CHAPTER

2

FIRST CONCEPTS

After Lewin had completed the requirements for his degree in the early summer of 1914, he volunteered for army service. World War I broke out very soon after, and he served in the army for most of the bitter four years of fighting. (The degree was conferred on him in 1916.) He entered the army a private and left it a lieutenant with an Iron Cross. Despite his background as an intellectual, Lewin adapted very well to being a soldier. Forced to make long marches on foot, he learned the infantryman’s trick of sleeping standing up—even when walking or marching. He spoke of this with amusement in later years and occasionally used this skill again.

The years 1914-1917 comprised the period of victorious advance for the Kaiser’s army, but the great spring offensive of 1918, which was intended to be the final push, floundered by midsummer on the banks of the Marne. Lewin had, in the interval, been wounded and hospitalized. (His youngest brother, Fritz, had been killed in action.) On furlough as a convalescent, Lewin filled the time with considerable thinking and some writing. Although strongly antimilitarist and deeply opposed to German nationalism, he had not found the war experience entirely unbearable. Being the kind of person he was, Lewin developed an interest in some of his duties and occasionally even found a chance for fun or at least an escape from military boredom. What saved him from the monotony, horror, and despair of four years in the trenches of World War I was his unquenchable
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curiosity. He continually conceptualized his experiences—as may be noted in his article “The War Landscape,”¹ which was published in 1917 during his furlough.

Professor Fritz Heider ² points out that this article provides a preview of many of the concepts—such as “boundary,” “direction,” and “zone”—which Lewin later defined in a systematic way. Indeed, the article is the first preliminary statement of the concept of “life space” which was to become one of Lewin’s lifelong themes. In it, he tells how the appearance of the landscape is transformed as a soldier approaches the front lines. The physical environment looks different because of the particular perceptual needs of the onlooker: a soldier at the front requires physical safety, food, a favorable position with respect to the enemy, and so on. It is a soldier’s needs, Lewin wrote, that cause him to see the landscape in one way and not otherwise. When the soldier is still a long distance from the front the peace landscape—as Lewin termed it—seems to stretch endlessly on all sides and is without direction. But as he gets closer to the front, the landscape seems to take on boundaries. It has a direction and a front and a back. This transformation, Lewin wrote, cannot be described simply as an awareness of increasing danger. Rather, it is experienced as a feature of the objective landscape.

Lewin described the difference between “peace things” and “battle things”—how the same objects can be experienced differently when seen in the context of peace or of battle. “What lies within the battle zone belongs to the soldier as his legitimate property, not because he has gained it by force of arms, but because in the context of battle everything is seen as something to be used for military purposes. Even barbaric acts such as the burning of furniture in war cannot be compared with the same acts in peacetime.” Lewin described the impression of incongruity when he had to get straw for bedding, or coal for fire to warm his dinner—in the battle zone. It seemed absurd, he declared, to suddenly use battle things as peace things.

In another paper published the same year and based on his dissertation, Lewin expressed his growing belief that motives have much to do with association; indeed, he set motive over against the frequency and contiguity to which the force of association was attributed at that time. He wrote that his work in psychology "began before World War I with experiments on association" and then went on to explain that his "intention was not to criticize associationism but rather to refine the measurement of the 'strength of the will'"—as developed by Asch, whose work at that time was the most theoretically precise in the field. But after three years of experimenting with nonsense syllables and reaction times split to one thousandth of a second, Lewin came to a stop. He felt there was no point in trying further to improve the exactness of the measure. He was also convinced that "association" alone could not account for the phenomena under observation and that there was need for a new explanation and a major modification in theory.

For Lewin, the year 1917 was memorable for something other than the publication of the two papers. While on furlough, he married Maria Landsberg, a close friend of Hedda Korsch. Maria was a teacher of German and English in one of the new high schools for girls established in 1912. Considered outstanding in the classroom, she continued teaching, with brief interruptions, after her marriage. Lewin and his bride lived first in an apartment in the Berlin suburb of Charlottenburg. Around 1922, they bought a house in a development near Tempelhof Airport. The area was an oasis of small, moderately priced single homes, surrounded by the big city. Kurt's sister, Hertha, and her family, as well as Karl and Hedda Korsch, also bought homes in the same suburb. Their children—the Lewins' daughter, Agnes, was born in 1919 and a son, Fritz, in 1922—were all about the same age. This, and the circumstance that all three families lived within easy walking distance, made for close and frequent social contact.

The Lewins had begun their marriage in the period of civil and economic turmoil experienced throughout Germany after World

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War I. The Kaiser abdicated, and, as the armistice went into effect, the German parliament met in Weimar to consider what to do. The stress and strain of political instability were in evidence everywhere. Inflation soon made German money worthless. But though life in Berlin, as elsewhere, was troubled and insecure in the early 1920's, the University tried to carry on. At the old Imperial Palace, which now housed a part of the University, a number of rooms had been assigned to the Psychological Institute, and it was here that Lewin came after being demobilized.

It was—despite the precarious political and economic situation—an exciting period for all intellectuals and especially so for Lewin, for whom the years at the Psychological Institute marked the beginning of his productivity and saw the laying of the foundations of his theoretical concepts and experimental methods. At the Institute, where Köhler and Wertheimer were breaking new ground in psychology in the formulation of their Gestalt theory, Lewin found an exciting setting for his own work. It seemed to him that Köhler and Wertheimer were opening doors too long held closed by the older revered figures of German psychology.

Against the traditional mosaic conception of phenomena as aggregates of distinct parts, the Gestaltists argued that perception could and should be considered in terms of “forms of organized wholes.” The wholes, they maintained, are different from merely sums of their parts; they take on an added characteristic or quality; they are entities with distinctive structures—changeable, to be sure, by any change in any part, but, although changing, definitely recognizable wholes, or Gestalts. Thus, the “solidity” of a brick wall was something more than the sum of the bricks in it. All mental experiences are patterned in this way; they take on a new aspect which depends on how they are “organized.” Such organization precedes and influences the experiences.

This Gestalt holism impressed Lewin. Though he was never a completely orthodox Gestaltist, he did become a vital force in the new movement and contributed to it his own special insights. To Lewin, Gestaltism seemed closer to actual experience than did piecemeal analysis, which had prevailed in psychology during his
prewar student days. The broad implications of Gestalt principles for the process of perceiving and thinking held immense promise, particularly as they might be applied to men at work.

Early Views on Applied Psychology

Lewin’s pioneer interest in the possible applications of psychology to the work environment was reflected in a paper he wrote in 1919 on the role of the laborer in agriculture, and in a second, written in 1920, on the laborer in industry. In the first essay, Lewin compared the organization of work on the farm with that in the factory. He pointed out that factory jobs are specialized and specific, whereas farming calls for much less division of labor. In the fields, more of the whole person is engaged and the farmer gets a certain satisfaction from working in the open air, caring for animals. The aptitudes involved are not as readily identified by aptitude tests as are the skills needed by a factory worker.

Furthermore, with the new machinery and advanced mechanization being employed in farming, more consideration should be given to their best use. This, obviously, turns on how the machines are designed and maintained and on their relation to the user’s muscles, how he tires, recovers and so on. Doing a hard job standing up might be more “economical” physically than an easier job performed bent over; a more comfortable handle might be more essential to the effective use of a tool than the distribution of its weight according to the rules of physics. The relation of the tool to the material on which it is used is another factor. In sum, the most efficient tools are those which fit both the worker and the material with which he works.

Lewin proposed a series of studies aimed at finding the most efficient method of doing each job and the most effective handling of

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each tool. The investigation of this complex psychophysical problem, Lewin suggested, might be restricted initially to a single tool—for example, the hoe—which could be examined systematically and experimentally. An investigator need only go where the work is, look, listen, and record. No apparatus is necessary. What is needed is a new angle of vision—and close cooperation between the research psychologist and the practical farmer. Such an inquiry, Lewin acknowledged, would be a scientific novelty. And, though practical results could not be guaranteed, the mere development of useful testing methods for farm work might be a vital contribution to a neglected area of psychology and life.

The second of Lewin’s early papers discusses the “Taylor System.” Frederick Winslow Taylor, an American industrial engineer often called the father of scientific management, aimed to achieve greater industrial efficiency by the elimination of superfluous effort. Taylor set up time-and-motion studies to establish a standard of production which combined the best skills of various workers rather than the movements of just the most proficient ones. The “Taylor System” was of intense interest to Lewin, who saw beyond it to new possibilities. Lewin was optimistic about scientific psychology as an aid in resolving problems of labor-management relations, and he felt that the industrial setting offered a rich field for exploring new facets of interpersonal relations. He began his paper on Taylorism in industry with some observations on the central role of labor in life: work has a “life value”; a man’s capacity to work gives meaning and substance to his whole existence. Accordingly, every job should sustain or enhance this “life value.” Modern technology tends only to reduce the hours of labor, to raise output by making production more efficient. That it also creates overspecialization and monotony does not seem to matter to management so long as its goal of increasing productivity is met.

For the individual worker, however, it is important that new job methods also include ways of making his task richer and more satisfying. To discover how to do this, Lewin felt, is a task not alone for the efficiency expert but also for the research psychologist. Shorten-
ing the workday is not enough. The work itself must be made
worth doing, no matter how long or short the task.

It is essential to recognize, Lewin declared, that the enriching and
humanizing of work depends not only on the kind of work to be
done but also on how far the job fulfills the laborer's psychological
needs. From the point of view of production, it had been customary
to measure work by an "objective" yardstick of cost and quantity
turned out. For the worker, however, the more significant factors
are the value he places on what he is doing and the satisfaction he
derives from it. These in turn are major factors in determining how
well the employee performs on the assembly line or at the work-
bench.

Production engineers' demand for the highest output at the lowest
cost disregards the function of "job satisfaction." Few "effi-
ciency experts" recognize that assigning people to the jobs they like
best—and thus perform best—is also a great aid to increased skill.
Recognition of a person's right to choose a job that he prefers,
Lewin felt, can have a tremendously liberating effect on human
effort.

Could psychology contribute to this liberation through its studies
of work and the relation of individuals to the job they want most to
do? Could psychological findings about people be used to balance
the rival interests of employer and employee, foreman and worker,
management and factory hand? Lewin believed that an affirmative
answer to both questions was a possibility. If the psychologist can
win the cooperation of both parties, workers and employers to-
gether might learn how to enhance the "life values" of work with-
out hampering the smooth flow of production. For example, diffi-
cult jobs could be studied with a view either to making them less
disagreeable, distributing them among a greater number of workers,
or to offering those performing them some special compensation.
Whatever the device ultimately found, its use could bring greater
interest and enthusiasm on the part of the worker and, with it,
higher output.

Lewin summed up his views by stressing that man does not live to
produce but produces to live. Improving the psychological compo-
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needs of man’s work will thus accomplish far more for the worker’s well-being than merely cutting down his hours on the job. What is important, what must always be sought, is an improvement in the inner value of the work as experienced by the man performing it.

In the Classroom

The psychologist Lewin continued to be intertwined with the philosopher Lewin throughout these years. “He never abandoned philosophy,” says Gertrud Lewin. “In Berlin he lectured one year in psychology and had a seminar in philosophy; the next year he had a lecture in philosophy and a seminar in psychology.” He taught these courses as a privatdozent, or lecturer (he was appointed in 1921)—a position which was the first stage in a university teacher’s career and which carried neither salary nor tenure. To qualify for appointment as a full member of the faculty, it was (and still is) necessary for a candidate to submit a Habilitationsschrift—a report on a research project beyond the doctoral dissertation which must be presented before the faculty in a formal lecture—and he must also be approved by vote of the full professorship of the faculty. The privatdozent did not enjoy the status of beamter, or state civil servant. He was dependent for his income on his share of student fees. If his lectures were well attended, his income rose; but it was never large, no matter how popular he might be; and, in Prussia, Jewish privatdozents did not rise to the position of full professor.

To Horace Kallen, the American philosopher who first met Lewin at a meeting of the International Psychological Society in Holland in 1925, there seemed to be a fundamental difference in outlook between Lewin, who was a “psychologist first and coincidentally a philosopher of the mind,” and Köhler, Koffka, and Wertheimer, who were “really philosophers first and psychologists afterwards.” However, Fritz Heider feels there was no real difference between Lewin and the others in this respect. To him Lewin remained a philosopher at heart despite the turn his interests took later.
In 1922, Lewin published one of his most important theoretical papers, the title of which translates as "The Concept of Genesis (or Origin) in Physics, Biology and Evolutional History." Donald Adams, who worked with Lewin in Berlin, considers it one of his most important theoretical works. The first paragraph of the preface with which Lewin began his genetic analysis of identity furnished, according to Adams, "a key to his productivity, the range of his inquiry and the depth and breadth of his impact on psychology. This study expressed his ultimate concern with the comparative 'science of the sciences.'" Lewin's whole career in psychology, observes Adams, actually was a single experiment in this historical-methodological field and he so regarded it. His broad and intensive pursuit of this inquiry, for example, arose from his conviction that psychology had reached a *Galileische Wendepunkt* (Galileian turning point) and needed only the push of some clearheaded conceptualizing and imaginative experimental work to achieve a breakthrough. With characteristic audacity, he himself set about giving it the nudge. *Begriff der Genese* will in time, Adams believes, be regarded as both Lewin's most original and comprehensive contribution and the source of the dazzling originality that characterized his experimental work in psychology.

Fritz Heider also considers *Begriff der Genese* most important because in it Lewin compares the various sciences in an entirely new way and tries to define the differences between them. He deals mostly with physics and biology, giving less attention to psychology. The concept on which his analysis centers he termed "genidentity," or the manner in which objects keep their identity over time. Even though an object takes on different appearances at different times, it is treated by us as identical, as the same object. For instance, physics considers its objects as extending over time; we speak of one and the same stone or star although it has been observed at different moments or epochs. Again, when we talk of the motion of an object, we imply "genidentity," that is, we imply that the same object is in different places at different times.

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Lewin argued that “the concept of genidentity as used in physics is different from that used in biology.” Let us consider an egg and the two-year-old chicken hatched from this egg. Egg and chicken are biologically genidentical; they represent different stages of development of the same biological matter. However, physically they are not genidentical, for the molecules composing them have changed. In the same way, a person at the age of forty is biologically identified with the same person at the age of twenty, though physically only a small number of molecules may be the same. He may have changed as a biological entity; but the fact that we can speak of a change means that we refer to the same organism.

Thus Lewin tried to show that physics and biology are essentially different in the basic units of description they use. This led him to assert that a fundamental incommensurability separates the sciences from one another: each science is a closed unit of systematically connected concepts. Paths of derivation lead along the lines of this network, but we cannot use the propositions or laws of one science for those of another. Going from one science to another means to change completely the way of dividing up reality into units.

Lewin expanded on this theme in his lectures and writings. He believed that development of the sciences only leads to a sharpening of the differences between them. Each science gradually purifies its concepts and segregates itself more and more from its neighbors. In line with these ideas, Lewin cautioned that our desire for meaning and unity of life must not lead us to look for an illusory satisfaction in the idea of a philosophical unity of science. The idea of an eventual unification of all sciences is wishful thinking. Of course, there are many bridges between the sciences, and we should be seeking more of them—for instance, in intermediate fields such as biochemistry and physiological psychology. But psychology should strive to build up a more or less autonomous realm of concepts and form a closely knit system. As psychology grows, it should become more aware of its own proper nature and should separate itself from other sciences such as physiology. Psychology should in this way purify itself.
CHAPTER

3

LEWIN

AS TEACHER

During the early 1920's Lewin established a reputation as a provocative lecturer and teacher and over the years attracted many of the students at the Psychological Institute. And while his own work took a new and independent course, veering away from the Gestaltist emphasis on perception, Lewin was anxious to hold the approval of his seniors. In a letter to Fritz Heider in June 1926, Lewin wrote about an article of his that had just been accepted for publication by the *Psychologische Forschung*: "It pleased me very much that Köhler and Koffka were quite impressed with it."

Several of his earliest students came from foreign countries, principally Russia and the Baltic states. Maria Ovsiankina, who—with Tamara Dembo, Bluma Zeigarnik, and Gita Birenbaum—was in the first group of Lewin's students, recalls that they soon divided themselves into "generations." She herself while still quite young was a "grandmother" because she was part of the first group.

These first four students had come to Berlin from Russia to study literature. In their gymnasia at home, they had become accustomed in their literature classes to psychological discussion and analyses of fictional characters, and they wanted to continue university work along those lines. But in Berlin they found no department of litera-
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ture, only of philology. It was not at all what they had hoped for. 
One by one, however, all four discovered the Psychological Insti-
tute—the only place at the University to study human personality 
and motivation. The Institute—where Wolfgang Köhler had recent-
ly succeeded Stumpf—was housed in one of the annexes of the huge Kunstgewerke Museum, built originally as a residence for the Kaiser. Here the laboratories and offices were located, while the 
classes and large seminars were held in the University building.

Maria Ovsiankina attended her first class under Lewin in 1924. 
“He was discussing some research on memory,” she recalls. “It was 
a seminar and there were only about fifteen of us in the room. What 
impressed me most was that Lewin was concerned not just with 
concepts but with behavior. He was young and tried to encourage classroom participation, although he was inexperienced and did not 
really know how to direct the discussion. We often came out of 
these classes stimulated but at the same time confused, and wonder-
ing, ‘What am I taking home?’ But he very quickly learned how to 
direct the discussion without depriving it of its democratic nature 
and stimulating quality. I remember going to one of his lectures 
about two years later. By then he was more skillful and rapidly 
becoming one of the more prominent members of a very eminent faculty.”

Tamara Dembo, Lewin’s third graduate student, came to him 
after hearing of his work from Bluma Zeigarnik and Maria Ovsian-
kina. She was drawn to industrial psychology, having resolved, 
after leaving gymnasium in her native Russia, to do “something 
about making machines more suitable to human beings, instead of 
human beings more suitable to machines.” She had read the work of 
Taylor and considered studying engineering, but turned instead to 
industrial psychology and then to general theoretical psychology 
and thus came into Lewin’s orbit. Like all of Lewin’s students, 
Tamara Dembo was quickly impressed by his concentration on his 
subject: “He was already talking in terms of forces, goal-directed 
behavior, and the life situation, which later became the life space. 
For Lewin, psychology was his whole life. We also thought about it 
all the time, not as a profession but as our whole way of life too—
and a way of life that required precise answers, for Lewin would never accept an answer that was just good enough. So he always had time to talk about one's work and our answers were refined through the discussion."

In his classes, Lewin encouraged each member of the group to present a formulation of personal observations and theories for criticism in general discussion. Surprisingly—or perhaps not so surprisingly, since Lewin thought like a mathematician—the formulations which finally emerged had precision. Like a mathematician, too, Lewin liked to employ visual symbols; he was always at the blackboard. Some students disliked his strange drawings, contending that they were unscientific. Others regarded them as part of his effort to communicate entirely new approaches to new concepts.

"Time after time," says Dr. Vera Mahler, who also became one of Lewin's students in 1924, "he would interrupt his lecture about some aspect of child psychology, for example, and begin to draw funny little 'eggs' on the blackboard. These he called the 'total psychological field' or 'life space' of the child's world. These little ovals would in turn contain smaller circles representing the child himself, and containing plus and minus signs; arrows would appear to indicate the direction of the various field forces; thick lines represented the barriers. Quickly we were in the midst of a conflict in the child's life, or a situation representing reward and punishment. All this was graphic, all was made clear, in Lewin's little drawings on the blackboard."

Years later, in his Principles of Topological Psychology (1936), Lewin stated, "I remember the moment when—more than ten years ago—it occurred to me that the figures on the blackboard which were to illustrate some problems for a group in psychology might after all be not merely illustrations but representations of real concepts."

"Lewin was something new and refreshing after the conventional lectures on child psychology we were used to," Dr. Mahler remarks, "even though Lewin's concepts sometimes gave us the impression of too much novelty. But the longer we studied with him, the clearer it became that here was something not merely novel but a sound
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approach to the psychological development of the child that had to be taken quite seriously."

Dr. Mahler's first impression of Lewin, already in his thirties, was of a young man with apple-red cheeks who seemed more like a student than a professor: "At the start we were not greatly impressed with his lecturing, for Lewin was in no way a polished or outstanding speaker and we had been spoiled by the brilliant lectures of Köhler and others." But his indifferent skill with words was forgotten by the students once Lewin started to expound his ideas. "We would sit in our seats in the classroom completely absorbed, as Lewin began to develop his train of thought. I shouldn't say he lectured—he really didn't in a conventional, well-organized manner. He was often creating as he was speaking. Frequently he paused in mid-sentence and seemed to forget his audience. Thinking aloud, he vented the new ideas pouring quickly into his mind."

At times, Lewin seemed too ready with new ideas, as new ones followed earlier ones rapidly and were too abruptly displaced by yet newer ones. Dr. Mahler once complained to him, "How can we find our way when you keep coming up with new ideas that sometimes contradict the old ones we haven't yet thoroughly understood?" Lewin smiled, and replied, "That's what science is all about. Science means progress, and progress means change. True science doesn't admit to stagnation. Everlasting change—that's the essence of science."

To Carl Frankenstein, who—like the young women students from the Baltic states—studied at the Psychological Institute between 1923 and 1926, the seeds of Lewin's greatness as a thinker and teacher were not as evident. Lewin, he recalls, apparently made no effort to compete with the Institute's two stars, Köhler and Wertheimer. Nevertheless, according to Frankenstein, the students found him a highly stimulating scientific counselor when they were planning a piece of research, and, though he was known to make heavy demands on them, they felt he had more empathy with his students than did either Wertheimer or Köhler. Too independent in his thinking to become anyone else's disciple, Lewin still seemed to Frankenstein, and some of his friends, to be a "Wertheimer man"—
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an analysis which Frankenstein now feels was inaccurate but which was probably based on Lewin’s feeling of deference toward his senior and better-known colleagues.

The German university system did not set a rigid schedule of course requirements, examinations, and deadlines for papers and theses, so there was always plenty of time for discussion and—in a more or less continuous seminar—students reported on their current work-in-progress. From 1924 on, Lewin was looking after as many as twelve to fifteen doctoral candidates at different stages of progress toward their degrees. Also, those working with Wertheimer and Köhler often joined the Lewin group’s dialogue. Everyone participated, talking about one another’s projects and offering suggestions for change.

The students held regular meetings every Saturday morning. Before long this came to be the talk of the Institute, because of the novelty of Lewin’s ideas, his highly charged way of presenting them, and his willingness to debate them in order to spark a formulation of still better ones. “The interaction between Lewin and this group of students was so free, and the disagreement so intense,” said Norman Maier, “that I remember them as the most stimulating experiences I have ever had. Historical approaches to psychological problems were swept aside. It seemed as if all questions were being attacked from scratch. . . . These were creative discussions during which ideas and theories were generated, explored, and controverted. I’m sure that Lewin owes much to his students in working through the theories he himself finally reached.”

Among Lewin’s students were two young Japanese—Kanae Sakuma and U. Onoshima. He became especially friendly with Sakuma, with whom he published a paper in 1925 (in the Psychologische Forschung) on the effect of moving goal objects toward and away from children. Sakuma and Onoshima had left Japan in 1923 to study psychology in Germany. With several other Japanese students they visited a number of German university centers for research in psychology—Göttingen, Halle, Wurzburg, Leipzig, Marburg, and Frankfurt—before settling at the Psychological Institute in Berlin. There the new director, Wolfgang Köhler, had agreed to
let them attend lectures, take part in seminars, and carry out their own research projects. Sakuma and Onoshima had considerable difficulty in following the new material in a strange language and asked Köhler to have a member of his staff assigned to them as a kind of mentor and counselor. Lewin, who was assigned the task, entered into it with his customary enthusiasm, setting up ten special lectures to brief the young Japanese and demonstrating a number of experiments for them. "It was under Lewin's friendly guidance," Sakuma recalls, "that I was able to understand the brilliant insights of Gestalt psychology and appreciate the broad theoretical development of Gestalt theory." Lewin also took Sakuma rowing on the Wannsee, brought him along to Chaliapin concerts and Max Reinhardt theatrical productions, had him for dinner in his own house, and generally sought to make the young Oriental feel at home.

After about a year in Berlin, Sakuma felt sufficiently at home to start wondering what the rest of Europe looked like. He made a quick decision to leave the Institute and move to Paris. As a farewell souvenir, Lewin gave him an etching by Hodler showing a woodcutter chopping down a tree with an ax. The scene was symbolic of Sakuma's abrupt termination of his studies. Lewin told him with regret. In October 1925, Sakuma returned to Japan and at once busied himself with setting up a Psychological Institute at Kyushu University modeled after the one in Berlin. It was to this center of Gestalt psychology in Japan that Sakuma invited Lewin when Kurt stopped off in Japan on his way home to Berlin from California in 1933.

Never a clockwatcher, Lewin might inadvertently bring one or several students home with him in the afternoon, hold them over at dinner, and keep them occupied past midnight. Or, on occasion, he sat in his office with one or more students, analyzing some psychological phenomenon or planning an experiment; suddenly realizing that he was hungry, he would find, on looking at his watch, that it was nine o'clock and would invite whoever was with him to join him for dinner in a restaurant or at his home. Wherever it might be, though, the meal blended into conversations that went on long into the night.
Doris Twitchell (later Allen) was especially fortunate in that she was invited to live in Lewin's home so that she could tutor him in English in preparation for lectures he planned to deliver in the United States. She had come to Berlin after she had received her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. She recalls, "I read an article by J. F. Brown regarding Lewin's work and I read of Kurt's differentiation between phenotypical and genotypical behavior. This had particular meaning to me as a person who had majored in chemistry and moved from there into biology, and from there into psychology. I began to realize that I was interested in the total behavior of a person in varied situations and that I undoubtedly would find laboratory work in regard to nerve impulses limiting. I therefore made a basic decision in regard to my future by going to Berlin to work with a person who I thought could probe with depth into the determinants of human behavior." She remembers that while she was in Lewin's home he was invited rather frequently to give talks before professional groups. "I particularly recall how impressed I was with the respect that the members of the Mathematical Society of Berlin extended to him on his presentation of topological space. One or more of the students of the Institute usually went along for these talks, as an extension of studying with him in the regular psychology courses."

Within the Institute, Lewin's students formed a close-knit group which inevitably gave rise to another informal association. This one was called the Quasselstrippe. Maria Ovsiankina defines the word thus: "In German, quassel means to ramble on; strippe is a string. So the Quasselstrippe was a group with whom you could just get together and talk freely." The Quasselstrippe usually met at the Schwedische Cafe across the Schlossplatz from the Institute.

Donald Adams has recalled his part in these freewheeling groups: "On a particular day the group might range in number from four or five to as many—though rarely—as ten. It's literally true that at the end of one of these discussions, which might go on for two, three, or even more hours, often with shifting membership as people came and went, no one could say who was the source of a given idea, even of a very productive and ultimately influential one. The discussion
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might take off from a more or less casual question or notion, be changed over in this corner, qualified in that, reoriented in another, and catch fire in still another. Then someone might see a possibility of broader application or relevance to problems not under discussion so far—and after more tinkering and batting about, it might emerge as something only remotely related to the remark that had set off the whole causerie in the first place—but of real importance. Kurt was right in imputing creativity to the collective. . . . There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Lewin was the indispensable member. He neither dominated nor overwhelmed, but his willingness to grant an enthusiastic hearing to even the most adventurous speculation supplied the ferment that made each participant rise above himself.

The people who attended these sessions seem to agree that they were free and easy, with plenty of opportunity—indeed, encouragement—to express different (and differing) opinions. Lewin never imposed either discipline or loyalty on his students and colleagues—unlike Freud, who demanded fealty from all who sat with him in Vienna's Cafe Arkadan, and Adler, who held court in the Cafe Siller in Vienna and banished all who did not demonstrate their allegiance.

MacKinnon recalls that the students would sit around in the cafe and talk over their problems: "As is the custom in European cafes, you have a cup of coffee and talk and chat, then you order a piece of cake, more time goes by, some more cake, another cup of coffee, a process that may go on for two or three hours. On one such occasion, somebody called for the bill and the waiter knew just what everyone had ordered. Although he hadn't kept a written reckoning, he presented an exact tally to everyone when the bill was called for. About a half hour later Lewin called the waiter over and asked him to write the check again. The waiter was indignant. 'I don't know any longer what you people ordered,' he said. 'You paid your bill.' In psychological terms, this indicated that a tension system had been building up in the waiter as we were ordering and that upon payment of the bill the tension system was discharged. This approach intrigued me, because it was what I had been saying, that a
lot of important problems had to be approached through observations of behavior of everyday life and that our task was to translate these into some kind of language and method that would bring them into the laboratory and permit some quantification of the phenomena in question.”

This informal experiment led to Zeigarnik’s famous study of the tension system, published in 1927 and completed under Lewin’s supervision (see page 42). It was an obvious example of how sparks set off by Lewin in the cafe were often used in the laboratory by his students. The cafe, too, was part of Lewin’s “life space.” As in this instance, it was the scene of impromptu experiments based on the here and now of actual experience, of the posing and explorations of immediate and new questions.