experience was required as only a physician like Dr Rutgers possessed. He was a sad and unhappy man, profoundly discouraged over the odds against which he had to struggle.

Nonetheless, my English friends were converted to the idea of clinics, and Bessie Drysdale and Dr Haire planned to open one soon in London.