

CHAPTER

7

LAST DAYS AT THE BERLIN INSTITUTE

During this period the work of the Psychological Institute was at its crest. Then danger signals appeared. As the 1930's opened, Europe's economic prosperity began to fade. The Wall Street crash of 1929 dried up American investment. Amid the bitter grumblers and scapegoat-seekers, reinforced by the economic distress of the country, Hitler and his party gained the political strength to take over the German government.

On the day in 1930 when the new Reichstag met, a Nazi delegation of 107 marched to the meeting in their brown uniforms, shouting in chorus, "Germany awake! Jews get out!" They smashed the shopwindows of Jewish-owned department stores on the Leipzigerstrasse. Three Nazi-inspired riots broke out at the University. The rioters demanded: "*Juden heraus!*" and one Jewish student was murdered. The University was closed three times; but most of the faculty, though troubled by what they saw and heard, continued to feel that the situation was temporary, that Nazism was a passing madness and that "it couldn't happen here." Still, it was unsettling, and the Lewins, who saw more clearly than some of their friends what might happen, were apprehensive. And then, of course, it did happen.

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About this time, and by happy coincidence, Kurt received an invitation to spend six months as a visiting professor at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. The bid came from Lewis M. Terman, Chairman of the Psychology Department at Stanford, who had asked Edwin G. Boring, Director of the Psychological Laboratory at Harvard, to recommend a distinguished visiting scholar with a broad background. Boring had heard Lewin at the International Meeting at Yale in 1929 and suggested that Lewin was the best man. Lewin welcomed the invitation and decided to accept.

In May 1932, Kurt arrived in New York, where he stopped for a few days en route to California. Gerti and their year-old daughter, Miriam, went ahead by boat through the Panama Canal. As a guest at the Columbia University Faculty Club, Lewin was introduced to a young assistant professor of psychology, Gardner Murphy, who subsequently became a good friend. Murphy remembers being introduced to a "slender, rosy-cheeked, eager, thoughtful young man," who, in his rather broken English, spoke earnestly of the political happenings in the Germany he had just left. Then Lewin went on to describe experiments he had been conducting at the Psychological Institute. He projected an interest in his subject that was warm and intense. Murphy was fascinated; he hurried home to look up Lewin's recently published article on the environmental forces in child behavior and development.

Shortly after reaching Stanford, Kurt was asked to deliver a paper before a meeting of the Western Psychological Association. According to Roger Barker, Terman was considerably worried for fear Lewin couldn't speak English. "And, as I soon learned, rightly so. He couldn't. I know *now* what the paper was about," says Barker, who, as a doctoral student in psychology at Stanford, attended the meeting. "But at the time I hadn't the faintest idea—partly because of his language, and partly because his ideas were so entirely foreign." Lewin discussed the subject of "substitute play"—that is, activities that serve as substitutes for uncompleted tasks. But since none of his hearers was familiar with his experiments with uncompleted tasks, nobody understood what he was saying.

In his classes, however, Lewin was able to get across to his stu-

dents, some of whom began to get an inkling of his theme. "He was a great communicator," observes Barker's wife, Louise. "He could gesture and he was so eager to tell you what he was trying to say that you just had to understand, and so you did."

One of Lewin's students that summer was Pauline Sears (Mrs. Robert Sears), who enrolled in Lewin's class at Terman's suggestion. She does not recall having too much trouble with Lewin's English, but she did have difficulty in understanding his ideas about topology and in following his diagrams—a new experience for her. "His English wasn't terribly good," she remembers, "but he was a stimulating personality, vital in his gestures, and he had brought with him marvelous motion pictures." Years later, in 1938, Lewin invited Robert Sears—who had done work in level of aspiration at Illinois—to a meeting of the Topological Society at Cornell. Sears and Neil Miller, who went with him, were the only non-Lewinians there. Both Robert Sears and Roger Barker recall one phrase from Lewin's then limited stock of English which delighted his classes and stayed in his students' memories. Someone challenged Lewin on a point, and he retorted, "Can be, but I sink absolute ozzer." The remark became a kind of slogan among Lewin's increasingly numerous friends and supporters.

For one thing, the German professor was a natural democrat, something his students were quick to appreciate. Barker remembers Lewin's lying down on a table in a classroom one afternoon. "I guess it was a long day, so he just lay down but kept the class going—certainly an un-German thing to do. Yet, despite his popularity, his ideas were so new—so startling, really, and so far beyond any of us at the time—that he really didn't have much impact on his students or even his fellow faculty members. Lewin had a background in philosophy and he had his own theory of science. None of us were equipped to follow him because we lacked his background. So we listened but did not fully understand or appreciate the originality of his ideas and the scope of his theory."

Lewin's appointment at Stanford ended with the beginning of the spring semester. Early in January 1933, Gertrud, who was expecting a second child, had set out across the United States with Miriam

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to return to Germany by ship. Kurt had decided to return by way of the Pacific, so that he could make stops in Japan and Russia, where he had been invited to lecture. Leaving Japan, he would proceed by way of the Trans-Siberian Railroad across the U.S.S.R. to Moscow and continue later by train to Berlin.

At Yokohama, Lewin was met by his student of a decade earlier, Professor Kanae Sakuma, who had modeled the Psychological Institute at Kyushu University upon the Institute in Berlin. Lewin's reputation had preceded him to Japan, and there was a lively discussion following his lectures and the showing of his famous movie of Hannah learning how to sit on a stone. Lewin was delighted to discover that a number of young scholars in Tokyo had formed a group to study his work, which they called the "Lewin-Klasse"—a group largely responsible for Lewin's influence on Japanese psychology.

He had an intense discussion with Professor Koreshige Masuda of Tokyo University, who expressed some serious doubt about the merits of Lewin's topological psychology. It was typical of Lewin's approach to a problem that, several days later while on a train from Tokyo to Kansar, he worked out a diagram that he felt would dispel Professor Masuda's reservations and asked Professor Sakuma to show it to him.

Meantime, little Miriam became ill en route to New York, and Gertrud had to delay their sailing. They were house guests of Fritz and Grace Heider in Northampton, Massachusetts, on January 30, when word came that Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany. Kurt heard the news just before he began his long train journey across Siberia, but, as he could not read the Japanese newspapers, he did not grasp the full impact of the event. Only after he reached Moscow, where his friends Bluma Zeigarnik and the distinguished Russian psychologist A. R. Luria were able to discuss it with him in German, did he fully realize what had happened.

By this time Lewin had concluded that he could not remain in Berlin. He foresaw then that no Jew and no man concerned with the spirit of free inquiry could live in Nazi Germany. He cabled

Fritz Heider at Smith College and Donald MacKinnon at Harvard:
GERTILAND IMPOSSIBLE. DO YOU KNOW OF A JOB?

Gertrud and Miriam had arrived back in Germany in April, about a month before Kurt himself returned. The Nazi grip was already tightening. She and the little girl went to Gertrud's mother in her home town of Sagan, and Gertrud sought to engage the non-Jewish obstetrician in Berlin who had delivered Miriam. The doctor was disturbed that she had come to him—German medical men were no longer supposed to treat Jewish women—but he did deliver the Lewins' newest child, Daniel. Gertrud saw more of what was happening in Germany. A Jewish physician in Sagan had the temerity to contradict a Nazi bully in the street. He was beaten so terribly that he died of heart failure a few days later.

Gertrud was at the railroad station in Sagan to meet Kurt on his return in May 1933. There he told her of his decision not to stay in Germany any longer. He said he would not teach at any university where his own child could not be a student. Shortly thereafter, he formally resigned from the University of Berlin and was proud ever after that he had not waited to be ousted.

Gertrud gave birth to Daniel in July and slowly recovered her full strength. One Sunday morning as she and Kurt talked of their hopes of getting to America and how difficult the life of a mere immigrant might be as compared with that of a visiting professor, the maid brought them a cable from Dean Robert Ogden of Cornell University: CORNELL INVITES YOU TO JOIN THE FACULTY. Lewin was elated, but there was so little time and so much to be done before the arrangements for the family exodus could be completed that it was decided that Kurt should go ahead without Gertrud and the children. He left Germany in August 1933, never to return.

The great days of the Berlin Institute had come to an obscene end; its "extension," the Lewin home, would no longer belong to them. The cafes, so often the scenes of brilliant intellectual debate, had become the hangouts of the toughs of the Nazi *Schutzstaffel*—the so-called Elite Corps. The Nazis took over the Institute in 1935. Though Köhler could have kept his professorship, he resigned in the summer of 1935 and accepted an appointment at Swarthmore

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College. He was the last of the big four to leave. Max Wertheimer was at the New School for Social Research, Koffka at Smith College, and Lewin by then was moving to Iowa.

En route to the United States, Lewin stopped at the University of Cambridge in England, as the guest of Sir Frederick Bartlett, the distinguished British psychologist. The visit remains particularly vivid in the memory of Eric Trist, later of London's Tavistock Institute, who was then a student of Bartlett's at Cambridge. Trist had come across Lewin's article on Aristotelian and Galileian modes of thought in 1932 while studying psychology at Cambridge. "I read it almost by accident," he says, "while browsing through some psychological journals in the Cambridge library. It was a revelation. When I returned to the department, Professor Bartlett asked me, 'What happened to you?' My eyes were evidently sparkling. I told him about this extraordinary paper. My interest in and debt to Lewin began from that moment."

A year later, when Lewin visited Professor Bartlett at Cambridge, Eric Trist was one of those whom Bartlett invited to tea.

Trist vividly remembers Lewin gesticulating and talking excitedly about topological psychology. Trist got the feeling then that Lewin "had a sense of musical delight in ideas." He was reminded of Coleridge and thought that Lewin was like him in that he too was a poet with a brilliant imagination. Trist added, "I always look at books like *Topological Psychology* and the ideas of vectors and hodological space as the first drawings for a Michelangelo picture—the sketches being the design of a theory."

The conversation at tea and during the visit to the centuries-old college was so vigorous that Lewin barely made his train to London for the connection with the boat-train to Southampton. Trist recalls pushing Lewin into the compartment as the train was moving.

Lewin's ideas had a powerful effect on British psychology and resulted in considerable Lewinian influence during World War II and in the decade that followed.