YOUTH, 1913–1933

The town of Lübeck, in which Willy Brandt was born on 18 December 1913, was a wealthy city which owed much of its prosperity to its port on the Baltic Sea. It had been a member of the Hansa League, and its leading patrician class was characterized by centuries of world-wide trading links which had instilled the seemingly quiet confidence which the novelist Thomas Mann depicts so well in Buddenbrooks. For the town this meant excellent cultural and educational provision from which the young Willy Brandt was later to benefit greatly. However, there was another side to the city: a poor working class which prided itself on its own traditions and culture. Between the two there was little contact.

Brandt was born Herbert Ernst Karl Frahm, the illegitimate son of a 19-year-old sales assistant; he adopted the name of Willy Brandt only later, when he was forced to hide his true identity after Hitler had come to power in Germany. He belonged thus to the other, the poor Germany. His grandfather in his youth had been a labourer on a landed estate in Mecklenburg where he was still treated like a bondsman with corporal punishment for a slight offence. He had revolted and eventually moved to Lübeck where he became a factory worker and later the driver of a factory lorry. This grandfather was to some extent typical of the rising, self-improving working class of the early 20th century, with a small library in which August Bebel’s Women and Socialism had a prominent place. Brandt’s mother showed the same characteristics. She tried to speak proper German (as against the local dialect, Platt, normally used in working class circles). She was an avid reader, regularly borrowing books from the cooperative library. She belonged to the workers’ dramatic society and had an annual subscription to the local People’s Theatre where the German
classics were regularly performed – Schiller more than Goethe because he was more ‘revolutionary’. Brandt's mother could recite long passages by heart. When Brandt was born his mother had to continue to work and therefore left him in the care of a neighbour. Brandt remembers himself as having been a lonely child, left to himself for many hours and without many playmates.1

His mother and grandfather never mentioned his father's name. Brandt, according to his latest memoirs, only dared to make enquiries much later, after the war. He found that his father was John Möller, a clerk in a firm in Hamburg who died in 1958 without ever having shown any interest in his son. Möller apparently had the reputation of having been exceptionally gifted with the wish to become a schoolmaster. To those who knew him he had been an ‘impressive personality’.

Up to the age of five Brandt was brought up exclusively by women. His life changed when his grandfather returned from the First World War in 1918. Brandt called him papa immediately and formed a deep attachment to him (although he later discovered that he was not even his real grandfather). It was therefore not surprising that when his widowed grandfather remarried in 1919 Brandt showed intense jealousy of his 'step-grandmother', called her aunt and remained aloof from her. Brandt lived with them and now saw his mother only twice a week. She did not seem to show much close interest in him although she loved dressing him up in smart clothes; pictures survive showing a pretty child in an array of different outfits, such as the uniform of a soldier of the Wilhelmine army or that of a sailor.

Brandt was a very bright boy, easily the best of his class, who loved reading. At thirteen he won a scholarship, first to a secondary modern and then to the Johanneum, a local grammar school of great reputation. The four years spent at the Johanneum were decisive for his intellectual development, and Brandt recalls particularly the German and History teacher who, through informal discussions, was always stimulating, provoking contradiction and debate. The open-mindedness of the staff was illustrated by the fact that during his final year he was allowed to write an extended essay about the former Social Democrat leader August Bebel – grammar schools in the Weimar Republic were normally notoriously nationalist and