

Gordonstoun and a Europe Mission

by Kurt Hahn

My first meeting with Tom McKittrick was a memorable one. It was in the autumn of 1945 at Wiesbaden, in a house where survivors from the German resistance movement had been gathered by American army authorities. He had deep sympathy for those true patriots who had fought Hitler against overwhelming odds, prepared to suffer death, torture and a “wounded name.” It was a consoling experience for me to talk to a man of his outlook. His horror of German iniquities was indeed deep, all the deeper because he felt that the German people had not only broken the laws of humanity, but had betrayed honorable standards once sacred to them.

In England, Vansittart had branded all Germans as Hitler had branded all Jews. Germany was labeled as the only aggressor nation in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries—history, forgotten or forged. Russia’s black record was whitewashed in reputable papers and anybody indicting her for recent atrocities such as the Katyn murders became suspect in his patriotism. No wonder that individual members of the occupying forces, both American and British, adopted a callous attitude towards the suffering Germans.

Tom McKittrick belonged to an influential group of Americans who were in revolt against this unchristian spirit. “We need Germany re-established, as an honorable member of the family of nations.” In this conviction he never wavered amid the passions of war and victory. “Re-education is the wrong word; restoration is the proper term. Let us build on the dependable element—the Christian resistance movement.” I could prove to him that many of the German young had turned away in horror from the Nazi crimes which millions of their countrymen had acclaimed or condoned.

My proposal to use the short-term school movement for the great task of restoration appealed to him. Through Allen Dulles I submitted a plan of campaign to General Clay, showing how to influence the choice of life for a million young people in a period of ten years by starting 100 short-term schools. One hundred young people were to be gathered in each school every four weeks, to be reclaimed in their physical fitness by training in resilience and powers of acceleration:

- to have the cleansing experience of adventure and enterprises;
- to be trained in First-Aid and Rescue Service;
- to practise active citizenship within a self-governing community;
- to be enlightened so as to remember the shameful past; and so as to accept the burden and the privilege of free men; to blush for their country and to be resolute in redeeming its honour.

This plan was turned down by the Military Government. But an alliance was formed between Tom McKittrick and myself, which was to bear fruit.

I came to New York in 1948 and would have left a bitterly disappointed man if my contacts had been restricted to encounters with representatives of formal education: they regarded as an intruder the “Erlebnistherapie” (a cure through experiences which claim the whole man) in which I believed, and they resented my claim that room for it should be made within the plan of life of the modern young both at school and at work. I remember so well my dispute with an eminent man representing the educational section of a famous Foundation. He challenged me to explain what sailing in a schooner could do for international education. In reply, I said we had at that moment the application before us for a future king of an Arab country to enter Gordonstoun. I happened to have at the school some Jews representing the best type of their race. If the Arab and one of these Jews were to go out sailing on our schooner, the Prince Louis, perhaps in a Northeasterly gale, and if they were become thoroughly seasick together, I would have done something for international education.

I reported all this to Tom McKittrick. He told me that our plan would have no chance of gaining the necessary backing unless responsible statesmanship recognized that it is a matter of vital importance to win the young for the cause of ordered freedom.

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In accordance with this view our approaches were directed into new avenues. In 1949, I came over again and this time we succeeded in carrying conviction in important quarters, which were deeply concerned about the nationalist and communist menace in Europe. The short-term school movement was offered and seriously considered at a high level as an instrument of penetration throughout troubled Europe. Support on a bold scale seemed within reach. Then caution broke out and we left once again defeated. A golden opportunity was missed. Bismarck once said: “A statesman does not make history but if in the events around him he hears the rustle of the mantle of God, he must jump up and catch at its hem.” The rustle was heard, but nobody jumped.

Tom McKittrick was undaunted. He became President of the American-British Foundation for European Education and called a London Advisory Committee into being. With the sure instinct of the practical idealist, he gave us the mot d’ordre: “Bring about demonstrations which will refute the skeptic.” He introduced me personally to the High Commissioner.

A statesman, according to Plato, should be an educator. Mr. McCloy proved himself a statesman. Honorable Germany will never forget what it owes to this thoughtful man of

action and his greathearted wife; on the other hand the plotters against freedom and democracy will always look upon the McCloy's as enemies No. 1.

In the defeat of the extremist parties at the recent elections in Germany the McCloy record played its part. In the crucial years your great democracy was represented in Germany by a man who was in earnest about your ideals.

Mr. McCloy was at once interested by our plea that the destiny of characters was shaped outside the classroom: that the curse of Germany—discord—could only be laid by challenging opportunities for cooperation presented to the young; and lastly that it was a matter of international importance to develop strength of nerve in the wise, the vulnerable, the imaginative—remembering their tragic failure in Germany's history where they so often raised their warning voices only to retire into noble helplessness just because they lacked "toughness in pursuit."

Mr. McCloy seemed particularly impressed by a saying of my late chief, Prince Max of Baden:

"The worth of a faith does not consist in the clarity with which it is stated, but in the steadfastness with which it is defended."

The first short-term school was opened on the Baltic in 1952, thanks to a gift from the American people (the McCloy Fund) of DM282,000. Others will tell of the victorious development of Weissenhaus: ninety firms sending apprentices at their own expense, constituted educational authorities detailing whole forms of their secondary schools each for a month, thereby recognizing the "Erlebnistherapie" as a part of education. The launching of the demonstration came late, but not too late, though precious years have been dawdled away with the revision of textbooks and other futile attempts at indoctrination.

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A daughter-society of the American-British Foundation was called into being—the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Europäische Erziehung. The occasion was the grant of scholarships awarded by the American-British Foundation for German independent schools. Today the Deutsche Gesellschaft is in a healthy development. Tom McKittrick's annual visits are most welcome. He has the power of switching on the daylight of impartial clarity when surrounded by the fogs of prejudice.

After the launching of the first Outward Bound school and its unexpected popularity, the question became acute: "What can be done to keep the movement from being corrupted?" Adventure and enterprise had long ago been discovered by the Soviets as powerful instruments of capture in their bid for the soul of the young. While rejecting the Morgenthau-flavored plan that the German young must not be given the blessings of vital

health lest they again serve the devil, we did not blind ourselves to the danger that the wrong people might gain control of the short-term school movement and use it to further their own evil ends.

There were two alternative plans discussed on how to meet that danger. One was that I should return to Germany and make it my whole-time job to campaign. The other was that Gordonstoun and Salem should grow to be fountainheads of a European movement. I would remain at Gordonstoun in the meantime. Salem, under Prince George of Hanover, was going from strength to strength, ever conscious of its European assignment. I can never be grateful enough to Tom McKittrick that he chose the second alternative. The Foundation collected substantial sums in the United States. They were sufficient to graft our services to Europe so firmly on to the Gordonstoun community that today I have no doubt about their survival.

I will now set down the developments that they have taken place in Gordonstoun thanks to American support.

(1) A German Department has been instituted. It started after a personal gift from J.D. Rockefeller III in 1949. It grew as the result of a second gift from the same source. Last week the first German Abitur was held at Gordonstoun, and for that matter in Britain, since 1914. The Abitur is the German University entrance examination. A Commissioner of high rank will come over every year to guide. We are now able to attract German boys between seventeen and nineteen, which is their most responsive age. We started the German Department by picking sons of the Resistance heroes and had the satisfaction to witness that they returned with a clear purpose, strengthened in the faith of their fathers by their contact with the noiseless and devoted loyalty as experienced within the self-governing community of a British independent school.

(2) We held in 1951, a Conference in Gordonstoun. It was attended by fifteen potential allies from Germany. All were men and women of authority. President Bauerle was our very able Chairman. Most of the members of this conference came as skeptics. First-hand experience, both of Gordonstoun and the Outward Bound schools, converted every one of them to believe in the healing power of the "erlebnis-therapie." Perhaps our most important guest on this occasion was Dr. Hartmann, Secretary of the German Red Cross. He wrote on his return to Germany:

"I have undertaken many journeys on behalf of the Red Cross and in doing this have gone to many countries, but scarcely once have I returned from an experience of two weeks as rich in impressions as the two weeks which have just come to an end. I give priority to my meeting the domain of your work and thought. I have the conviction that the German Red Cross will reap lasting benefits if the short-term schools of Germany develop an intimate contact with the work of the Red Cross."

He took action on the strength of this conviction. Not only has the German Red Cross exercised a guiding influence at Weissenhaus, but it will continue to take a shipping hand in all the enterprises which we hope to base on the Weissenhaus precedent.

(3) Later in the year 1951 we opened our House of Guests. We received all possible moral support from the Foreign Office, but material assistance came from America only. One hundred and fifty-three guests have been with us, including school principals, masters and instructors, Red Cross officials, journalists, clergymen, foresters and Merchant Marine cadets.

The majority of these men and women left Britain as convinced supporters, determined to make the experience gained fruitful within their own spheres. I register three practical results which can be traced to direct contacts with Gordonstoun and the Outward Bound schools. The German Ministry of the Interior has awarded scholarships to refugee boys who want to attend Weissenhaus. Plans for a Red Cross short-term school are taking shape. The first experiment with a monthly Forestry course is about to be launched.

I now come lastly to that contribution of Gordonstoun which, I think, more than any other deserves to live and grow and which would have wilted without American help. To explain its significance I must go back to what may be called ancient history.

James in fact, is wrong when he says that war shows human nature at its highest dynamics; “reverence for life” can release higher dynamics. The certainty of this diagnosis was brought home to us through a sister-service—the Fire Service. . .our firemen have been in action on ten serious occasions. Boys between sixteen and nineteen (and the same applies to girls) have, as Lord Dawson of Penn already observed during the first World War, an alertness of the senses and a vigilance of a spirit superior to those of the man and the child

At the beginning of the century, William James had thrown out a challenge for statesmen and educators, or rather for a joint effort of both, to find “the moral equivalent to war.” He discovered the existence of a hidden power ever in readiness to become a make-weight in favor of war during an international crisis; the longing of young people to prove themselves in danger and in need, a longing that peace so often leaves unsatisfied and drives underground whence it breaks forth during fateful decisions. “The peace with a broken wing is in itself a menace to peace.” James called his vision a Utopia. Already in 1935 Gordonstoun had proved that his vision can become a living reality. Our Watchers’ Service was founded that year. Whoever sees our boys in action in an emergency or even in a realistic drill, with the Breeches Buoy and the Cliff Ladder, or only observes them when they are on watch, standing in our Coastguard hut and peering into the stormy night, lest a vessel in distress burns an inefficient flame, will agree that an enthralment has taken place such as has no rival.

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them, not only in their own interest, but for the sake of the splendid service they can render. This service received flattering recognition from the National Authorities which controlled the Coastguard and Fire Services. For all that, these active service organizations were in danger of shrinking into insignificance at the very moment when our experiment could have established an undoubted validity. Its economic structure does not enable a conscientious Governing body to shoulder burdens outside the normal educational pattern. The State gave us every encouragement by actually making use of our boys, proving to them that they were relied upon as men, but the bureaucratic authorities could not make up their mind to give us financial support. The blight of hesitancy had fallen upon all decisions likely to create a precedent. For years we could not get a "Yes" or "No" out of them, but only a "Yo."

Tom McKittrick came to see for himself. He saw our Coastguard and Firemen disheartened through lack of equipment and envious of the voluntary pre-military organizations, the Sea Cadets and the Army Cadets, who were handsomely provided for by the War Office and the Admiralty. Before the War our Coastguards and during the War our Fire Service had attracted recruits from the district. There was no question of this in the condition of neglect in which our Rescue Services found themselves. As yet the devotion was still there. Our Coastguards actually sacrificed part of their holidays in order to be on call throughout the year. But I saw the red light which warned me that we were overstraining their loyalty, and sooner or later we would hear murmurings. It is no exaggeration to say that a most hopeful experiment was in danger of collapsing when victory seemed within sight.

Our American friends saw the significance and the precariousness of our demonstration. They persuaded the American-British Foundation and the London Advisory Committee to help the Gordonstoun Rescue Service so that they could compete in smartness and efficiency with the pre-military organizations. We received assistance from America to buy uniforms, to employ semi-professional Coastguards in the holidays, to improve our technical equipment and above all to appoint additional men to our staff to supervise our activities, thereby releasing overburdened schoolmasters to their proper assignments. As a result, for the last two years our active service organizations hold the most honoured place in our community life. Every visitor from Germany was deeply impressed by the efficiency and devotion of our watchers and firemen and left us with the conviction that training for rescue should be put right in the center of the short-term school's plan of life.

As I write I receive great news. Enlightened friends from France have promised \$8,400 for our Rescue Services on condition that the George V Jubilee Trust should add an annual subsidy of \$4,200 for three years. This subsidy was recommended by the Research Committee of the Trust in Case Gordonstoun would succeed in raising the capital sum of \$8,400. It is wonderful that this act of faith should come from France.

I have retired at a propitious moment. The part of my life's work which I value most is safe.

Long ago Prince Max of Baden said that infectious health exists no less than infectious disease. The “islands of healing” are increasing. If our hopes are fulfilled we will help to immunize the young of Europe against the totalitarian poison.

He who watches and labors, undergoes hardships and dangers, all for the sake of saving, perhaps after years, one human life—burns with sacred wrath and loathing when he encounters contempt for the individual, his existence and his dignity.