

Contents

PART I

The German Years

1. Beginnings	3
2. First Concepts	10
3. Lewin as Teacher	20
4. Tension Systems and Field Theory	29
5. The Experiments	40
6. Growing Renown	48
7. Last Days at the Berlin Institute	64

PART II

The American Years

8. The Beginnings of a New Life	73
9. Setting New Forces in Action	86
10. Early Iowa Years—Social Theory and Social Problems	96
11. Topology and the Representation of Psychological Forces	111
12. Experimental Studies	119
13. Widening Circle	132

14.	Action Research in Industry	141
15.	Testing Theory in Action	153
16.	The Search for Help	160
17.	The Dynamics Underlying Group Life	166
18.	Action Research in Community Affairs	173
19.	Launching Group Dynamics at M.I.T.	178
20.	Launching Programs of Community Action	191
21.	Some Major Action-Research Projects	201
22.	Unifying Themes and the Last Days	219
EPILOGUE		
	An Enduring Influence	227
	APPENDIX A: A Bibliography of the Works of Kurt Lewin	238
	APPENDIX B: The Berlin Experiments	244
	APPENDIX C: The Topology Group—1935	260
	APPENDIX D: Iowa Studies	262
	APPENDIX E: C.C.I. Publications	267
	APPENDIX F: Research Center for Group Dynamics Publications—1945–1950	277
	Index	285

PART I

The German Years

CHAPTER



BEGINNINGS

The psychologist finds himself in the midst of a rich and vast land full of strange happenings; there are men killing themselves; a child playing; a child forming his lips trying to say his first word; a person who, having fallen in love and being caught in an unhappy situation, is not willing or not able to find a way out; there is the mystical state called hypnosis, where the will of one person seems to govern another person; there is the reaching out for higher and more difficult goals; loyalty to a group; dreaming; planning; exploring the world; and so on without end. It is an immense continent full of fascination and power and full of stretches of land where no one ever has set foot.

Psychology is out to conquer this continent, to find out where its treasures are hidden, to investigate its danger spots, to master its vast forces, and to utilize its energies.

How can one reach this goal?¹

Kurt Lewin, who wrote these challenging words, was born in the tiny village of Mogilno in the Prussian province of Posen, now part of Poland, on what he used to describe as “the ninth nine of ninety” —September 9, 1890. His father, Leopold, owned and operated a general store; the family lived above it. A few miles from Mogilno, he also owned a small farm, which his son Kurt loved. As a small-

¹ Kurt Lewin, “Formalization and Progress in Psychology,” *University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare*, 1940, 16, No. 3.

town boy, free to wander in grassy fields and pine forests, Kurt developed a feeling for nature. He liked gardening, became handy with tools, and developed great skill in woodwork and mechanics.

The boy looked very much like his father, but in temperament seems to have been more like his mother, Recha. She was filled with energy and drive and nurtured high aspirations for her four children, whom she raised while she worked in the family store. Hertha was the eldest; then came three sons, Kurt, Egon, and Fritz. The mother, articulate and warmhearted, was always busy. Leopold ran the shop and took a hand in community affairs, serving for a time as president of the Mogilno synagogue. In this close and affectionate family, Fritz, who was tall, athletic, and high-spirited and excelled at sports, often came home late, but, no matter what the hour, his mother was always waiting for him. Her patience made a deep impression on Kurt, who also was frequently tardy. Kurt's wife, Gertrud, thinks that he measured the depth of a woman's love or a friend's affection by their willingness to accept his habitual tardiness.

The Lewins, a thrifty, middle-class family, were fairly comfortable. Their social life centered on family, relatives, and neighbors. Their circle also included the families of coreligionists from neighboring towns, for in the Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm II, all Jews were subjected to overt, publicly approved discrimination. In the small towns of eastern Prussia, the landed aristocracy and the army officers' corps constituted the top social level. Members of these groups shunned all social contact with Jews, though they were willing to do business with them. Few Jews, even though they might meet the educational requirements, could aspire to a responsible post in Germany's civil service or to a commission in the Kaiser's peacetime army. Thus, anti-Semitism was a fact of life with which Jewish children became familiar early, both at school and in the community. Since Prussian law required that every child receive religious instruction during the elementary-school years, Kurt and his brothers attended Jewish religious classes. At the age of thirteen, each went through the Hebrew Bar Mitzvah ritual. But this Jewish involvement did not inhibit the family's celebration of Christmas.

Beginnings

They exchanged gifts and looked upon the holiday as a festive occasion.

The Lewins wanted their children to have the best possible education, and they realized that Mogilno's limited facilities could not provide proper schooling. Hence, while he was still in elementary school, Kurt was sent to board with a family in Posen, the provincial capital. Then, in 1905, the family moved to Berlin, where fifteen-year-old Kurt was enrolled in the Kaiserin Augusta Gymnasium. In elementary school Kurt had not been an outstanding pupil. Though not a difficult child, he had displayed occasional temper tantrums and his family nicknamed him the "Furious Herring." His high intelligence was not even suspected until his last two years of high school. In 1907 he was introduced to Greek philosophy and fell in love with it. It was a love that lasted all his life. During this same period his scholastic record improved remarkably.

At this time in Germany there were three different types of gymnasias: the oldest (of which the Kaiserin Augusta was an example) was of the humanistic type and stressed the study of the classics—especially Latin and Greek—with some mathematics, and very little science. The two other types, though they also laid less stress on the classics, offered more instruction in science. When Kurt entered the gymnasium in 1905, Berlin was not only an elegant imperial city but also the capital of German scholarship and a world center of scientific achievement. The universities were organized around the original "four faculties" of the medieval period—theology, jurisprudence, medicine, and philosophy—and any subject that could not be assigned to one of the first three was classified as philosophy. Thus all the natural sciences, the social sciences, the liberal arts, and the humanities came under the faculty of philosophy. It was therefore possible and customary for students to shift at will from the sciences to the arts and from the arts to the sciences. Psychology was still taught as a division of philosophy, as, indeed, it was in many American universities even years later.

In April 1909, Kurt, after completing his term at the gymnasium, entered the University of Freiburg, planning to study medicine and become a country doctor. Apparently he found the anatomy

courses at Freiburg too distasteful, however, and he transferred his interest to biology—an interest that would endure throughout his life. But he stayed at Freiburg for only a single semester. In October 1909, he registered at the University of Munich, but he remained there too for only one semester, and, in April 1910, he registered at the University of Berlin, where he worked for his doctorate. He took courses, among others, in philosophy and was especially attracted to the theory of science. In one of his classes at Berlin, he wrote a paper on the question of concepts in the various sciences. His instructor challenged one of his statements and suggested he check to see whether it would hold true for psychology. It marked the beginning of Lewin's serious work in the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin, whose director at the time was Carl Stumpf.

In 1910, the year in which he returned to Berlin, Lewin finally committed himself to a career as a university teacher. Neither of his parents seemed to object to his choice, although they knew that discrimination against Jews was strong in all German universities and that his chances of becoming a full professor with tenure were extremely slight. But they gave him their approval and furnished the needed financial support.

At the University of Berlin, Kurt found a lively group of students that included several girl graduates of the one school which did prepare girls for the university. "Kurt seemed to fit right in . . . a natural, good fellow," Dr. Hedda Korsch, one of them, recalls. "He was popular in whatever circle he joined. He was a person to laugh with. He enjoyed dancing, and was a genial companion to have along on weekend hikes, when we had long discussions about democratizing Germany and liberating women from the conventional restrictions on their freedom." The group, often as many as nine or ten, walked together to the University from their residences, noisily debating social problems as they went. Their talk soon led to action, and they organized a series of evening classes for working-class adults, which they staffed with members of their earnest group. "The public authorities," Dr. Korsch remembers, "were deeply suspicious of the project, which the students referred to as

Beginnings

'workingmen's courses' and which were for both men and women, though hardly any women came. The curriculum was severely restricted, and during the first year the instructors were allowed to teach only the 'three R's.' Courses in geography, history, or free composition were forbidden as likely to prompt subversive actions. But each year the group got more concessions for more subjects, and the pupil enrollment grew. The students serving as the faculty soon had two or three assistants. All who took part in this venture did so with intense enthusiasm."

The zeal and zest of this extramural activity did not extend to the students' own classrooms. There the professors lectured and the students took notes—but apathetically and without much real concern. During their third and fourth years, they attended seminars where one or another might ask a respectful question, offer an occasional objection, or raise an issue. (The privilege of speaking up was not, however, readily granted to the women students, whose presence was thought to inhibit such masculine academic freedoms as smoking and beer drinking.) When the time came for Lewin to choose a dissertation director (or "thesis-father"), he selected Carl Stumpf. A leader in redirecting the study of man's mind from the discipline of philosophy to that of science, Stumpf had been appointed professor of psychology and director of the Psychological Laboratory at the University of Berlin in 1894. He was a man of wide-ranging interests; both a philosopher and a psychologist, he was interested, too, in primitive music and created a psychology of sound. He also was the founder of the Berlin Association for Child Psychology and the developer of original theories of space perception and sensation.

Though he would preserve the traditional aloofness of the German professor in his relations with Lewin, Stumpf did not have the overbearing Prussian manner characteristic of Wilhelm Wundt, founder of the first laboratory of experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig in 1878. Wundt's work attracted distinguished students and brought him into contact with William James, but he managed to alienate almost everyone by his dictatorial approach.

*clever
Harry*

For Stumpf, and for his contemporary Geheimrat G. E. Müller, Lewin never had anything but the highest regard. Both were members of the German Society for Experimental Psychology; they were decided empiricists; they had done a tremendous amount of exact experimental work in a variety of fields; and they had very definite ideas and were militant enough to put up, when necessary, a stiff fight in defense of their views. Lewin believed that Stumpf was an outstanding pioneer of the new epoch of experimental psychology in Germany.

Stumpf began to teach in Berlin at a time when, according to Lewin, it still took courage to approach questions of the soul experimentally, in an atmosphere in which philosophy was the accepted king and in which experimental procedures seemed to be hopelessly distant from any problems of real psychological importance. Lewin's high regard for his mentor was well merited, for, during Stumpf's tenure as director of the Psychological Laboratory (from 1894 until his retirement in 1921), he attracted a brilliant faculty—Wertheimer, Koffka, Köhler—and it was while he was director that a whole new school of psychology, Gestaltism, was founded.

Stumpf gave his students an unusual degree of freedom, though to some it might seem more accurate to say "lack of attention." The thesis topic Lewin had selected was presented to Stumpf by an assistant, while Lewin himself waited in another room to learn if it would be acceptable. Lewin could not remember having ever discussed the matter with Stumpf between the time the assistant relayed word that his subject was approved and the day of his final examination four years later.

As a student, Lewin himself generated excitement by his open criticism of conventional theories. His curiosity and unusual insights impressed his classmates. "Kurt was an exceptional person," reports Hedda Korsch, "and right from the beginning we felt that he was much more perceptive and active than the rest of us. He had a direct approach to the dynamic of people's minds. He would joke and say that he was like the boy in the fairy tale who saw that the emperor was wearing no clothes. 'That,' he said, 'was how *he* felt—that is what his approach to psychology should be.'"

In 1910, Lewin took a course in philosophy under Ernst Cassirer, toward whom Lewin always (as he put it) felt "the deep gratitude of a student toward his teacher." Thirty-six years after he listened to Cassirer lecture in Berlin, Lewin would write: "Scarcely a year passed when I did not have specific reason to acknowledge the help which Cassirer's views on the nature of science and research offered. . . . To proceed beyond the limitations of a given level of knowledge, the researcher, as a rule, has to break down methodological taboos which condemn as 'unscientific' or 'illogical' the very methods or concepts which later on prove to be basic for the next major progress."²

This was certainly true in Lewin's instance. He noted that, just as the infant science of psychology had to compete with the "grown-up sciences" of biology, chemistry, and physics, so did the experimental psychology of will and emotion have to fight for recognition "against a prevalent attitude which placed volition, emotion, and sentiments in the 'poetic realm' of beautiful words, a realm to which nothing corresponds which could be regarded as 'existing' in the sense in which the scientist uses the term. . . . Although every psychologist had to deal with these acts realistically in his private life, they were banned from the realm of 'facts' in the scientific sense."³ Emotions were declared to be something too "fluid" and "intangible" to be pinned down by scientific analysis or by experimental procedures. "Such methodological argument," Lewin noted, "did not deny existence to the phenomenon, but it did have the effect of keeping it outside the realm of empirical science." Armed with Cassirer's vision and his own genius, Lewin assumed the task of breaking the taboo and of treating in the psychological laboratory topics which had been considered outside the realm of science.

² "Cassirer's Philosophy of Science and Social Science," in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer* (New York: Tudor, 1949).

³ *Ibid.*