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Portrait of a Pedagogue

KLAUS MANN



L'ECOLE D'HUMANITE (School of Humanity), a modest community consisting of a small wood chalet surrounded by little bungalows, is situated in a picturesque mountain valley on the *Lac Noir* (Black Lake), near Fribourg, Switzerland. To the casual traveler, this remote and rustic settlement may appear to hold little of interest, but actually it is the scene of what is perhaps the most important educational experiment in war-torn Europe today.

The head and founder of the *École d'Humanité*, Paul Geheeb—"Paulus," as he is affectionately called by his pupils and collaborators—is an incurable optimist who at the age of seventy-five still maintains his faith in the fundamental goodness of human nature even in these sorry times. Of course, Paulus is not so ignorant or naïve as to be unaware of the follies and outrages of our so-called civilization. He believes, however, that men can be improved by means of education and is convinced that his "School of Humanity" is his own modest contribution to that end.

"Even though the history of the past decades seems to prove that there is actually no such thing as a universal human society and that a School of Humanity has therefore no chance to succeed, I maintain that a school of that particular sort is exactly what our epoch needs and requires." Thus Paulus explains and defends his enterprise in an introductory essay. Referring to all the difficulties that face him under present conditions, he quotes Friedrich Nietzsche: "All decisive things have been accomplished in spite of difficulties."

WHAT a curious old man who speaks with so much purpose and determination in a time given to all sorts of confusions and compromises! A clear-sighted and active idealist seems to be an anachronism in this mercenary, muddled world of ours. And, in fact, Paulus even outwardly gives the impression

of being somewhat out of place in modern surroundings; the headmaster of the *École d'Humanité* looks like a character out of an Indian fairy tale or Scandinavian saga.

Ageless rather than old, he resembles a sturdy hermit leading an austere but wholesome life in the wilderness. The face, surprisingly short between his enormous beard and a rich mop of hair, is hardened and bleached, as it were, by constant exposure to storm, rain, and sunshine. At once robust and sensitive, this countenance radiates vigor as well as kindness, serene detachment and yet an almost sacerdotal gravity. The square, heavy jaws and the straight, prominent nose suggest a strong-minded and forceful character, whereas the soft and full lips—very red against the grayish-white beard—seem to indicate an emotional and sensual disposition. The eyes, with unusually large pupils, are wide and dark under bushy brows. Peering out of deep, almost black sockets, these strangely fascinating eyes tend to stare into space, the greenish-golden iris fixed as though in magic reverie.

His arms, which are a little too long, add a slightly apish quality to his venerable appearance. His gait, even though stooping, is brisk and not without a certain dynamic élan. No matter what the temperature may be, Paulus will never wear a topcoat or a hat but seems to feel perfectly comfortable in his everlasting gray blouse and knee breeches that leave the lower part of his legs bare, thus revealing the impressive muscles of his well-shaped calves.

An affable patriarch—always gracious and cordial, even if in a somewhat absent-minded fashion—Geheeb presides over the frugal meals and other social functions of his motley flock. His most loyal friend and most efficient collaborator is Mrs. Geheeb, known to the members of the community simply as "Aunt Edith"—a practical-minded matron of considerable stamina and common sense. A staff of six or seven

KLAUS MANN, German-American novelist, essayist, and playwright, and son of Thomas Mann, has lived in France, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and the United States since 1933. His autobiography, *The Turning Point*, was published in 1942. In collaboration with his sister Erika Mann, he wrote *Escape to Life* and *The Other Germany*.

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young Swiss teachers assist the Geheebes in their educational and administrative tasks—out of sheer idealism, incidentally, for the *École d'Humanité* is in no position to pay salaries.

AS for the children, living and working here under primitive but healthy conditions, they constitute a remarkably mixed yet harmonious family. There are, at the present moment, just about forty pupils; but this modest number includes a great variety of social and racial types. Under the auspices of the "School of Humanity," the scions of old Swiss patrician houses mingle with Czech refugees and young German Jews who have witnessed the horrors of Belsen, Oranienburg, and other Gestapo infernos. A swarthy, sad-eyed young fellow whose parents were gassed by the Nazis shares his room with a fair, athletic boy of unmistakably Prussian appearance—the nephew of General von Brauchitsch. While his famous uncle was instrumental in perfecting Hitler's formidable weapon, the Reichswehr, von Brauchitsch, Jr., thanks to some benign caprice of his mother, was brought up on the shores of the Black Lake in neutral Switzerland.

There are little Poles and little Hungarians; children who were driven from their home in Holland when the Germans moved in and children who were evacuated from one of the destroyed German cities where their parents may still lie buried under debris and rubble. Two melancholy-looking girls with oversized heads and bloated limbs spent most of their childhood in Theresienstadt, the fortress near Prague used by the Nazis as a ghetto town for Jews from Czechoslovakia and other countries. "It's the poor food they were getting there," Aunt Edith explained, when I asked about the reason for the girls' physical deformation. "Malnutrition must have affected their glands. . . ."

MANY tongues are spoken in this out-of-the-way mountain valley. I noticed a slit-eyed, cute little fellow—not older than five or six—who tried to make himself understood by chatting away in what sounded to me like a very rare Chinese dialect. The youngsters to whom he addressed his exotic gibberish laughed good-naturedly and answered in Swiss-German with some French and Hungarian words thrown in. "Li Tso is a newcomer," Aunt Edith told me, smiling at the little Chinaman. "Just arrived here the other day. You should see him in a few weeks! He'll be speaking fluent Esperanto—the kind of mixed lingo, you know, in which our cosmopolitan kids like to express themselves."

They understand each other, these children, although they hail from different countries and classes. They eat and sleep, study and play together—the well-bred

young patricians from Zurich and Geneva and the little displaced persons from Budapest and Shanghai. There are no servants to take care of them: the children shine their boots, make their beds, cook their meals, do everything themselves, under Aunt Edith's jolly and competent supervision. The more mature students will gather in Paulus' studio of an evening and listen to his reading of Goethe or of the Indian *Veda*. As for more down-to-earth subjects, such as grammar and mathematics, the young Swiss teachers try their best to make them as interesting as possible to their polyglot classes. When the weather is fair, most of the lessons are given outside in the garden surrounding the central chalet or on one of the nearby meadows. During the hot season (which is rather short up here), the children enjoy swimming in the fresh, crystal-clear water of the lake; in the winter, their favorite pastime and exercise is skiing, a sport at which Paulus excels.

ON fine winter mornings, one can see Paulus climbing briskly the steep slopes of the snow-covered, rugged hills whose distant summits attract him with irresistible power. A veteran skier and mountaineer, he is quicker and has more endurance than the young folks—even von Brauchitsch, Jr., finds it difficult to keep pace with him. Moving upward steadily and swiftly, the old man's hoary figure seems to become a part of the Alpine scenery—merging, as it were, with the glaciers, the rocks, the sky.

Waiting for his breathless companions to catch up with him, Paulus slows down, pauses. "What's wrong with you kids?" he calls back, looking very much like a mythical wanderer, a sorcerer from the mountains, as he stands there in the midst of the icy wilderness, leaning against his tall ski stick, his striped beard and silver hair disheveled by the wind. "Am I too fast for you great athletes of the younger generation?" he asks, and bursts out laughing—a sonorous, forceful, somewhat hollow laughter—while his wide, greenish-golden eyes peer back, encouraging the weary boys and girls down there at the foot of the slope. As they



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struggle along, their leader remains motionless—his face serious again, absorbed in the sight of the towering panorama.

WHO is this peculiar fellow—this quaint-looking Alpinist, humanitarian and philosopher? Paul Geheeb, son of a Lutheran pastor, has played a significant role in the history of German and European experimental education. The *Odenwaldschule*, a country school of which he was the founder and which he ran until 1934, was indeed one of the world's most remarkable educational establishments. Situated in the very heart of Germany, between Frankfurt-on-the-Main and Heidelberg, the *Odenwaldschule* attracted young people from five continents. At the time I was a pupil there, in 1923 and 1924, the school community included students from Norway and Italy, India and the United States, South Africa and Japan. There were about 250 pupils, their ages ranging from three to eighteen, occupying twelve handsome villas, which were named after Geheeb's favorite poets and thinkers, the patron saints of the place—Plato, Kant, Fichte, Herder, Lessing, and so forth. The central building, containing the dining room and the assembly hall, bore the name of Germany's greatest genius and citizen of the world, Goethe. It was there that Paulus used to preside over the sessions of the school parliament—formal meetings at which the entire personnel, students as well as instructors, discussed the current affairs of the community.

The *Odenwaldschule*, or "Oso," to use the school's more popular abbreviation, was founded back in 1910—just about the time when the so-called "Youth Movement" began to challenge the principles and conventions of nineteenth-century pedagogy. The career of Paul Geheeb has been closely connected with that intriguing, typically German phenomenon, the *Jugendbewegung*.

THE Youth Movement, so essentially and profoundly German in its origin and purposes, had the Janus-faced ambiguity, the equivocal impact characteristic of so many intellectual tendencies and events in that unhappy country. Started as a romantic and emotional rebellion against the drabness and materialism of modern mechanized life, the *Jugendbewegung* had undoubtedly its vital and creative function. But this vociferous cult of Youth—Youth, as such, as an aim in itself—this aggressive predilection for biological and sentimental values, in contrast to the much denounced "intellectualism" of Western civilization, this idolatry of "Blood and Soil," this obscurantist penchant for medieval moods and rituals, this whole confused romanticism was pregnant with the most ominous germs and potentialities. Clearly, the Youth Movement—launched shortly before the outbreak of World War I; reaching the peak of its influence during the decade

from 1918 to 1928—has to be counted among those forces that helped in conditioning a generation of Germans for the pseudo-romantic savagery of Nazism.

Considering the highly problematical character of the Youth Movement, it is all the more impressive that a man, a German, should have succeeded, by virtue of his sound instinct and rational sense of values, in absorbing all the stimulating and constructive elements of that philosophy while rejecting its dangerous implications. Paulus, who began his career as a champion of the German *Jugendbewegung*, could become at the same time a good European and a pedagogue of truly universal stature, because he was inspired and guided by those whom he likes to call "the great educators of mankind, from Lao-tse, Plato, and Christ to Goethe and Pestalozzi."

If the Youth Movement with its Teutonic mysticism and romanticism was his first intellectual experience, it was soon to be counterbalanced and outweighed by other influences—notably the sublime legacy of Hellenic thought, the message of Christian ethics, and the philosophy of the great German humanists and internationalists in the Herder-Goethe tradition. These fundamental elements of Occidental culture were later integrated in Paul Geheeb's steadily widening vision with Oriental wisdom. The India of the Vedanta and the China of Lao-tse contributed as decisively to the formation of this rich and responsive mind as did the Hellas of Socrates and the Germany of Kant and Goethe.

AMONG the pictures adorning Paulus' little study at the *Odenwaldschule* were those of two leaders of modern India, Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Others whose likenesses decorated the austere simple room were Tolstoy, Romain Rolland, and Pestalozzi, the great Swiss pedagogue whose educational principles had an important bearing on Geheeb's own ideas and methods. Tolstoy belongs to Paulus' intellectual heroes—not primarily because of his literary genius but rather because of his capacity as an ethical and religious thinker. As for the French novelist, Romain Rolland, his friendship with Paul Geheeb was to survive two Franco-German wars. The two men remained close to each other, even when Rolland's pacifist and humanitarian idealism had turned more radical and finally manifested itself in the form of militant Communism.

Such a development (even though he did not allow it to interfere with a lifelong personal friendship) was certainly not in keeping with Geheeb's own tastes and tenets. Marxism, as a philosophy and political doctrine, cannot appeal to a man principally concerned with moral and metaphysical questions. An individualist with social consciousness, Paulus does not think in terms of "classes" or their innate characteristics and talents but rather in terms of in-

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dividuals who, by developing their innate characteristics and talents, may become useful and serviceable members of the community. If Paulus, the pedagogue, emphasizes the necessity of social training, as did his Swiss master Pestalozzi, he is strictly opposed to regimentation in any form. To him discipline has no educational value unless it results from the voluntary and spontaneous initiative of all members of the group. To overcome and balance the antagonism between freedom and discipline is the basic problem of education, as it is of social life in general.

ALTHOUGH Paulus has always kept away from politics, his cosmopolitan and progressive views could not but make him a suspicious figure to German nationalists. As far back as 1917, during the first World War, the leader of the *Odenwaldschule* was reprimanded by the authorities for not celebrating the birthday of his majesty, Emperor Wilhelm II. "But why should I make my students celebrate the Kaiser's anniversary?" Geheeb wondered with disarming naïveté when questioned by the officials. "He hasn't taught them anything—or has he? I'd much rather have them remember the birthdays of truly great men like Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin. . . ."

Later, under the Weimar Republic, the "Oso" was tolerated but never officially encouraged or supported. And when the Nazis took over, in 1933, the clash between Paulus and German officialdom became inevitable.

Being of immaculately "Aryan" stock, Paulus might have been permitted to stay as a kind of nominal or puppet chief of his own school—under certain conditions. It wasn't really much the Nazi commissary asked for—just a few minor concessions Herr Geheeb was expected to make for the sake of the National Revolution. Surely, he would not mind divorcing his wife? (Mrs. Geheeb's racial background was objectionable from the Nazi point of view.) Moreover, all "non-Aryan" or politically subversive teachers and students would have to be expelled immediately. And none of that democratic humbug any more! The so-called *Schulgemeinde*, or School Parliament—the moral and administrative backbone of the whole "Oso" setup—was to be dissolved for good. Instead of free discussion there would be from now on the dictate of authoritarian leadership—a leadership which Paulus was supposed to "share" with a Nazi supervisor. Were those mild and moderate conditions agreeable to Herr Geheeb?

They were not. Paulus preferred exile to an arrangement of that particular sort. Early in 1934, he left Germany for Switzerland, accompanied by his wife and a small group of faithful teachers and students. The *Odenwaldschule*—the personal property of the Geheeb's, incidentally—was taken over by one of Paulus' less loyal collaborators: a strikingly Nordic-

looking young man by the name of Heinrich Sachs, who had already prepared a completely nazified staff.

The fact that his country had been usurped by the forces of organized lawlessness could not discourage a stout-hearted old fighter for progress and enlightenment. Was his beloved "Oso" to be turned into a Nazi school under the auspices of an ignorant commissary and his acquiescent stooge? All the worse—but no reason for despair! The "Oso" spirit would survive, would be revived and developed in a new school to be founded in Switzerland.

THE *École d'Humanité* was originally established at Versoix, near Geneva. Not an easy job for a man in his seventies to start from scratch again with limited finances in a strange country. Yet it worked: the daring experiment turned out to be a success! After a few months of intense effort, the new school had attracted almost a hundred students—young boys and girls of fourteen different nationalities, including several Americans.

The outbreak of World War II disrupted Geheeb's latest experiment. Panic-stricken parents recalled their children home to San Francisco, London, Berlin, Bombay, Barcelona. The colorful community on the Lake of Geneva—a miniature version of the near-by League of Nations—was reduced in size and had to be moved to more modest premises: the chalet in the mountain valley near Fribourg was chosen as a temporary shelter.

"We're not going to stay here," Paulus told me when I was visiting him some months ago. "The place is too small, you know. I'm already negotiating with the owners of a very fine estate in the Berne area—much more spacious than our present home and much easier to reach, too. There will be a lot of new students: the interest in what we're doing here seems to be growing all over the world. Look at my mail! Quite a collection of international stamps, isn't it?"

He showed me a letter he had received some time ago from Rabindranath Tagore. The Indian poet, congratulating his old friend on the foundation of the school in Switzerland, wrote, among other things: ". . . The only hope of saving civilization is through 'enlightened' education, and organizations like your *École d'Humanité* and my *Santiniketan* have indeed a great role to play."

"How right he is!" Paulus said. "Yes, the preservation of peace, the establishment of a lasting international order, is in the last analysis an educational problem. It's up to us pedagogues to save the human race—nobody else can do it! If only there were enough time. . . . The trouble with educators is that they can't work quite as fast as the scientists who keep inventing new weapons and the diplomats who rush from one hopeless conference to the next."

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THIS was the familiar voice of my old friend and teacher—his resonant, hearty tone. Paulus did not seem to have changed at all during the many years I had not seen him. He looked just the way he used to at the *Odenwaldschule* twenty-five years ago—ageless rather than old, a sturdy patriarch whose eyes had remained young under the bushy brows. There he was, the indestructible old champion of youth, resting on his couch after a good day's work, surrounded by the same relics and souvenirs that had adorned his study back in Germany—the Gothic crucifix, the Buddha, the portraits of Goethe, Tolstoy, Pestalozzi, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (Alexander's less famous but, in Paulus' opinion, more important brother), the autographed photographs of Tagore, Gandhi, and Romain Rolland.

Did he intend to return eventually to the country where he had begun his career and from which he had been driven by the Nazis?

"I don't think so," Paulus said to me. "No, I don't think I'll ever go back to Germany. It is true, educators are needed there—more urgently needed, perhaps, than in any other country—but would I be able to work in an atmosphere poisoned by twelve years

of Nazi indoctrination? I'm afraid I wouldn't be up to it, however young I may feel. . . . Besides," he added, after a short silence, "I am grateful to Switzerland, which granted me hospitality when I needed it most. Here, if anywhere, I may have a chance to build up—gradually, little by little—the kind of school I really want to create: a School of Humanity worthy of its name!"

I could not help thinking of some of the young people now under Paulus' care—the sad-eyed boy whose parents were gassed at Auschwitz; the two pathetic girls with the oversized heads—and the old man's unabated faith struck me as more admirable than ever.

"Of course," I told him—and, curiously, I felt much older, more skeptical and more tired than my white-haired companion seemed to be—"of course, you'll have your school."

"Naturally, I will," the old man smiled, his eyes radiant with hope and confidence. "What you've seen here today is just a beginning, a nucleus. It will develop, grow. One has to be very patient."

It would be easier to be patient and less difficult to keep up one's faith if more were like you, Paul Geheeb.

THE CITY CHILDREN

DO NOT KNOW THE NIGHT

THE city children do not know the night.
It has no shape for them, is weightless here
In shadow doorways, alleyways where fear
Lies watching terror in the cat-fur light.
On city streets plunged neon bleeds the night;
On avenues the spangle faces wear
The gaze of shopfronts in a yellow stare.
The moon falls strangled on the traffic light.

The city children do not know the slack
Blue hills of evening, nor the trembling field
That grows in moments to a purple yield,
The fluid land that floods the river back.
How tenderly the quiet house is sealed
With sleep, and wide winds to wish the morning back.

— GENE BAROFF