

# CHAPTER

# 18

# ACTION RESEARCH IN COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

With his characteristic commitment of time, energy, and enthusiasm, Lewin undertook the task of launching his two new and parallel commitments: the Commission on Community Interrelations (C.C.I.) for the American Jewish Congress (A.J.C.) and the Research Center for Group Dynamics at M.I.T. Each effort was typical of Lewin in action.

In laying the groundwork for the C.C.I. project, he made many trips from Iowa to the Atlantic Coast, taking the twenty-four-hour train ride repeatedly in order to go over plans with Lippitt, McGregor, Likert, French, Cartwright, and a number of other colleagues in New York and Washington. Of key importance was Charles Hendry, who was to become the first research coordinator for C.C.I.

The Hendry-Lewin relationship went back to 1940 when Hendry first learned of Lewin from an article in *The New York Times Magazine* on the Lippitt-White "autocracy-democracy" study. Fascinated by the story, he invited Lippitt, then teaching at Southern Illinois, to join the Research and Statistics Staff of the Boy

Scouts of America, of which Hendry was then the director. Lippitt accepted the invitation. Shortly thereafter, Hendry invited Lewin to serve as a consultant to the Boy Scouts' research program.

One day in the summer of 1944, Lewin phoned Hendry from Washington to "discuss a matter of urgent importance." He was coming to New York. Would Hendry meet him at Pennsylvania Station? Hendry did, then took him by bus to his apartment near Columbia University. Once settled down on the two-decker, Lewin quickly turned to business. "I shall never forget that ride," relates Hendry. "Lewin was bursting with exhilaration. Greetings, courtesies, and formalities completed, he opened his briefcase and produced a typewritten document, one obviously in the process of revision and refinement. Lewin insisted it be read then and there, atop the bus."

While Hendry strove to read amid the turmoil of traffic below, Lewin tried to protect the manuscript from the wind and to interject comments as if to underline the ideas. What Hendry was trying to read was the first draft of a memorandum to the American Jewish Congress on the establishment of C.C.I. It called for a broad program that would use scientific methods to search out the roots of anti-Semitism rather than its overt symptoms. "I was quickly aware," Hendry recalls, "that I held a precious document in my hands. I knew it then intuitively. I know it now in retrospect with deepened sensitivity."

Several weeks later, an eight-page letter, supplementing Lewin's outline in detail, came from Ronald Lippitt, who had left the Boy Scouts to join Lewin in the OSS. Lippitt listed (for the president of the American Jewish Congress) other considerations which he and Lewin had taken into account. "The American Jewish Congress," Lippitt quoted Lewin as saying, "is very anxious to make this an 'intercultural' project rather than a research on Jews." The whole idea was "to make very fluid the roles of researcher and practitioner." Lewin foresaw "promise of very significant adventure from all angles."

As in his earlier projects and programs, Lewin's optimism, energy, and enthusiasm were a driving force. Convinced that social science

could be used in new and more effective ways to deal with practical problems of group and community life, he remained unmoved by arguments of those A.J.C. members who feared that social scientists would "try to tell people what to do" or by those "practical-minded" persons who brushed off social sciences as "merely common sense."

In a letter to Rabbi Wise, Lewin declared, "We Jews will have to fight for ourselves and we will do so strongly and with good conscience. We also know that the fight of the Jews is a part of the fight of all minorities for democratic equality of rights and opportunities, and that the liberation of the minorities will in fact be the greatest liberation of the majority. If we establish a Commission on Community Interrelations we do so with the knowledge that the Jews cannot win their fight without the active help of those groups within the majority which are of good will. It wants to work hand in hand with these groups. It will not try to use non-Jewish friends as a front to spare Jews from doing any part of the fighting that they themselves should do; but it will try to get positive cooperation between all groups in those areas of community living which count most."

Planning sessions were held in Cambridge, Washington, and New York during several months, with Lewin constantly on the go between the three cities. His physical endurance was a source of amazement to his associates. Hendry remarked, "I remember him saying one day that during the First World War he sometimes became so weary that he actually succeeded in sleeping while he marched in a column of soldiers." After one strenuous organizational day in New York, Lewin almost repeated this feat.

Lewin spoke often of the hopeful role of group dynamics and action research in human affairs. But he cautioned that the plans for it depended on discovering through scientific study the answers to such questions as the following:

Under what circumstances does a neighborhood which is open to Jews become all Jewish?

When does it stay "mixed"?

Which procedures in giving jobs to minority members serve to increase, and which to decrease, group tension?

Under what circumstances and to what degree is the building of self-respect among minority members a prerequisite for improvement?

How can one avoid the "shot-in-the-arm" effect, which improves intergroup relations for a while, only to have them fall back again to earlier or even lower levels?

What kind of training and education facilitates adjustment?

What problems develop in a community with the arrival of minority group members?

Which methods of dealing with these problems resolve them most readily?

Lewin was absorbed by these critical questions. He was now ready to make his laboratory "the individual," as seen in his groups, in his community. Tension, conflict, crisis, change—these were the targets upon which he trained his mind. His basic assumptions, hypothesis, and methodology could not be confined within the neat traditional boundaries of any specialized field, school of thought, or established system. His research undertakings were problem-oriented, cutting across and mobilizing the theoretical knowledge and the technical resources of all relevant disciplines.

He quickly began the task of assembling a staff for C.C.I. Charles Hendry was invited to serve as coordinator of research. With his acceptance, C.C.I., the first research organization of its kind, was in operation.

Lewin's letter of invitation to Hendry was a mixture of seriousness, light banter, and unconscious prophecy. "The whole thing will be an adventure," he wrote, "and I see you writing wonderful memoirs about it after your 80th birthday, with a lot of poetry and beautiful prose."

Lewin's acknowledgment of Hendry's acceptance, four days later, retained only the seriousness of the invitation: "I know that we will have to face an unknown number of obstacles, the most severe of which, I am sure, is hidden from us at present. The sailing for a while may be easier than I expect. But somewhere along the road, maybe in a half-year, maybe in two years, I am sure we will have to face major crises. I have observed this type of development in many research undertakings, and we will have to be unusually lucky if this time we avoid it. To my mind the difference between

success and defeat in such undertakings depends mainly upon the willingness and the guts to pull through such periods. It seems to me decisive that one knows that such developments are the rule, that one is not afraid of this period, and that one holds up a team that is able to pull through.”

It was during this period that Lewin announced to the staff that he had decided to change the pronunciation of his name. He stated that his children had difficulty explaining to their friends why the family name was spelled “Lewin” but pronounced “Laveen.” To avoid further embarrassment to the children, he asked his colleagues to use the American pronunciation rather than the German.

But most of his associates found it difficult to shift from the familiar German pronunciation. Lewin himself often inadvertently reverted to calling himself “Laveen” and there was frequent laughter about it. The confusion continues to the present time, and colleagues of the Berlin and Iowa years and their students still alternate between “Lewin” and “Laveen.”

Cartwright tells of the graduate student in his class who found the lecture on topology very difficult. Cartwright suggested that the student read the book *Principles of Topological Psychology*. Several weeks later the student reported back to him: “That book you recommended by the fellow Lewin is no easier to understand than that Professor Laveen you are always quoting.”