

## THE KURT LEWIN I REMEMBER

### Thomas Lewin

My cousin, Dr. Miriam Lewin, who is Kurt Lewin's daughter and a retired professor of psychology at Manhattanville College, is too ill to attend this conference, so that's why I'm here today to tell you about the Kurt Lewin I remember. Miriam does, however, send her best wishes.

I only met with my uncle once, and that was when I was a teenager, because he left Germany for America shortly after I was born, and died just two years after I arrived in America. I escaped to England from Berlin, my hometown, in March 1939, just before my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, and spent the first 1.5 years living at a boys Boarding School. I spoke only German when I arrived but when you're in total immersion, you pick up a new language pretty quickly! My aunt and uncle, Herbert and Sabine Jessel, came to England from Berlin on Sept. 1, 1939 the same day the German army marched into Poland, which was the real beginning of World War II, although if you talk to many Americans, they'll probably tell you that World War II started on Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, because that's when the United States went to war in the Pacific, and in Europe. I went to live with the Jessels early in 1941, a year and a half after they'd arrived in England, switching to a day school close to where they lived, and then moving to another boys Boarding School for my last two years of British schooling.

When the war ended in 1945, I joined a group of 100 people, most of them Germans, sailing to America to be reunited with family members. We were a flotilla of American soldiers returning home from Europe, one of the last Atlantic convoys of World War II, on duty because not all the German U-Boats had surrendered yet! I was going to America to be reunited with my father, Egon Lewin, Kurt's brother, who had also escaped the Holocaust. My father had decided to settle in middle America, rather than New York City, to re-establish his pioneering burglar and fire alarm business, so he was living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, about 400 km Northwest of Chicago, and was not able to meet me due to wartime travel restrictions. I spent my first week in America with my uncle, Gunther Jessel, who had also escaped to America and was living in New York City. Then I went by train to visit my uncle, Kurt Lewin, his wife, Gertie, and their children, Daniel and Miriam, who were living in Upper Newton Falls, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb not far from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Kurt was Director of the Research Institute for Group Dynamics, which he had recently founded.

I enjoyed my one-week visit, although what I really wanted to do was to take the train to Minneapolis, so I would finally be reunited with my father, whom I hadn't seen since I left Berlin in March, 1939, shortly before my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. In retrospect, though, I was fortunate to have that time with my uncle Kurt, because he died very suddenly, and unexpectedly, of a heart attack less than two years later, in February 1947, when he was only 57 years old.

One of my memories of that visit gives us an insight into what kind of a man Kurt Lewin was. Kurt Lewin had an incredible focus on people's relationships with each other, and with their community. He was driving me to the train station at the end of my visit, and he suddenly started honking his car horn. He honked that horn again and again, for several seconds at a time, and when he finally stopped making all that noise, I asked him why he was doing it. He was grinning ear to ear as he explained that we had seen a wedding party driving toward us, and that he knew it was a wedding party because there had been a bride and groom riding in the front car, which was decorated with white ribbons, and because the parade of cars behind them were all honking *their* horns and when one meets a parade of cars like that in the United States, it's the American custom to honk one's car horn to congratulate the young newlyweds! Although I never saw Uncle Kurt again, after that one-week visit, recent conversations with his daughter, Miriam, and stories I remember my father telling about his brother Kurt, will give you more clues about the type of man Kurt Lewin was. Whenever he found himself in a new situation, he would engulf himself in every aspect of that situation so he could learn from it. In any scholarly field the people who become leaders are usually those who are alert and who recognize or intuit something new long before their peers do. Such awareness may transcend their immediate field of expertise, so it really opens up new opportunities for research. This was typical of much of his research methodology: study, analyze, participate, and learn.

Kurt Lewin was a Visiting Professor at Stanford University in California during the 1932-33 academic year. At the end of that school year Kurt traveled on to Japan, where he also lectured. He was always very aware of the world around him, and always tried to stay up on current events so he'd know what lay ahead, but during the two weeks he spent on the Trans-Siberian railroad en route home to Germany, he couldn't find any news about what was happening in the world, because the only newspapers available were printed in Russian. But when he finally found a newspaper on the train that he could read, he learned what was happening in Germany, now that Adolf Hitler was in power! At the very next station, he sent a telegram to his wife in Sagan, Germany, saying, GERTI LAND IMPOSSIBLE. He was afraid the authorities were already accessing incoming telegrams, and would read his message to his wife, so that way his shorthand way of telling Gertie that they should leave Germany as soon as possible. Gertie had been teaching kindergarten, and Kurt was a so-called private teacher at a university. Even before Hitler, German universities wouldn't give tenure to Jews, so he got paid according to the number of students he had, and earned much less than his tenured colleagues, and he never knew from one year to the next whether he would be re-hired – and when Gertie met him at the railroad station, he told her they had to leave Germany! Both of them were, in fact, fired from their jobs that year because they were Jews. Kurt was an ardent Zionist, and late in 1933 or early 1934, he went to Jerusalem to try to find a job at Hebrew University there. They desperately wanted him to join their faculty, but had almost no funds for new faculty and zero funds for research – and for Kurt, research was of the utmost importance. So Kurt and Gertie, and their children, Miriam and Daniel, left Germany for America in 1934, long before most of the world would realize what was happening now that Hitler was der Führer.

Kurt Lewin's early schooling was here in Mogilno, but even before it was time for him to go to the gymnasium, his parents moved to Berlin so he could get the education he would need to get into a university. For Jewish parents, as I'm sure you know, the goal always tends to be better and broader education for their children, and Uncle Kurt's education was a classical one – an



education highly valued by Jews. He took at least four years of Latin, Greek, and mathematics – but he couldn't also take English language classes, so when he came to America, he spoke very little English! In contrast, his wife, Gertie, came from a family that sent her to what they called in those days a Higher Daughters School – higher than elementary school, that is! – because there were no college courses for young women in those days. It was an advanced school for young ladies, where she not only learned how to needlepoint and cook, but also learned French and English, which meant that she was able to help Uncle Kurt communicate when he crossed the Atlantic and settled in America!

After World War I, Lewin married his first wife, Maria Landsberg with whom he had two children, Esther and Reuven. Kurt and Maria were divorced in 1926, and when the Nazis came to power, Maria and the children emigrated to Palestine. Later, Esther came to live with her father and his second family in Iowa for four years, so she could attend the University of Iowa, and she and Miriam became very good friends. After graduation, Esther returned to Israel where, eventually, doctors diagnosed both Esther and Reuven with schizophrenia. Perhaps Maria also suffered from this disease. It is a sad story.

There is an entertaining story however, that Miriam told me about Kurt Lewin's university education, and I'm sure this is one you'll appreciate! In Germany before the early 1920s, Ph.D. candidates *never* could actually talk with their Dissertation Supervisor, who was known as Herr Doktor Professor so-and-so, and could only be reached via formal letters written to the Professor's Assistant, who would then take the communication to the Professor, who would then reply via his Assistant! Uncle Kurt had taken many courses from Professor Karl Stumpf during his years of study, so Kurt decided to ask Dr. Stumpf to be his Dissertation Supervisor. He wrote up his thesis proposal and submitted it to Dr. Stumpf via Dr. Stumpf's assistant, who took it to Dr. Stumpf and reported back to Uncle Kurt that Stumpf had accepted it. Uncle Kurt later said that he could not ever recall discussing his work or the contents of the thesis until after it had been completed, accepted and approved. These stories are interesting for what they tell us about relationships between graduate students and their faculty in that era in Germany. I trust that none of you can or would treat your students that way today!

During Kurt's early years in America, he threw himself wholeheartedly into both teaching and research. And unlike Professor Stumpf, he was fully involved with his graduate students because, he said, he learned as much from them as he was able to teach them!

He did have some interesting language problems, though. Before he left Berlin, he had started taking English lessons from one of his graduate students, but it turned out that the student came from a lower-class neighborhood in the Bronx, in New York City, and spoke with a very thick Bronx accent, so Kurt's friends told him he'd better find a new teacher, because he couldn't teach in a college in America if he spoke bad New York English!

One day, when Kurt was invited, as a distinguished professor, to attend, and comment on, a lecture given by a famous American psychologist, his response after the presentation was *I zink everyzing other*. He thought he was praising the professor, not insulting him – but although the audience laughed loudly, they, as always, appreciated his comments! But he enjoyed that sort of interplay, and so did his colleagues, because he was a very warm and friendly person, and did have a good sense of humor.

Hitler often proclaimed that democracy was an inefficient style of government, and that you get a lot more done if you're autocratic. While teaching at the University of Iowa, Kurt decided

to do a study on youngsters who were signed up for after-school arts and crafts classes, to see how the children reacted to different kinds of leadership by the adults leading them. He decided to study two styles of leaderships: a democratic style and an autocratic style. Each was carefully defined in an Operational Definition, which included a list of behaviors the leaders should and should not adhere to. You are probably all familiar with this study, published by Lewin Lippett and White. Lippett and White were two graduate students who worked with Kurt Lewin. At one point, Ralph White was supposed to act like a democratic leader, but the trained observers, who wrote down what the leader actually did, discovered that White had failed to act according to Lewin's instructions for the democratic leadership role.

Many researchers would have just thrown out the data White collected, but Uncle Kurt looked carefully at what White had done and decided to name White's behavior the "Laissez-faire" leadership style, meaning "let it go," or "let it be." They then redesigned the study to include all three types of leadership, and many years later, White told my cousin Miriam that he considered the finding that laissez-faire leadership was not at all the same as democratic leadership and had different effects on the boys' behavior *the single most important finding of that research project* (emphasis added). Many people still make the mistake of confusing democratic and laissez-faire leadership today, and when the laissez-faire leadership does not reach the desired results, they conclude that democratic leadership is a failure! We can also question whether some of the failures of the leaders of the Weimar Republic also rested on that confusion between democratic and laissez-faire leadership. Again, many, if not most, researchers would have tossed out that study as having been improperly designed, but Kurt Lewin used it as an important exercise in how to analyze data.

Another bit of trivia about Uncle Kurt was that he never bought a new car in his life, because he believed that doing so was a waste of money. He also loved music, and one day, while he was living in Iowa City, because he was teaching at the University of Iowa, he was driving along a country road with one of his students, listening to a Mozart symphony on the radio. He became so enthralled with the music that he started to conduct the orchestra with both hands, but fortunately his student grabbed the car's steering wheel before it could run off the road!

And another family anecdote is about his wife's sister, Lena Weiss. When Lena was studying for her Ph.D. under Martin Heidigger in Germany, she spent ten long years as Heidigger's „go-pher" – an American slang word for an unpaid assistant who is expected to do research for his or her professor, run errands, and do many other things than would normally be expected from a graduate student. But then, at the end of her ten years of study for her Ph.D., Hitler was just coming to power, and Heidigger, who was already a devoted Nazi, refused to grant her Ph.D. degree because she was Jewish! She succeeded in escaping from Germany and spent the rest of her life in England, where she was never able to teach at any of the top universities, but did teach at one or more not-so-famous colleges. Kurt often said that being an academician never prevented people like Heidigger from blindly following their countries' leaders, or political direction. And, as of course I'm sure you realize, we still need to be aware, and concerned, even today, when well-educated so-called experts make pronouncements that are near-sighted, and/or questionable. A popular joke among some Americans in higher education today is that they'd prefer to be governed by the first 200 people listed in the telephone directory, rather than by academics!

But to get back to Kurt Lewin, another story about what was happening in Germany, during his second year in the U.S. as a guest lecturer, is that Gertie and Miriam had come to California



with him. But by the time Kurt was to leave for Japan, Gertie was pregnant with their second child, and they decided that Gertie and little Miriam should go back to Germany without him, via the Panama Canal. That way, Gertie could have her baby at home in Germany, where she knew her doctors, and Kurt would be able to concentrate on his academic work and his lectures while he was in Japan, without having to worry about his wife and newborn child. But when Gertie went to her doctor in Silesia, who had delivered Miriam in 1931, he turned her away, because she was a Jew, so she had to find another doctor.

The only book-length biography of Kurt Lewin is Alfred Marrow's *The Practical Theorist*, published in 1964. Marrow was a businessman, as well as a trained psychologist, and he'd gotten to know Kurt quite well, and worked with him. Marrow hired Kurt to improve productivity in Marrow's pajama factory because Kurt was convinced he could make that happen by having workers participate in decisions that affect the way their tasks are organized and carried out. Marrow became so interested in Kurt Lewin and his ideas that he wrote the book, whose title comes from one of Kurt's favorite sayings: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory". The book is still in print and can be found on Amazon.com. There are also four volumes available from what was intended to be an eight-volume set of Lewin's work, published by Graumann, and I understand that Dr. Robert Kleiner, who is also speaking at this conference, is preparing a book on Lewin's pioneering contributions to developmental psychology. And last but not least, you can also use the world-wide web to access taped interviews with people who knew Kurt Lewin, and to access commentaries on Kurt's work, and other materials, which are archived at the Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron, in Akron, Ohio, which has a state-of-the-art preservation system.

It's been a pleasure to meet so many of you, and a real honor to be invited to attend this conference, and to talk to you about my never-to-be-forgotten uncle, Kurt Lewin.