CHAPTER 8

THE BEGINNINGS OF A NEW LIFE

In the fall of 1933, Kurt Lewin began a new life in a strange land—not as a visiting professor, but as a refugee scholar with a temporary appointment supported by Foundation funds. His new country was experiencing the worst economic depression of its history, its people struggling with an economy of scarcity that suffused all of American life. Some fifteen million men, more than a quarter of the work force, were without jobs. Soup kitchens, bread lines, men selling apples on street corners—these characterized the scene in 1933. There were fewer students in the nation’s colleges, faculties were reduced, salaries slashed. Scholars fortunate enough to hold faculty appointments—and Americans who were seeking them—were not enthusiastic about the competition for jobs by foreign refugee scholars. Lewin had sensed this when he was visiting professor at Stanford in 1932; he was very much more aware of it when he came back to the United States.

Rensis Likert remembers meeting Lewin for the first time in 1933 at a luncheon in New York City with Douglas Fryer of New York University. Lewin had stopped in New York for a few days on his way to Cornell. “His forecast of developments in Nazi Germany was depressing—but accurate,” Likert recalls. Among other things, Lewin expressed the view that the German people would neither
overthrow nor replace Hitler. Only a major war and a German defeat, Lewin said in 1933, could result in Hitler's removal as dictator of Germany.

The invitation to Cornell was in good part the work of Dr. Ethel Waring of the School of Home Economics there. A specialist in child development, she had first met Lewin in 1929 at the Psychological Institute in Berlin, where she had been particularly impressed by his motion-picture studies of children. On her return to Ithaca, she became a missionary for Lewin's experimental techniques and theoretical concepts. On many occasions she urged Dean Robert Ogden to find a way to invite Lewin to Cornell. The critical political situation in Germany caused her to redouble her efforts. She pressed Ogden to find a place for him in Ithaca—and then find the money for it.

The Cornell appointment was for two years only. It was made possible by a grant from the Emergency Committee on Displaced Scholars, then under the chairmanship of Lawrence K. Frank. It carried an annual salary of about $3,000 and could not be renewed. Nor was the appointment to the Cornell Psychology Department; it was, rather, in the School of Home Economics.

Once established at Cornell, Lewin set to work on a systematic series of studies of the effect of social pressure on the eating habits of children in the Cornell Nursery School. Tamara Dembo and Jerome Frank, pupils of his in Berlin, soon joined him in Ithaca and began research on related projects.

Of the years at Cornell, Tamara Dembo has observed that, "while the atmosphere at Iowa in later years was in many ways as exciting as Berlin, Cornell wasn't." Perhaps the difference was due to their unfamiliar location in the School of Home Economics, a radical change from the Faculty of Philosophy at Berlin. Nevertheless, Dembo believed, the groundwork was laid here for some of Lewin's later consequential experiments. "At the nursery school there were problems created by children who were poor eaters, and the question came up of how the teacher could change their eating habits. This was a problem involving social pressure from the teacher. Although the area of social relationships wasn't yet central to Lewin's work, it was at least already peripheral at Cornell."
The Beginnings of a New Life

Lewin's two years in Ithaca were busy ones. He concentrated on the work at the Nursery School; he drafted plans for the Psychological Institute he hoped to get established at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; he worked doggedly at readying for publication some of the records of the research he had conducted in Berlin. Aware of the academic “publish or perish” atmosphere of America, he decided that he must get his earlier work into print as soon as practicable. Of the numerous papers he had written in Germany, few had appeared in English, and his mastery of the language of his new country was too imperfect for him to attempt the translation on his own. But he had devoted friends and students who quickly rallied to help him.

A few of his most important articles were assembled and translated by Donald K. Adams and Karl E. Zener, both members of the psychology faculty of Duke University. These were published by McGraw-Hill in 1935 under the title A Dynamic Theory of Personality. When Fritz and Grace Heider undertook to translate into English Lewin’s book-length manuscript Principles of Topological Psychology (eventually published by McGraw-Hill in 1936), the Heiders and the Lewins arranged to spend the summers of 1934 and 1935 together. They boarded with a farm family in Milford, New York, about midway between Ithaca and Northampton, Massachusetts, where the Heiders had been living. For a study, they set up a tent in the back yard.

Lewin dedicated the book to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem but prefaced it with a letter to Wolfgang Köhler, his colleague and friend at Berlin, who had shown himself a courageous opponent to Hitler and vigorously resisted Nazi efforts to impose restrictions against Jewish students and faculty members at the Institute. The families were friendly, even close at times. When Köhler had visited America in 1932 to deliver a series of lectures, Gerti Lewin had taken the Köhlers’ daughter Karen into her own home for three months while Frau Köhler accompanied her husband. At that time Köhler had spoken with Dean Ogden of Cornell about Lewin, thus playing a key role in Lewin’s invitation to Cornell.

Köhler was one of the Christian academicians and scientists who left Hitler’s Germany. But in the United States he and Lewin grew
apart, though Lewin always retained enormous respect and admiration for Köhler. The physical distance between them—Lewin at Cornell, Köhler at Swarthmore—ended the close association of Berlin. There were other changes as well. In America, Lewin was no longer Köhler’s junior, either in prestige or importance. Indeed, Lewin was gathering a following of his own as he developed his own concepts and methods and opened up new areas of study and research. His work challenged the Gestalt school in some areas and went beyond it in others.

A year earlier, in his first book, *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*, Lewin had expressed his appreciation of the teaching of Wertheimer and the collaboration of Köhler. “I need not emphasize my debts to these outstanding personalities,” he had written. “The fundamental ideas of Gestalt theory are the foundation of all our investigations in the field of the will, of affect, and of the personality.”

Lewin’s open letter to Köhler in his preface to his second book, *Principles of Topological Psychology*, thus marked both a farewell to the past and a forward look to the future. The letter is a reasoned and reasonable statement in which Lewin strikes out on his own, charting his own path in psychology while acknowledging his debt to his former colleague. He recalls the “collective of friends” who worked together during the “happy and lively” days in Berlin, and he closes with a statement of affection and respect for the friend from whom he must now take leave, voicing the hope that the book might “prove to be somewhat worthy of the spirit of this collective and of the leading influence you have had on each of its steps. For the friends scattered throughout the world, this feeling of cooperation seems to continue and the circle steadily to widen. I would enjoy nothing more than to have contributed to this broad cooperation.” Turning then from past to future, Lewin dedicated his book “to a young scientific center at the meeting of the East and West (the Hebrew University in Jerusalem), where I hope new productive collectives will arise.”

But if the letter to Köhler was a reasonable statement, it may also have been, Grace Heider believes, a little self-conscious. Lewin may have been aware that his decision to deal entirely with the psycho-
logical life space and to disregard the physiological level could be seen as a heresy and therefore be a source of tension between him and Köhler. To others, the publication of Principles of Topological Psychology somehow formalized Lewin’s action in leaving the “present” group of Gestaltists behind and setting boldly out on his own path. And so, even while striking out on his own, Lewin expressed his continuing identification with the Berlin “collective,” acknowledging that he had “always found myself unable to think productively as a single person.”

That Lewin hoped to remain in personal and professional touch with Köhler was made clear in the very next sentence: “Those who are acquainted with you know that you are not interested in ‘psychological schools,’ and one of the main incentives of this book is to help develop a psychological language generally understandable and independent of schools.” That this turned out to be true was pleasing to Lewin. His personal and professional friendship with Köhler remained warm during the remaining years of his life.

The manuscript of Principles of Topological Psychology, written in German, was never published in that language. But the Heiders completed their labors in time for the book to be published in English in 1936. It was a comprehensive and systematic statement of Lewin’s psychology. In it Lewin comments that too little experimental work had been done on the psychology of will, of needs, and of personality. The few experiments that had been reported he found artificial and abstract. He challenged the view held by many psychologists that these processes were too elusive and complex for scientific experiments. He explained his admiration for the pioneering work of Freud, but he criticized the findings of psychoanalysts as unscientific since they were based entirely on case studies and therapeutic work. Such derivations he considered methodologically unsound.

Lewin stressed again his conviction that “psychology” must develop concepts that are equally applicable to the facts of child psychology, animal psychology, or psychopathology; to problems of the infant, the adolescent, or the aged; to personality and environment. “We cannot unify the different fields of psychology,” he
argued, “until we can include will, needs, and personality. We can
do this. There are already a number of studies that have shown that
an experimental attack of these fundamental problems is quite pos-
sible.” He pointed out that these investigations dealt with the whole
person and took into account the characteristics of the person, his
momentary state, and his psychological environment. This was in
contrast to the conventional experiments on sensations in which the
individual’s ideals, ambitions, and social relationships play no role at
all or only a subordinate one.

Lewin devoted most of the text to the task of psychology and the
foundations of topological and vector psychology. “Topologically
the person is represented as a connected region which is separated
from the environment by a Jordan curve and within this region
there are part regions, such as the ‘inner-personal’ region and the
motor-perceptual region. The latter has the position of a boundary
zone between the inner-personal region and the environment.” This
scheme is shown in Figure 8–1.

The drawings in Figure 8–2 are Lewin’s conceptual representations
of the person in three situations—calm, stress, and very high tension.

Lewin’s mathematical representations of empirical phenomena
can be viewed as one would a road map. Markings indicate direction
and distance, and other symbols represent the relations between
rivers, cities, and mountains. The Jordan curve conceptually repre-
The Beginnings of a New Life

presents the person, the psychological environment and the life space. The Jordan curve (or elliptical ring), Lewin maintained, is not an illustration but a representation of reality. Lewin cautioned that these representations correspond primarily to momentary situations and that these are constantly being altered. Psychological reality, he reminded psychologists, is forever changing because of the dynamic forces in the person and the environment.

![Figure 8-2. Relations between various strata of the person under different circumstances. (a) The person in an easy situation: the peripheral parts p of the inner-personal region I, are easily accessible from outside E; the more central parts c are less accessible; the inner-personal region I influences the motor region M relatively freely. (b) The person under stress, in state of self-control: the peripheral parts p of the inner-personal region I are less accessible than in (a); peripheral and central parts (c and p) are more closely connected; communication between I and M is less free. (c) The person under very high tension: unification (primitivation, "regression") of the inner-personal region I, M, motor-perceptual region; I, inner-personal region; p, peripheral parts of I; c, central parts of I; E, environment; Bp, dynamic wall between c and p; Bp, dynamic wall between I and M. (From Principles of Topological Psychology, p. 181.)

Lewin's book did not get the attention many of his colleagues felt it deserved—perhaps because its concepts were so unfamiliar or because the terminology (in spite of all the Heider's efforts) was so difficult. American psychologists were not used to the idea of mathematical models and none of them knew topology. Moreover, as few were willing to learn it, most of them never really understood the book. Many interpreted the topological representations as mere pictures or illustrations, rather than as mathematics. Besides, the mathematics was not very powerful in that early form; so a psychologist had to have faith that it could be developed further and that such development would be a gradual process.

79
There were unfavorable reviews by Brolyer in 1936–1937, Heidbreder in 1937, and Garrett in 1939. Additional reviews—some favorable, others unfavorable—appeared more frequently in the 1940's. But during the same period many of Lewin's concepts—such as vector, valence, life space, field theory, and tension system—became indispensable parts of psychology. Morton Deutsch, in commenting on Lewin's topological concepts, says, "It would be foolish to neglect the suggestive value of his imaginative attempt to develop a geometry suitable for psychology. Lewin pointed out the need for a new mathematics based on axioms different from those of the mathematics developed for the physical sciences. He indicated some of the properties that would be required of a geometry adequate to handle psychological space and he stimulated a more widespread interest in the development of such a geometry."

Dorwin Cartwright recently observed, "Lewin's attitude toward mathematics displayed a strong ambivalence; he was attracted by its rigor but fearful of what he called 'premature formalization.' He was unwilling to allow the requirements of mathematical convenience to dictate the content of psychological theory. As a result, his own use of mathematics was essentially programmatic, setting a style of thought and indicating prospects for greater rigor in the field of psychology (and perhaps that of mathematics, too). He was fully aware that his use of topology was quite primitive from a mathematical point of view, but he was undaunted by the critics. He was convinced that someday the potentialities he saw would become actualized."

At the time Lewin was so completely absorbed in his other outside interest, the founding of a Psychological Institute at the Hebrew University, that the reception of his book did not trouble him as much as it might have. His concern over the future of Palestine led him to anticipate challenges to its Jewish population which could be met only by a Research Institute specially tailored to the needs of a small state that would be peopled largely by immigrants. In November 1934, he produced a preliminary statement of what such an Institute would need to do. The statement forecast many of the difficulties that would face prospective newcomers to the ancient
Jewish homeland and how the Institute could serve in helping to overcome them.

"The problems of Jews emigrating from European countries to Palestine will be tremendous," he wrote. Their integration into Palestinian life would involve hardships and conflicts. The Palestinian economy would be basically agricultural, and most of the immigrants would be coming from cities and small towns; so they would have to be taught farming and would need special training in human relations for living and working together on cooperative farms. Although he admired the kibbutz form of agricultural development, Lewin clearly recognized that all the newcomers would not adjust readily to this communal living.

Moreover, the Jewish immigrants were bound to have varied backgrounds. They would come from many parts of Europe and from different occupational and economic levels, with differences in personal habits, manners, speech, even folkways and worship. The differences could occasion serious social friction. Lewin was especially concerned about those escaping from Nazi control who would bring tragic, terrifying memories. These would present a double problem, one of maintaining their morale and hopes while they waited tensely for entrance visas, and one of somehow enabling their new country to meet their hopes. "The relation of people's expectations and the reality they experience," Lewin wrote, "profoundly affect their behavior."

Lewin proposed an international study project to find ways of easing these hardships. Quantitative and experimental research should seek out the wisest solutions and strive for a set of practical administrative alternatives. The application of the kind of scientific methods he had in mind would generate data that could materially lessen human suffering, develop better communities, and reduce costs by millions of dollars.

Among the problems for which experimental solutions might be sought were: the rate at which immigrants adjusted to Palestinian conditions; the forces at work on them; the range and degree of adjustment of the immigrants in terms of their countries of origin; the varieties and roles of preparatory training; the influences in Pal-
estine most favorable to the assimilation of newcomers; the problems of human relations generated by change of habitat; the means and methods by which these problems could best be met; steps which could develop the immigrants' commitment to an economy of survival and growth in a desert land; the means of developing such changes of attitude in the radical adjustments required to balance their past experience with their new conditions of life; and the best means of coping with an inevitable atmosphere of suspicion, distrust, and fear. Working on these problems, Lewin expressed for the first time his new interest in what became known as action research. It marked a radical departure from the type of research he had been conducting up to that time.

All through 1934-1935, Lewin devoted his energies to winning American support for the Institute. Within a few months, thanks in no small measure to the help of Horace M. Kallen of the New School for Social Research, he had gathered a distinguished group of sponsors for the project. Lewin traveled back and forth between Ithaca and New York City. He went personally to see prospective sponsors, many whom he had never met before, and won their support. He gave considerable time to insignificant details, such as ordering stationery and answering correspondence, since the sponsors produced neither clerical help nor office space. A letter he sent me in July 1935 reveals Lewin's meticulous attention to detail, much as he was averse to it and usually inept at it.

But he never succeeded in getting the project for the Institute financed. It was too remote from the more immediate endeavor to rescue Jews from the Nazi inferno. Jewish and other philanthropy from 1935 to 1939 was largely concentrated on that task. To Lewin this singleness of purpose by the Jewish leaders was a mistake. He believed that what happened after a Jew had been rescued could be almost as vital as the rescue itself, and he was convinced that an Institute in Palestine would produce insights that would later be of use the world over. He had in mind making this service the goal of his own career. Then, too, his appointment at Cornell was approaching the end of its term, and no other American opening was yet in sight. Horace Kallen and some other friends and admirers,
Dear Alfred:

Please find enclosed a copy of a letter to Rosenbach and the draft for a letter which should be sent to the sponsors, with the exception of Mrs. Roosevelt.

The letter to Rosenbach tells you the situation. I am afraid of two things: A delay in the sending of the letters, and that the letters may not be properly copied. I outlined these letters with some of the professors in Cornell and I don't like to have them changed.

I fear that if the friends handle the business something will go wrong. Would it be possible that you could supervise it or even let the copies be made in your office and let Rosenbach just sign them? It is very important that no copy is sent to Mrs. Roosevelt.

I sent under separate cover, fifty of our letterheads. I hope you will like them. May I ask you or Monette to telephone to Rosenbach to find out whether he agrees to send the letter and then to make out a definite procedure?

I have a second favor to ask from Monette. I would like to get in touch with this Mr. David Levy, whom I mentioned in the letter to Rosenbach. Would it be possible to find out his address and whether he is now in New York. He has worked or is working with the Child Welfare Organization, the chairman of which is Mrs. Sidney Gruenberg.

Should I order envelopes and what should be printed on them?

Cordially yours,

Kurt Lewin
even though they were strong sponsors of the Palestine project, strongly preferred to keep Lewin and his innovative insights and techniques in the United States.

Lawrence D. Frank, who, as a staff member of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Fund, had been instrumental in securing the funds for Lewin’s appointment at Cornell, wrote that he found the prospect of Lewin’s leaving the United States appalling. He felt that the studies begun at Berlin and Cornell had to continue. But where could Lewin go?

Among others, Frank contacted the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station (now the Institute of Child Behavior and Research), whose director was George Stoddard, about a place for Lewin there. Iowa had no funds for new staff members, but Frank succeeded in getting an appropriation from the Rockefeller Fund’s General Education Board to cover Lewin’s appointment to the faculty of the University of Iowa for a three-year period, with the understanding that Stoddard would make every effort to continue the appointment at the termination of the grant. Stoddard, as it turned out, managed to keep Lewin on at Iowa when the grant ran out.

The University of Iowa was an important center for psychological research and education. George Stoddard and Beth Wellman were doing important work on environmental influences on intelligence. Carl Seashore had done much to attract the interest of psychologists everywhere. Kenneth Spence later joined the faculty because of its fine reputation. The General Education Board provided a number of fellowships so that Lewin could organize a research team. One went to Tamara Dembo; two others to Roger Barker, who had just completed his doctoral studies at Stanford, and Herbert Wright, who had just finished his at Duke University.

Lewin never gave up his interest in the Jewish state, nor did the move to Iowa diminish his dedication to the idea of setting up a Psychological Institute at the Hebrew University. But at Iowa he entered a new field of fresh problems—problems relevant to the American scene. He was to pioneer in a double sense and give a new turn to the theory and practice of the behavioral sciences.

Lewin was now forty-five. He had lived through the develop-
The Beginnings of a New Life

ments and crises of the years between Bismarck and Hitler. He had been an officer in an army that had been deemed the greatest military machine of its time yet had gone down to harsh defeat. He had been deeply affected by the political turmoil and economic catastrophe of the Weimar Republic. He had encountered the violent and increasingly barbaric anti-Semitism of Hitler Germany. This, combined with an intense commitment to the problems and values of science, sharpened his awareness of the relationships between knowledge and policy, of the need for attention to political issues if human life and culture were to grow and be renewed. He had a view of what kind of human community the democratic society should be, having seen at first hand the enemies of such a society.

Thus, like Tocqueville a hundred years earlier, Lewin looked at American life using his European experience as a continual and inescapable point of reference. In his speculation and research, this led in the ensuing years to a deepening interest in problems of democratic leadership and of the conditions for effective individual and group growth; it gave rise to a widening concern about ways in which greater knowledge of human behavior could be used to deal with social problems.

Donald MacKinnon believes that "in some ways it was a good thing that he did emigrate and find himself in an entirely new environment. This was the stimulus which directed his energies to problems that he might never have dealt with if there hadn't been an upheaval in the world at that particular time. All these terrible events deepened his commitment to mankind and the betterment of man's lot."

85