

CHAPTER

16

THE SEARCH FOR HELP

At the beginning of his search for funds, Lewin first came to the Field Foundation, then headed by the late Marshall Field, Jr. Thinking I was acquainted with Field, he asked for an introduction. That I did not know the philanthropist did not deter Lewin once he had made up his mind that the Field Foundation was a potential source of help for his project. He phoned Mr. Field directly from my office while my attention was engaged in another matter. I returned to hear: "Mr. Marshall Field, please. Kurt La-veen speaking."

This unhesitating directness did not bring Mr. Field to the telephone, but it got Lewin an appointment with Maxwell Hahn, director of Field's foundation. Hahn's memory of his first meeting with Lewin is vivid. He describes him coming "shyly" into the rather modest offices of the Foundation in New York. "Unassuming and self-deprecating, Professor Lewin outlined convincingly his ideas for an institute to help democracy learn how to handle its group problems more efficiently and less prejudicially." Indeed, Lewin was so persuasive that Hahn insisted that his visitor join him at home for dinner and keep talking—an event, Hahn states, quite unheard of in foundation circles.

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Soon after, Hahn went to Iowa City to evaluate Lewin and his ideas and came away confirmed in his initial impression. What especially caught his interest was a factory in which Alex Bavelas was working on an action-research experiment to improve employee morale. Hahn reported to the Foundation that Lewin merited its support.

“Although Kurt did not know it,” Hahn comments, “he approached us when the Foundation’s funds were extremely limited and had been overcommitted.” Yet he undertook to provide Lewin a grant of \$30,000 to be paid in two installments of \$15,000 a year, the money to be used to set up the proposed center. This was in 1943.

The next year Lewin unexpectedly found an additional sponsor for his institute, the American Jewish Congress. Lewin at various times lectured to community organizations on minority problems and intergroup relations. He had published articles on these subjects. Some of these came to the attention of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, then President of the American Jewish Congress, which had voted in the spring of 1944 to establish a research institute of exactly the kind Lewin was projecting. It was to be especially concerned with the causes of group prejudice and finding the methods that would be effective in eradicating them. Dr. Wise saw in Lewin the kind of scientist such a project would need and suggested that Rabbi Irving Miller, the Congress vice-president, explore with Lewin the possibility of his taking on this pioneer job.

It took Miller some time to reach Lewin, who was mostly in Washington and out of reach in the secret offices of the OSS. When Miller caught up with him by phone during one of his brief visits to Iowa, he agreed to see Miller after returning to Washington. Because of Lewin’s relations with the OSS the encounter took on a cloak-and-dagger quality which today seems comic. Lewin said he would be arriving on an early train; the location of the OSS being classified, Lewin had Miller meet him for breakfast in the Savarin Restaurant of Union Station at seven o’clock of a hot July morning.

Lewin listened somewhat distractedly to Miller’s proposition regarding the project of the American Jewish Congress to set up a

research center for the study of community relations with a focus on group discrimination. A million dollars would be available for the study. Lewin suggested that he and Miller meet with me at my home in New York City the following Sunday. Miller agreed and Lewin telephoned me about the arrangement.

I was spending the summer with my family at a resort community on Long Island and invited the two there. Lewin promptly agreed but he had characteristically missed getting Miller's name (he referred to him in conversation as "this rabbi"), but somehow gave Miller the impression that the meeting would take place at the home of a man named Merrill rather than Marrow.

Meanwhile, Lewin asked me to get him an account of the American Jewish Congress, about which he knew little or nothing. The report about its financial strength was not encouraging, though the Congress did have a notable history of social action. Organized in 1918, the Congress had among its founders Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, Judge Julian Mack, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and other leading American Jews. In 1919, its representation had worked to have confirmation of the Balfour Declaration favoring establishment of a "Jewish national home" in Palestine written into the Versailles Treaty. In 1933 it had launched an anti-Nazi boycott and it had since been fighting Hitler and Nazism in every way it could. But it was only one among many Jewish organizations doing so. Although its leadership was distinguished, its resources were so small that they barely covered its budget. Various persons to whom I talked doubted that the American Jewish Congress would be able to raise the million dollars of which Rabbi Miller had spoken.

The report did not discourage Lewin. The Congress project appealed to him because its preoccupation with anti-Semitism came close to home to him, and because it could provide just the conditions he felt were necessary for the broad scale application of his conceptions of action research and group dynamics.

On the Sunday set for the conference, Lewin arrived early. He spent most of the pleasant sunny afternoon on the beach and finished off with a dip in the ocean. I remained on my porch waiting for Lewin's guest to arrive. As the afternoon drew to a close, I saw

approaching a distant relative of mine by marriage, Rabbi Irving Miller. We greeted each other, each unaware that the immediate agency of our present encounter was Kurt Lewin. After a little chit-chat, Rabbi Miller said he had to run off; he was due at six o'clock at the home of some people and was already a few minutes late. He set off down the street.

About fifteen minutes later he came by again, this time with a worried look. He wanted to know if I knew the people who lived on that street. Being a summer resident, I didn't. Did Miller have the number of the house or the name of the family he was seeking? Maybe someone inside might know.

"I'm not quite sure," Miller replied. "I believe it's Merrill. But there's no one by that name at the address I was given." So, frustrated, Miller began to tell about the man he had encountered in the Savarin Restaurant in Washington and how they had agreed to meet this day at a friend's house in Long Island.

"Are you talking about Kurt Lewin?" I asked.

"Yes," exclaimed Miller. "How did you know?"

Why I knew surprised him even more. And as we talked about it, Lewin came up wet from his dip.

In my library, where the three of us at last settled down to confer, Rabbi Miller was surprisingly realistic in his account of the project and ways and means. I was skeptical about it; there were the inevitable hazards in pioneering social research for an organization like the American Jewish Congress. It would want a quick payoff, whereas such studies are a long-range affair. I urged Lewin to hold off.

Lewin couldn't. He was eager to set up such a research center. "The idea of doing pioneer work in 'action research' that hopefully might provide an example big enough to revolutionize certain aspects of our social life," he wrote me shortly after the meeting, "is too attractive to be delayed. The stake is so high and so difficult that its attainment is more important than any other consideration." With his projected center for group dynamics well to the fore in his mind, this seemed a perfect chance to combine theory with action research. "I am ready to go to any lengths to find a productive solution," the letter continued. "Social action is part of the changing

social world. Security, I realize, will have to be established every day anew. But I am ready to take the risk."

Lewin was aware that an organization like the American Jewish Congress could not receive community support unless its research program met community needs head on. "Pure" research hence would be out of the question. But in a separate statement of his design for a commission, Lewin delineated the combination of experiment and application he termed "action research." The combination was ideal, he declared, for scientists whose chief concern was geared toward action, toward changing the world while simultaneously contributing to the advancement of scientific knowledge.

Before he could start coupling theory with experiment, however, Lewin had to secure an academic location for the proposed center. He wanted it at a large university, preferably in a city troubled by the variety of vexing industrial, community, racial, and leadership problems he wished to study. The center would, of course, have to have the autonomy the project required, but its relations with the university's departments of social science, especially of psychology, sociology, and anthropology, would require close cooperation.

Five or six institutions seemed natural choices, but Lewin concentrated, as his friends advised, on two: the University of California at Berkeley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. California's Professor Edward Tolman and M.I.T.'s Professor Douglas McGregor undertook the task of urging the plan upon the presidents of their institutions.

Having stayed in Palo Alto in 1932-1933 and having spent the summer of 1939 in Berkeley, Lewin was enthusiastic about California's climate, especially because of the extreme severity of winters on the Midwest plains. His preference went automatically to the Pacific.

In August 1944, Rensis Likert arranged a dinner in the garden of the Cosmos Club in Washington, at which MacGregor and Lewin met to exchange thoughts about the idea of such a center at M.I.T. McGregor and Lewin were equally enthusiastic about the center and McGregor returned to Boston determined to win President Carl Compton's approval. Meanwhile, President Edward Sproul at

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Berkeley found the idea promising, but needed time to think it through before asking the California Board of Regents to act on it. Carl Compton, M.I.T. president, responded similarly to McGregor.

At this time Lewin's position at Iowa was becoming difficult. His desire to set up a special kind of research center was no secret there, and many felt that he could not possibly discharge his duties at the Child Welfare Research Center and work at all the other tasks he was taking on. Iowa authorities wanted to be advised of his intentions.

Lacking a definite commitment from either California or M.I.T., Lewin's mind was not made up, but, with the Iowa people pressing him, he called Douglas McGregor at M.I.T. to ask for a definite yes or no. McGregor again got in touch with President Compton, and Compton, after a brief hesitation, answered "yes." Lewin was sent a formal invitation to set up the Research Center for Group Dynamics at M.I.T. His predilection for California's climate delayed his acceptance a day or two, but accept he did and gratefully. Two days later, Tolman called him with the word that President Sproul had mailed the formal invitation to set up the center at the University of California. But Lewin had already accepted M.I.T.'s offer and had begun to collect a staff and the balance of the money needed to support the institute.