

## Kurt Hahn and the Pursuit of Genius

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Twenty-seven years have passed since Kurt Hahn died and there are few friends left who can give witness to his personality. This is an attempt of one who knew him well to give an account of what he was like. We first met in Salem in August 1930 and I remained in contact with him until his death 44 years later. I was his pupil in Salem and Gordonstoun for 8 years and engaged in working in his schools from 1948 to 1984 with one break of four years.

He was an eccentric, and this is important to remember when reading accounts about him. Some reminiscences are influenced by this and lead to misunderstandings. The best-known story about him took place in the very early days of Gordonstoun, when the house had not yet been adapted to the accommodation necessary for a school. It is told by Max Selka, who shared a study with two other boys, which could only be reached through the Headmaster's bathroom. One day Max marched into the bathroom and halted when he saw the bath was occupied. A deep voice sounded: „GET OUT YOU SILLY ASS, CAN'T YOU SEE THE DOOR IS LOCKED!“ This has everything necessary, the imperative, the corrective, humour and Lewis Carroll. John Stuart Mill writes: „The difference between genius and eccentricity is very narrow.“

He suffered from two serious illnesses throughout his adult life. He, like so many other great men, was manic-depressive and suffered from infrequent attacks. Before World War 2, he was hospitalised in Zurich and the same occurred in Oxford in the fifties, after which he had to retire from Gordonstoun in 1953.

The second illness was in the head. It was caused by the narrowing of the Sylvian duct, thus increasing the pressure of the cerebro-spinal fluid in the brain. The Sylvian duct is the communicating channel between the brain and the spinal cord. Blockages cause severe headaches. In 1913, Hahn was operated by Sir Victor Horsley. He took a piece of vein from the ankle and transplanted it at the back of the head to widen the Sylvian duct. The scar is the origin of the belief that there was a plate installed. From this time on Hahn began taking precautions to avoid the sun: wearing hats with broad rims and often going out only after dark, which led to the story of sunstroke. In 1955, Professor Riechert in Freiburg, who repeated the operation, confirmed that the duct was free and the trouble lay in a psychosis.

In character he was a kind man with a very strong will. From boyhood on he was guided by moral principles. For me his most characteristic facet was "active compassion". He not only felt strongly about anybody in distress but he would start telephoning at once to plan the necessary action. He was particularly moved to help individuals but, it seemed to me, that he was less affected by major catastrophes. An example for this was his failure to react to the Holocaust at the end of the war and his conversion to the Anglican Church at that time, a fact that earned him the hostility of the Israelis.

In character he was a man of great courage as his protests to the politics of Hitler show, e.g. the Beuthen murder. He led an ascetic life: no smoking, no alcohol, and no physical relationship to man or woman. He had an extensive sense of humour, and a charming smile but never laughed.

He concentrated on his job and seldom took holidays; indeed he had few interests for recreation. He was not interested in the arts and had little appreciation of music. On his rare visits to the cinema, he seems to have spent most of the time sleeping. He did not play cards or chess or parlour games. His library was small and altered little in the 40 years that I observed it. He rarely read books but kept up with the principle newspapers in German or English, the only two languages he spoke well. While he did read Plato, Kant and other authors I had the impression that his main inspiration in education came from the practice of Cecil Reddie in Abbotsholme and Hermann Lietz in Germany. While Herbert Spencer wrote: "Education has for its object the formation of character", Hahn was more precise: "The destiny of character is shaped outside the classroom."

Hahn, while a very modest man was proud of his own inventions and tended to react if he felt there might be any trespassing. He did not believe in discussion and was of no use in a committee. His gift was his power of persuasion, often exerted at his twin breakfasts, with a few influential persons.

## Kurt Hahn and the Aims of Education

By Thomas James

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### The Center of A Life

Kurt Hahn understood weakness better than strength. The goal of learning, in his view, was compensatory: to purify the destructive inclinations of the human personality, to redress the imbalances in modern ways of living, to develop each person's disabilities to their maximum potential, and to place new-found strength in service of those in need. Kurt Hahn was suspicious of presumed excellence; he paid scant attention to the glories of unsurpassed individual performance, whether it be on the playing fields at Eton or the examination ordeal of the German gymnasium. He understood, as few educators have so well, the tender fears of young people, their alienation before the rigors and rituals of adult power. He understood how wrong it was to vanquish them with that power to make them learn. This strategy would only deepen their confusion about the meaning of their lives, making them cynical, lacking in humanity, even if it strengthened them.

Where did Hahn learn this, and if he once felt it himself, how did he convert his own weakness into an enduring vision of education? We must look, I believe, to that most tumultuous time of life to see the emerging center. In late adolescence, on the threshold of higher education and adult life, Hahn felt the impact of three events that changed his life.

The first was an expedition, some days of fresh air and majestic surroundings on a walking tour of the Dolomite Alps. One can well imagine the exhilaration of a boy in his teens on such a rite of passage. Famed for their bold, otherworldly shapes, their awe-inspiring hues of light and shadow from sunrise to sunset, the Dolomites imprinted on Hahn an inextinguishable love of natural beauty. As an educator, he would always be devising ways to turn his classrooms out of doors, putting his students into motion and forcing his teachers to come to grips with the healing powers of direct experience.

Something else happened on this expedition. A second event added a specific passion to these other feelings, strong enough to organize his self-discovery into a lifelong vocation. Two English schoolboys who accompanied Hahn gave him a gift, a book called

Emlohstobba by the German educator Hermann Lietz. The title of the book was the name of their school, Abbotsholme, spelled backwards.

Lietz wrote rapturously of life inside that school, where he served as master of studies for a sabbatical year under the innovative headmaster, Cecil Reddie. When Lietz returned to Germany, he fathered the country school movement there, inspiring others to begin schools more healthful for young people than the prevailing system of the time. For Hahn this book was a momentous gift. Along with the living example of the two students from Abbotsholme, who impressed him with their healthy love of life, and the sheer beauty of their alpine journey together, young Hahn must have felt in himself a new conviction of life's possibilities. Coming at a time when his own formal education was marching lockstep through the authoritarian, rigidly academic curriculum of the gymnasium, the alternative vision of a more humane and democratic school, capable of fostering more perfect human beings, seized his imagination with a force that can be judged only by abandoning strict chronology and looking ahead to the seventy indefatigable years of institution-building that lay in front of him.

It was not on that trip, however, that Hahn imagined the school he hoped to build. Two years later, the year of his graduation from the gymnasium, a third event completed his initiation. He suffered a life-threatening sunstroke that permanently changed his life. Never again would he have the freedom to trek or sail long, pleasurable distances out-ofdoors. Nor was it certain, in the weeks following the accident, whether he would recover enough even to participate in normal functions of life. Depression set in, squelching his hopes. One would not be surprised if his boyhood dreams became cruel reminders of all that was not possible now. **His life was a wash-out, a failure before it had really begun.**

Here, and not in his later life of so many memorable accomplishments, the educational genius of the man is to be found. The center emerged as a discovery of who he really was inside, the gift of suddenly knowing what he had to do, and would do, **when he bumped up against his own limitations.** It was the scale of values, the plan of life, the desired future he asserted as his response to adversity.

Was he a genius? Let me list what I think are his major contributions to education:

- That helpers should hold office in their areas of responsibility. This system adapted from democratic politics still works admirably.
- That the use of craftsmen be encouraged so that all students learn care for work and increase their power of concentration.
- That the challenge of the sea and of the mountains be part of training for all students. In 1941 this resulted in sea training at Aberdovey for the young sailors before they joined their ships in the war. Later, after the war was over, the foundation of the Outward Bound followed in 1946.
- The challenge of the students in 1935 to build the coastguard hut on the cliffs near Gordonstoun.

To Hahn, as to few other people, enthusiasm and determination were the same thing. **Hahn has always been alarmingly impractical, yet for him, ideas would turn into deeds, plans into practice, Castles into schools.**

There are people who caught some fire from Hahn and then went and did his work, in their own ways. This is a good system for making an idealist's ideas spread and work. It means that the ideas can change and therefore survive and become not so much a doctrine, more a way of life.

Adversity came to Hahn in several forms, all of which must have seemed insuperable from his perspective in a darkened room as he recovered from his accident. **The physical disability would always be present in his life.** It would be necessary for him to wear a broad-brimmed hat to protect his head from the sunlight. Frail in the heat, he would have to flee northward to a cooler climate in the summers. Periodically, he would need to undergo major operations to relieve the fluid pressure within his head. All this he knew, or could well imagine, in those months of convalescence, but he also could not help but be conscious of other adversities that would dog his every effort to improve himself for the rest of his life. **In his family, the other sons received encouragement to go into business, while Kurt appeared to be gravitating toward a less prestigious role, possibly that of a teacher.**

He loved the classics and pushed himself hard in his attempts to master them, **but alas, he did not shine as a student.** Although he revered tradition, he would never know the life of a scholar. Even if he had been a much better student, his Jewish background would always limit his opportunities in a nation whose anti-semitism was becoming increasingly strident with each passing decade.

**In his darkened room, Kurt Hahn regenerated his spirit with a vision of what he could do with his life.** He decided that he would someday start a school modelled on principles drawn from Plato's Republic, a school that would expand the wholesome influence he identified with Hermann Lietz and Cecil Reddie's Abbotsholme.

How much of the vision came to him at that time and how much came later is not clear, but he grasped the essential outline. **The school would harmonize the social and intellectual differences between its students by operating as a community of participation and active service. It would seek out the natural qualities of leadership, skill, and responsibility possessed by all in different ways when they see that they are truly needed. His school of the future would harmonize the wild and discordant personality of the adolescent by demonstrating this true need.**

How could his vision be made believable to the alienated young? Closer to home, how could Kurt Hahn himself, in his debility and depression, bring himself to believe in a better life? Forced by the accident to reflect upon his own childhood, to seek out some deeper matrix of meaning to keep his spirits up, Hahn came face to face with his own youthful passion.

The full text of the lecture can be found at:

<http://www.pearsoncollege.ca/reconnect/Documents/JWYoung%20speech.pdf>