

MEMORIES OF THE DAYS SHORTLY BEFORE AND AFTER LEWIN'S DEATH

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Dear Friends,

I am indeed honored to have been invited to add my tribute to the memory of Kurt Lewin. Due to my advanced age with all its ravages, I regret that I cannot be with you in person. One advantage, however, of my approaching graduation from the brotherhood of octogenarians is that I am in that select group of living psychologists who had personal interactions with Lewin for an extended period of time (specifically from 1938 to 1947). My judgment that he is one of the truly great figures in the history of psychology is based not only upon study of his numerous publications but perhaps more importantly, from close association with him in the arduous enterprise of creating psychology.

Over the years, I have undertaken several critiques of "Lewinian Psychology". Since these can be found in the published literature I shall not attempt to summarize them here. Instead, I shall draw upon my own memories of the days shortly before and after Lewin's death, hoping in this way to convey a more personalized understanding of just how much Lewin was admired and loved by psychologists around the world at the end of his life.

As fate would have it, it became my sad task to inform the relevant people of Lewin's fatal heart attack in the early hours of February 12, 1947. After notifying the staff and students in the research Center for Group Dynamics and the relevant administrative officials I turned my attention to the wider world of professional psychology.

I began with a group of psychologists who Lewin called "the topologists". The core of this group included his most loyal friends and enthusiastic supporters living in the United States. Many of these people had studied with Lewin in Berlin and had become the earliest American advocates of the "Lewinian approach" to psychology. Over the years the "typology group" had grown to approximately one hundred members from institutions all over the United States. I quickly discovered that I did not need to call many of these individuals because they had already heard the news via an informal communication network that connected them to one another. Within an incredibly short period of time we began receiving messages of shock, sorrow, and sympathy from Lewin's "topologists". They could hardly believe that such an inspiring person with so many promising plans for the betterment of society would no longer be with them.

I next wanted to convey my sad news to Gordon Allport, the distinguished psychologist at nearby Harvard University. Allport had been helpful to Lewin in so many ways that I did not want

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Allport to learn of Lewin's death from some indirect source. I knew, however, that he usually spent the mornings at home and that Mrs. Allport was instructed to protect him from all interruptions. Nevertheless I called his home. When I explained the purpose of my call she let me talk to him immediately. He said that he would go at once to Harvard and inform the psychologists and other social scientists there of Lewin's passing. A few days later a friend of mine at Harvard told me that Allport had put a notice and brief tribute on the bulletin board at the entrance to the Department's central office. Then a remarkable thing happened. When faculty and students saw the notice, an atmosphere of quiet mourning filled the hallway as small groups of people shared with one another their feelings of shock and loss. My friend told me that this hushed atmosphere persisted throughout the day.

Another group of people that I wanted to reach consisted of a relatively large number of Lewin's fellow psychologists who had resided outside the United States during the Second World War. Lewin resented the fact that he had been deprived of any interaction with these people for more than six years. He had kept a file in his office of their names, mailing addresses, and topics he wanted to discuss with each of them. This was a truly international group of Lewin's friends and associates from countries around the world. I wrote to these people informing them of Lewin's death and the matters he wanted to discuss with them. I received a sufficient number of replies to be assured that "Lewin's Psychologists" were still in action around the world.

I would like to share with you one of these replies. It came from Aleksander Luria, probably Russia's most respected twentieth century psychologist. Writing from Moscow, he said that Bluma Zeigarnik, who had been one of Lewin's best known Berlin students in the mid-1920's, was in his office when he opened my letter. Thus they learned, together, of Lewin's death, and they grieved, together for the loss of dear friend and superb psychologist.

By far, the most distressing of my memories of Lewin were concerned with his plans for the future. His time was tightly scheduled with projects of various sorts most of which involved many other people. For example just a few hours after his early morning death on February 12, 1947, he had planned to fly from Boston to New York City for a day of conferences and meetings. From his point-of-view the most important of these was with a group of philanthropists who might be persuaded to provide financial support for the establishment of a Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Hebrew University located in Jerusalem. He had planned this presentation for months, and it was about to take place. He was quite confident that Israel would soon be recognized as a nation and that such a research center would make important contributions to the solution of many problems that this new nation would face. However, his death meant that this meeting never took place, and Lewin would never see such a research center or the recognition of the nation of Israel.

Lewin's death had a similar impact on the many other plans that he was developing. His death meant that never again would Lewin be involved in these projects and interpersonal relationships. The finality of this fact was very hard to accept.

This concludes my description of events more than fifty years ago. I hope that I have contributed some understanding of Lewin as a person and have added something to the tribute to a great and beloved individual.