Paul Geheeb and Nazi Germany: Progressive Education in the Age of Fascism

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Abstract

On March 7, 1933, Nazi paramilitary troops raided a progressive school in Oberhambach, Germany, ostensibly seeking Communist party literature. The Nazis' ultimate goal was a greater one, however. Co-opting the Odenwald School, at the time world-famous in educational circles, along with its charismatic founder and director, Paul Geheeb, would have been a propaganda coup, placing the National Socialists at the vanguard of a reformist movement that had up until then been fundamentally opposed to Nazi principles. Geheeb—pacifist, feminist, and anti-authoritarian—faced a choice between maintaining his school and maintaining his principles. When he was ordered not to resign or shut down the school, on pain of seeing himself and the Jewish family he had married into sent off to concentration camps, the dilemma was complete. That he was able to finesse this seemingly impossible situation, eventually landing in Switzerland with a group of students and teachers to continue his life's mission, was in large measure due to his success in instilling anti-authoritarian values in the children with whom he worked. This case study tells of a leader who despised obedience getting the better of a regime that saw obedience to the Führer (Leader) as the supreme virtue.

1 A Double Leadership Challenge

Since the spread of compulsory education in European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century, the best form and philosophy of education has been a topic of endless discussion. While national schooling systems privilege discipline, theoretical knowledge, and a fixed academic curriculum, reformers such as Beatrice

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M. Gutmann (ed.), *Historians on Leadership and Strategy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26090-3_6

Ensor, Adolphe Ferrière, Ellen Key, and Cecile Reddie emphasized the education of the whole person, combining "head, hand and heart" and "learning by doing." (Gutmann 2016). In the German-speaking world, such alternative educators were known as Reformpädagogen (Boehm 2012). Among them was Paul Geheeb (1870–1961), a seminal figure in the progressive education movement of the early twentieth century.

All alternative educators had to contend with the displeasure of establishment representatives, from school boards to national politicians, whose natural tendency was to conformity and uniformity, rather than the development of each unique individual child (Scheibe 1999). This was all the more true for educators who found themselves under the purview of the twentieth century's ideologically charged regimes, foremost among them Hitler's National Socialism. It is against this backdrop that the story of Geheeb's quest to build a new type of school unfolded.

Geheeb left few specifically pedagogical writings behind when he died, and in his lifetime was averse to establishing educational methods or systems. Thus, while there are many Steiner and Montessori schools carrying out the programs of their founders, there is still only one Geheeb-school, and it takes a visit there to catch the unwritten "something" that is Geheeb's true legacy.[1]

As Geheeb grew older, he became more and more convinced that there was little more to say about his educational philosophy than a single four-word imperative: "Become who you are." These words, originally set down by Pindar to encourage an aristocratic youth to act aristocratically, and later appropriated by Nietzsche as the subtitle of his provocatively titled evaluation of his own work, *Ecce Homo, or, How one becomes what one is,* were reinterpreted by Geheeb in the sense that we would nowadays naturally take them. Each person, each child, has a unique individual essence, Geheeb believed, which can either unfold and flourish or be boxed in and stultified, and it is the job of a school to encourage the former. Most schools, Geheeb believed, concentrated on the latter task.

Since each child is absolutely unique, there could be no question, for Geheeb, of an educational "method," a program, a single "best environment" that a school should strive to create. The school should not mold the student with its structures and its practices; rather, the structures and practices should be molded by the particular students—and teachers—who are present at any given time.

But what, then, should such a school actually *do?* And what is the role of the leader of a school so suspicious of schooling? Whatever it may be, Geheeb was good at filling it. By the early 1930s, he was internationally known in educational circles. The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, the French dramatist and mystic Romain Rolland, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, the German novelist Thomas Mann, and many other notables were directly or indirectly involved with Geheeb and his

[1]Technically, Geheeb founded two schools, the Odenwaldschule in Germany and the Ecole d'Humanité in Switzerland. The Ecole d'Humanité was a displaced and almost direct continuation of the Odenwaldschule, however, so I am here treating them as a single school that emigrated and changed its name.

school. He himself was discussed as a nominee for a Nobel Peace Prize. And his school still flourishes, 108 years after its founding.

Looking at Geheeb as a leader, however, involves looking well beyond how he managed to direct an institution that was in its very essence suspicious of direction. For in 1933 a full-fledged crisis erupted, pitting the pacifist, feminist, humanist, democratic Geheeb against the militant, misogynist, racist, dictatorial Nazi regime. Geheeb was explicitly ordered to transform his school into a Nazi institution—or else. And thus his leadership was put to its severest test—not vis-à-vis recalcitrant teenagers, but in opposition to the Third Reich.

This chapter will examine Geheeb's double leadership challenge. This involved resolving an internal contradiction and surviving a strong external disruption. Though Geheeb would never have used such terms to describe his work, his project essentially required him to create, refine, and direct an organization that was at its core against systemic and structural conventions. Moreover, while doing so, he had to accommodate and, eventually, circumvent the intervention of the Nazi party. At the end of the day, he was successful and managed both to bring to life a radically progressive school and outfox one of history's most brutal regimes.

2 The Odenwaldschule and Nazi Germany

2.1 From the Founding to the *Warte* System

After several aborted attempts at co-directing *Landerziehungsheime*, or country boarding schools, with fellow progressive educators, the 40-year-old Paul Geheeb founded his own school, the Odenwaldschule, in Oberhambach in Hesse, Germany, in 1910. Geheeb had recently married Edith Cassirer, the daughter of the Berlin industrialist Max Cassirer, a successful and high-ranking assimilated Jew who had converted to Protestantism. Max Cassirer was highly suspicious of his daughter's choice of husband—Geheeb was a former theology student who had a single sermon to his credit, no financial means, and a record of falling out with his partners in all of his previous ventures. But Cassirer was eventually won over by, or resigned himself to, this long-bearded, sandal-wearing visionary, who had responded to his question, "But how will you support my daughter?" with the reply, "You're a wealthy man. You've supported your daughter until now, and I haven't thought about it" (Näf 1998).

In fact, Cassirer would now not only support his daughter, but his son-in-law as well—and, more significantly, the school that Geheeb was eager to establish. Cassirer bought a brilliant property and refurbished the houses on it, and so made possible Geheeb's dream.

That dream was radical, yet boasted few concrete details. Students at the school were to determine their own programs. It was to be the first truly coeducational school in Europe, with male and female students living together in the same buildings and composing, with a teacher or teaching couple, a school "family." Even the most rudimentary school structures—how classes would be held, what

would be taught, how the schedule would be organized—were to be determined by the entire school, not by Geheeb or a deputy. And even these phrases were out of place: classes would not be "held"—rather, students would direct their own learning; material would not be "taught"—rather, students would select it and study on their own, with a teacher present as a resource; no single schedule was to be fixed once and for all, but the organization of the school would be a constant process of discovery by the community. The ultimate goal of the teacher, Geheeb suggested, was to make himself or herself superfluous. Students were to evaluate their own progress as they learned, and teachers would not give grades. Classes were of mixed ages, grouped according to interest and ability. Academic classes were complemented by a heavy emphasis on arts and handiwork, and practical work, for example in the school garden, was as important as studying. Multiday hikes—some lasting up to a month—were threaded into the school year, sometimes spontaneously when the weather and conditions were ideal. Largely through the weekly *Schulgemeinde*, or School Community Meeting, in which every student had a voice and every opinion was to be respected, the school would create and run itself.

Geheeb's own interventions were rare, and largely confined to ensuring that his principles—of the responsibility of each individual in the community, of the freedom of each individual to develop in his or her own way and at his or her own pace, of the respect to be accorded to each child—were not violated. Practical affairs were largely left to Edith and the other teachers. This was so on both on the small and the large scales. When Edith and Paul moved with a small group of teachers to Oberhambach in the German state of Hesse in 1910, a valuable grand piano was left outside by the movers, and rain was threatening. When Edith asked Geheeb where it should be taken, he said he would think about it—then retired to take a nap. As the storm gathered, Edith organized a team to move the piano into safety (Näf 2006).

Other issues were of greater moment than the desired location for a piano. Three years into the school's existence, it became clear to the teachers that a more formal structure was needed for the course system. Otto Erdmann, one of the mainstays of the staff, formulated a brilliant compromise between the students' freedom to choose their objects of study and the need for some kind of formal planning. In Erdmann's system, students chose to study two subjects intensively every morning for month-long periods, after which they chose again. The system is still practiced in a diluted form at the Ecole d'Humanité today. Yet, Erdmann's innovation never truly won Geheeb's approval—he seemed to tolerate it more than to appreciate it. The brilliant physics didactician Martin Wagenschein, meanwhile, developed his socratic-genetic-exemplary (*sokratisch-genetisch-exemplarisch*) pedagogy while working at the Odenwaldschule in the 1920s and 1930s. Geheeb and Wagenschein were good friends, but Geheeb was largely uninterested in Wagenschein's innovations. Anything that smacked of a system did not appeal to him. Instead, he was interested in the unique paths of development of people, both of his students and his teachers. He related to students on a direct and intensely personal level, most often without a hint of hierarchy. In later years, a small girl traumatized by her wartime experiences attended the Ecole d'Humanité. As a result of her psychical wounds, she had stopped

speaking altogether. One day Geheeb (by now well into his 60s) joined her in spitting cherry pits out of a second story window. When Edith walked past below, she loudly scolded the unseen pit-spitters, and Geheeb crouched down and hid with the child below the windowsill. On that same day, the child began to talk again (Shirley 1992: 185).

A peculiar mixture of detachment and intense involvement characterized Geheeb's leadership style. His belief that the school community should create itself, both as a school and a community, with as little top-down direction as possible kept him from intervening; yet when his principles were threatened, he thundered with a passion. Thus, he was largely silent in the School Community Meetings—but when he spoke, his voice carried enormous weight. An indefatigable letter-writer, he communicated with parents and authorities with heartfelt and lengthy missives defending his principles and outraged at incursions against them. When crises hit the school, however, he sometimes reacted by heading off on solitary hikes, often for days at a time, or by tending to the animals the school kept. Animals were drawn to him—a famous picture shows him with an owl perched on his forearm, another with a deer at his side, and a story tells of a wounded dog who shied away from everyone who tried to help it, but meekly approached Geheeb on its own, and allowed him to bandage its leg (Näf 2006).

Thus, Geheeb watched over his school, allowing others to run practical affairs, intervening to protect principles but not to push programs. An apparent exception to this practice was an intervention in 1931, when he proposed and pushed through a yet more radical way of organizing the school's residential life. Even here, however, the intervention was in defense of principle and pointed in the direction, not of top-down management, but of increased student autonomy. Geheeb had become convinced that his ideal of student responsibility was not being realized to the extent that he wished, and that adult family heads were overstretched. He proposed—or dictated—that all faculty would move out of the buildings they shared with their school families, and live together in a single house. Henceforth, the other houses would be run by older students, who carried the responsibility for all areas of house management: cleaning, academic scheduling, trips home, pocket money, hygiene, etc. Geheeb met regularly with the *Warte*, as the responsible older students were called. While some students complained that the *Warte* system put too much weight on their shoulders as they prepared for their *Abitur* exams, the system demonstrably led to a school in which student engagement, accountability, and responsibility were remarkably high. Geheeb's motives for the transition to the *Warte* system may have been purely pedagogical; they may, however, have been a deliberate move to safeguard the integrity of his school in the dark time that he saw coming as he looked out at contemporary German politics.

2.2 Nazi Interventions

The National Socialists (Nazis) came to power in 1933. Although the war was still 6 years in the future, the change to authoritarian rule proceeded rapidly. On January

30, Hitler was appointed Chancellor by the German president Paul von Hindenburg. On February 28, the Reichstag Fire Decree nullified many German civil liberties. Already in the first 2 months of Hitler's rule, the Hessian Ministry of Culture and Education was gutted, and Nazi appointees took over. On March 7—eight days before Hitler proclaimed the Third Reich and fifteen before the Enabling Act appointed him Dictator of Germany—the Odenwaldschule was raided by a contingent of a dozen SA troops. Students were interviewed and rooms searched, ostensibly for Communist party literature. Some was found. A second raid took place 4 days later, this time carried out by some 50 armed SA and SS men. Students stuffed toilets with papers and hid books among the roofing felt, fearing that they might be seen as compromising. The Nazis confiscated travel books about the Soviet Union, writings on coeducation, Marx's *Capital,* and a Sanskrit dictionary (which they mistook for a Hebrew text). Edith's brother Kurt was struck in the face and kicked down a staircase. A chemistry teacher with a collection of pacifist books was arrested. The storm troopers left, warning Geheeb to align his school with National Socialism—or else (Shirley 1992).

Geheeb's worst fears had been realized, and he now played a double game. On the one hand, he wrote letters, some almost sycophantic, to placate the authorities ("I hope that the Odenwaldschule. . .will continue to bloom and come ever closer to achieving its ideals under your government"), while on the other hand, he sent a friend in Switzerland a very different message ("If I were forced to give up my work here, could I then come to Switzerland with my best teachers and about one hundred children?") (Geheeb 1970).

A third raid took place on April 7, in response to a denunciation by a teacher who had overheard Geheeb tell students that Hitler was a psychopath. After interviewing a number of students, the Hessian Minister of Culture Friedrich Ringshausen confronted Geheeb, calling him into his own office, in which Ringshausen sat on Geheeb's preferred seat. Geheeb's response to Ringshausen's accusation was to burst out laughing. Later, he could not explain why he laughed, even as he was fully aware of the grave danger this might have put him in. Ringshausen was not amused. He ordered Geheeb to end the school's thoroughgoing coeducation by placing girls and boys in different houses. He then ordered him to dismiss almost the entire teaching staff and replace it with teachers chosen by the ministry and sympathetic to Nazism.

Coeducation lay at the heart of Geheeb's pedagogical project, and a staff of National Socialists would hardly be congruent with his school. It was still not clear to him, however, what the staying power of the Nazis would be, nor whether their conditions might not be softened by exposure to the unique culture of the Odenwaldschule. Geheeb stuck it out, unwilling at this point to give up his life's work and his father-in-law's property. He made a civil attempt to welcome the new teachers, at one point telling them to "Be completely honest, entirely yourselves! Become who you are!" (Shirley 1992). He still had some hope that the spirit of the Odenwaldschule would work its magic on them, and that an accommodation with the regime might be both temporary and not unacceptably costly.

And in this he was not entirely naïve. As noted above, the goal of Geheeb's leadership, from well before the Nazi time, had been to create a school in which the teachers were superfluous, a school with such a strong internal culture that it needed little conventional leadership in order to function. In creating the system of the *Warte,* he had pushed this impulse to its limits. The *Wartekonferenzen*—the regular meetings between the *Warte* and Geheeb—at this point comprised a stronger locus of power than even the staff meetings, which were largely dedicated to academic issues. As suggested above, it is possible, or even likely, that Geheeb's imposition of the *Warte* system was at least in part motivated by the developments he saw in the Germany outside of the school—a way of diminishing the effects of any potential outside intervention. After all, if the teachers had little power, if the students were running the show, then new Nazi teachers would have far less relevance than they might in a normal school. And in fact the students at the Odenwaldschule, not used to being ordered about, now often bluntly refused to cooperate with the new teachers, or resisted passively, by responding lackadaisically and ineffectively to their requests. Meanwhile they, along with Geheeb, continued to run the school as before, while the Nazi sympathizers saw their influence confined to the less consequential staff meetings.

2.3 The Juggernaut

But this uneasy truce lasted no more than a couple of months. On July 20, Rudolph Blank, the Nazi official now in charge of supervising the Odenwaldschule, paid an early morning visit. The Odenwaldschule had been denounced again, this time not to the ministry in Hesse but to the Reich Ministry of the Interior in Berlin. Blank intervened in three ways. He dissolved the *Wartekonferenz*, telling the *Warte*, according to Geheeb's later recollection, "Dear children, you really have it much easier when your teachers order and the students obey and leave all responsibility to the adults" (Shirley 1992). Second, Blank announced that the school would henceforth be led not by Geheeb alone, but in partnership with a zealous Nazi teacher named Freidank—the very man who had been the source of the previous denunciation. Third, Blank forbid Geheeb to close the school. Such a symbolic protest against Nazi education policies, he intimated, would not be tolerated. And besides, pointing to the internationally known and respected Geheeb as the leader of a Nazi school would be an excellent asset for propaganda purposes.

Geheeb was infuriated, especially by the third condition. The double game that he had been playing, including his plan-B of closing down his school and emigrating with students and staff to Switzerland, had just been demolished. "You don't understand anything about education! You've completely destroyed my school today!" Geheeb cried. Blank responded: "You say that I've completely destroyed your school. If you should happen to think of closing the school, we've still got space for you in a concentration camp in this area. And that's where you'll go!" (Shirley 1992).

This was the juggernaut. The threat was explicit, and Geheeb knew well that not only he himself was threatened, but also Edith and all the Cassirers—who were, we remember, originally Jewish. He would either have to swallow the bitter pill of leading a Nazi school in absolute contradiction to the principles that meant everything to him, or else condemn his wider family to concentration camps and, in all likelihood, death. There seemed to be no way out. The game was up for Paul Geheeb.

2.4 The Way Out

> This is no longer the Odenwaldschule. This is a travesty, a Hitler school. You have to close it now.

These words were spoken not by friends or colleagues or family of Geheeb, but by the disenfranchised *Warte* who stormed Geheeb's office on the night of July 20, after Blank's intervention. Geheeb responded by explaining the trap in which he was caught—damned if he did and damned if he didn't. "[Closing the school] is expressly forbidden to me," he said.

And then a remarkable thing happened. A way out opened up.

> Then we will close the school (Shirley 1992).

It was the *Warte*, the students to whom Geheeb had given such remarkable responsibility, who offered him up the solution to an insoluble problem. *Then we will close the school.* The idea was beautiful in its simplicity. If enough students withdrew from the Odenwaldschule, it would not be able to pay its bills. It would cease to be a viable institution. Geheeb would not close the school—rather, an untenable financial situation would force its end.

During the summer vacation of 1933, Geheeb adopted the students' suggestion. He spent 2 months in Switzerland, looking for a place to continue his work with the students who, he hoped, would emigrate with him once the Odenwaldschule had closed due to low enrollment. Switzerland had been recognized as a neutral country since the 1815 Congress of Vienna and was to a large extent untouched by the National Socialist movement, and Geheeb presumed that it would remain so. In the Institut Monnier in Versoix, he found a private school that was suffering from its own low student numbers and whose director agreed to partner with Geheeb in return for the students he hoped Geheeb would bring along with him from Germany.

Meanwhile, Geheeb wrote letters—first, to parents whom he could trust and who either lived or were vacationing abroad. He described the situation in Germany and his plans to emigrate, and suggested that they withdraw their children from the Odenwaldschule and send them directly to the Institut Monnier. It would have been more than dangerous to write directly to German parents, as letters were regularly opened by the Nazi authorities, but Geheeb conspired with an American friend living in France to draft a letter—nominally from the friend—informing parents of the

impossible situation at the Odenwaldschule. The letter closed: "If I can give you any advice, it would be to visit Herr Geheeb in the school, or if you do not wish to do this, to keep your children out of the school altogether" (quoted in Shirley 1992).

There was no hint that Geheeb had anything to do with this letter, and the American was writing from a safe location with apparently personal advice. Meanwhile, the older students who were in on the plan communicated with their parents regarding their own withdrawal. Remarkably, despite the wide range of communication involved in the depopulation of the school, not a single person denounced the plan to the authorities. The Nazis never suspected that Geheeb himself was behind the failing of his life's work.

There was one hitch, however, to the immediate realization of the plan: some of the students involved in it needed to take their *Abitur* exams the following fall or spring. The idea, accordingly, became to gradually depopulate the school, so that it would fail just as the students finished their exams.

With these preparations made, Geheeb returned to the now decimated Odenwaldschule in the autumn—a school which now featured military training, political education classes, the singing of nationalistic songs while marching through the countryside, a contingent of the Hitler Youth, and the separation of boys from girls and Aryans from Jews. Enrollment had dropped from 145 to 94, and was still sinking. Geheeb made clear to the Hessian authorities that he wished to continue his work there, but that, unfortunately, the financial situation was very precarious.

2.5 Help from Berlin and Emigration

To fully see through Geheeb's plan, however, it was necessary not only that the school fail financially, but that he also be granted permission to emigrate—a permission that would need to come from Berlin. On a trip there in November, Geheeb was lucky to find a sympathetic ear in Dr. Ludwig Niessen at the Reich Ministry of the Interior. The Odenwaldschule, as Geheeb presented it, was doomed, due to its declining enrollment; he himself, however, had found an opportunity to continue his work on behalf of German culture from abroad. Ironically, the centralization of power effected by the Nazis had transferred the highest educational authority from the individual states to Berlin. Thus, the sympathetic Niessen now had more power in the matter than the antagonistic officials in Hesse. In a follow-up visit to Niessen in January, Geheeb received not only his blessing to close the school for financial reasons but also to emigrate—with students—to Switzerland. Niessen's motives may have been his own sympathy for Geheeb; the civil service in Berlin was still composed of much-needed professional bureaucrats rather than Nazi appointees. Alternatively, it may simply have been a desire to be rid of a vexing problem. Whatever they were, Geheeb's new ally in Berlin allowed the finishing touches to be applied to the upcoming exodus.

On March 19, 1934, Geheeb's Odenwaldschule closed. On March 31, Geheeb traveled to Versoix, to be joined a week later by Edith, 2 teachers, and 25 students. Although much to his displeasure, a new school, the *Gemeinschaft der*

Odenwaldschule, which was to run on Nazi principles, was founded shortly afterward on the campus in Oberhambach. Geheeb stifled his objections to this project because it allowed Max Cassirer to retain his property and receive a modest rent on it—temporarily. The property was later confiscated anyway, and Cassirer emigrated to England, where he died. This second Odenwaldschule—no longer Geheeb's—persisted throughout the war and finally closed in 2015.

At Geheeb's new school, the Institut Monnier, tensions soon arose between the two directors. Geheeb took over the school alone, renaming it the Ecole d'Humanité, but soon had to relocate. After a 10-year odyssey through Switzerland, surviving on a shoestring, overcoming one crisis after another, and serving mostly traumatized refugee children, Geheeb's school moved to its current location in Hasliberg Goldern, where his legacy is still felt today. Geheeb died in 1961; Edith, who ran the school together with Armin and Nathalie Lüthi after his death, died in 1982.

3 Living in the Idea

3.1 Trust

"To live in the idea is to treat the impossible as if it were possible." (*In der Idee leben heisst, das Unmögliche zu behandeln, als wenn es möglich wäre.*) This maxim of Goethe's was one of Geheeb's favorite quotes, and his life offers a paradigmatic example of its precept. On the one hand, eminently impractical—as evidenced by the grand piano in the rain, the offer that Cassirer should support his daughter after their marriage, and his disappearances into the mountains during hard times at the school—Geheeb yet knew with absolute clarity what he wanted his school to be. He lived in this idea.

But what, exactly, was the idea? As we saw in the "Introduction," by the end of his life, he preferred to express it in only four words: "Become who you are." To run a school dedicated to this idea is of necessity to have a very fine touch. What Geheeb looked for was an organic unfolding of potential, in individuals, in the community, and in the classroom. A leadership style that promotes such unfolding involves both a huge amount of trust in the people with whom one works—in this case both the teachers and the students—and a clear eye for violations of the principle. Geheeb's approach was both extremely laissez-faire and extremely harsh. His letters, along with various anecdotes and transcripts, show how fiery and decisive he could be when he detected that the freedoms he promoted were being abused. He dismissed teachers and expelled students who were not up to the hard task of self-development, a great part of which involved taking on responsibility in and for the community (Näf 2006).

There is an implicit contradiction here, which translates into an implicit faith. When I give you—as a teacher or a student—a great deal of autonomy to allow you to unfold in a manner that is congruent with "who you are," how do I know that what I might see as your "abuse" of this freedom is not merely the expression of who you unfortunately really are, which might be a person I don't happen to approve of? This

contradiction did not seem to bother Geheeb; his implicit faith was that human beings, surrounded by an atmosphere of respect and caring, will unfold organically, each in a unique but each in a positive direction. An unburdened organic unfolding, he believed, would not lead in a twisted direction.

Yet Geheeb's work, especially after his emigration, was hardly with unburdened children. His approach to the often severely war-traumatized students during the Swiss odyssey of the Ecole d'Humanité between 1934 and 1946 demonstrates his faith in his idea under some of the toughest conditions imaginable. As one student later recalled,

> The students were aggressive, dedicated, and too old for their years. And *they* ran the school. Most of them were refugees from Germany who could pay only an exceedingly small sum each month, some nothing at all. Paulus never turned a pupil away. They were brilliant, defensive, and, many of them, tragically maladjusted. Children who have seen their parents shamed, mistreated and, in some cases, jailed or killed are not children. . .They wanted to work and work and work. They wanted to build themselves into people who could fight back. Under their rigid discipline we worked and studied and worked from the cold early morning exercises until bedtime. Even our recreational moments had to have a purpose.
>
> They knew how hard it was for the school to keep going, and through their student government, and it was a complete student government, they saw that all the chores of keeping the school clean and fed were carried out. The emotional strain was unbearable for some. . .the German mail plane—with the swastika on its wings—flew over the vegetable garden every afternoon around 4:00 and those of us working in the garden screamed and yelled curses in uncontrollable hate. . .
>
> This was progressive education—harsh and exaggerated to be sure. This was Paul Geheeb's educational experiment—living still in poverty and exile. . .This was an educational experience none of us will ever forget (Cassirer et al. 1960).

This faith seems eminently admirable. Yet, Geheeb's long letters to the Hessian Nazi authorities explaining his pedagogical purposes and why they ought to receive support could also be read as the height of naiveté. The Nazis in Hesse hardly cared about Geheeb's "idea." Yet Geheeb's persistence, his belief that his "idea" would ultimately convince, paid off in the end. Not only with Niessen in Berlin, who, at the heart of the Third Reich, found a soft spot for this feminist pacifist democrat; in the years of the Swiss odyssey, as well, Geheeb believed his way again and again out of the most hopeless-seeming situations (Näf 2006).

And it seems a fitting act of justice that, in the one situation in which Geheeb actually seemed to be cornered with no escape, it was the very students in whom he had put so much trust and in whom he had invested so much responsibility that rescued him. When there was no honorable or even conceivable way either to close or to continue running his school, when Geheeb had run into a complete and total dead end, it was the young people in whom he had invested his belief who stepped up to lead their leader out of the impossible.

3.2 Laughter

Perhaps the incident most revealing of Geheeb's character was his reaction to the denunciation mentioned above, by a teacher, of his description of Hitler as a psychopath. The Nazi official who ordered Geheeb into his own office, the man who had, surely in a display of his power, seated himself on Geheeb's chair in order to interview him, this man who led the SS and SA to invade a school and interrogate its children, could easily be seen as a personification of evil. The colleague who had betrayed Geheeb to such a man might be seen as another. Geheeb's spontaneous—and dangerous—reaction to the situation was to burst into laughter. He could not himself explain what this laughter meant, or where it came from.

When we examine the situation from outside, though, what we see is a stark confrontation between two diametrically opposed forms of leadership. The one relies on force and intimidation, violence and compulsion, command and obedience. It represents the cult of the *Führer,* Hitler's title, which literally means *leader*. The other form of leadership consists of making space and according respect, allowing growth and encouraging diversity, challenging individuals to be, not what you want them to be, but "who they are"—and, occasionally, calling them onto the carpet when they evade this challenge. The two styles are in this scene so perfectly juxtaposed, one opposite the other—one in uniform, the other in sandals—that it is, indeed, almost comic. And in the end, it was the man who laughed—and trusted—who found his way to freedom.

3.3 The Right Ingredients

Yet it would seem trite and, indeed, even ridiculous to imply that trust and laughter are the ingredients necessary for outfoxing totalitarian regimes—or even leading a radical school. And although one might suggest that Geheeb simply got lucky with the Nazis—it is easy to imagine a very different ending to the story—there was surely something more involved than mere good fortune. It may be that the very paradox at the heart of Geheeb's "idea" provides the key. Geheeb "lived in the idea" to be sure, devoting almost every minute of the last five decades of his long life to his project. Such profound passion and dedication to an idea might be dubbed, in other contexts, fanaticism—an intense and unremitting belief found most often in fundamentalist sects. How else to explain the long letters Geheeb wrote trying to convince *Nazis* of the need for his school to continue to work in a manner diametrically opposed to Nazism!

Yet, Geheeb's fanaticism was not for a doctrine or a prescription, but was rather what one might call a faith in a process, or an environment—and a liberating one at that. The strength of his passion was not thrown away on dogma, but came to life through the opposite of dogma—the unwavering belief in individual uniqueness, development, and expression.

In Geheeb, the force of belief of an ideologue thus existed in the service of an anti-ideology. This difficult-to-pin-down combination, which always seems to

escape accurate formulation and has to be lived, rather than theorized—is this a leadership model that can be emulated? One might be tempted to reply that it can only work in a very specific circumstance, such as a progressive school, removed from the "real world." Not a model for "real life," for the cold hard world of facts that must be dealt with and business that must be run. It is for this reason so startling that Geheeb outwitted the Nazis—as cold and hard a "reality" as they come. And that he did so not through some stratagem unrelated to his idea, not by abandoning his principles and looking to "other means"—but precisely through the very fruition of his idea, as exemplified in the intervention of the *Warte*: the culmination of his effort to become superfluous.

3.4 Superfluity

Viewed through another lens, however, Geheeb was anything but superfluous. His unique school embodied his unique idea—and it is unthinkable that it would have become established without him. Even as he absented himself during crises to disappear into the woods, or remained largely silent as school assemblies or faculty meetings debated important issues, it was the few words he finally spoke, or his approval or indifference to decisions, that carried the greatest weight of all (Näf 2006). Even after his death, it could be argued that his person—rather than his writings or any "system" he established—has provided and still provides, over half a century late, the backbone of the Ecole d'Humanité. As mentioned above, it is illuminating that there are no other Geheeb schools, as there are Montessori or Steiner schools; this argues for a dependence of his school on his person rather than his teachings.

We thus have another paradox—not only the conviction of an ideologue in the service of an anti-ideology, but also the achievement of superfluity by a man anything but superfluous. Today, there are many models and practices of organizational leadership that aim to be transformative, models that, similar to Geheeb's strivings, attempt to invert top-down leadership, explore mutual rather than unilateral power, and develop the responsibility and initiative of all actors in their organizations. Street Smart Awareness, Inquiry-in-Action, and Holacracy, among others, represent such trends (Allen and Gutekunst 2018; Torbert and Rooke 2009; Hughes and Klein 2015). Geheeb's example suggests that, counterintuitive though it may seem, such initiatives may be particularly effective when they are led by a strong personality, one who brings a deep-rooted belief not vested in a particular method or outcome but rather in a liberating and flexible process or environment, one designed and continually adjusted to bring out the best in the people and the culture of the organization. Geheeb was a leader strong enough to wish for superfluity, and his school realized a culture that weathered even Hitler's thugs.

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