

## THE BEGINNING OF THE BIO-DYNAMIC MOVEMENT ON THE CONTINENT

Dr. Almar von Wistinghausen

Translation by Janet Wood

*(The following information is taken with kind permission from a memoir by Dr. Almar von Wistinghausen in the Newsheet of the German Anthroposophical Society. The author is Chairman of the Demeter-Bund and has devoted his life to the Bio-Dynamic movement.)*

As a student of agriculture I went to Breslau for the winter semester of 1923/24. I was only 19 years old and knew nothing of Anthroposophy, but I very soon got to know Erhard Bartsch, who introduced me to a small circle preparing for an agricultural course which was soon to be given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner.

The initiative to ask Rudolf Steiner to give a course for farmers came from a group of young farmers working with Count Keyserlingk, Ernst Stegemann and others. After long negotiations Count Keyserlingk sent his nephew, Alexander, to Dornach with instructions to return only with a positive answer!

Finally it was agreed to hold the agricultural course at Whitsuntide, 1924, in the house of Count Keyserlingk, Schloss Koberwitz. At the same time there were to be evening lectures in Breslau and a Youth Conference. The active members of the Anthroposophical Society and our little circle were kept busy with preparations. Ernst Bartsch organised a group of young people to keep law and order as in Munich, a short time before, an Anthroposophical meeting had been disturbed by the National Socialists who at that time were beginning to come to power. So it was that we guardians of the peace and the bodyguard waited on the platform, together with members of the Breslau group, for the train from Basel. There arrived Rudolf Steiner, Marie Steiner, Elizabeth Vreede, Gunther Wachsmuth, a large group of eurythmists and several other friends from the movement. My first impressions of Rudolf Steiner's personality produced an effect on me which has been decisive for my whole life.

Only members of the Society were admitted to the lectures in Breslau and Koberwitz and since I was an absolute novice there seemed little prospect of attending the agriculture course. However, I obtained special permission from Rudolf Steiner to participate at Koberwitz, though I was not allowed to hear the evening lectures at Breslau. I was, therefore, put on guard duty outside the door, but nothing happened.

The agriculture course was extremely difficult for me to understand as the whole background was lacking: nevertheless, I was able to take in a whole new way of thinking. I was fascinated way Rudolf Steiner spoke and how he adjusted himself to his audience and answered questions with a great deal of patience. During the Course thoughts came to me that I had never had

before, but I still could not quite grasp them. In the discussion it struck me that the questioners, too, only had problems within the framework of their own conceptions which

hardly touched on the real core of the matter in the lectures. They referred more to practical matters of agriculture rather than to the idea of a new scientific concept of the world. Rudolf Steiner would certainly have been able to give much deeper information if he had met with more understanding. I think that many of those present hoped for a second course later.

At the various events I was a personal escort to Dr. Steiner. On one occasion he thanked me with a handshake which left a deep impression on one so young as I was. I vividly remember the so-called "rout", a party at the end of the Conference to which Count and Countess Keyserlingk had invited all the participants. The kindly and witty address by Rudolf Steiner went straight to my heart.

The Agriculture Course was given at a time when agriculture in Germany was still run on relatively traditional lines. The use of mineral fertilisers was still minimal compared with today. Poisons were only used as dressings for grain and yet the quality of the produce had noticeably deteriorated. Even at that time, fifty years ago, the life forces were diminishing in our so-called cultured land.

None of us had the slightest idea where the development of these effects would lead. Rudolf Steiner knew and pointed out how important it is that the blessing of the preparations should be brought to the earth on a large scale as quickly as possible. What was said at Koherwitz can save the earth from devastation. This thought was implanted in the souls of those who heard and gave them the will to help wherever possible

With Rudolf Steiner's help and encouragement the community of farmers, as he called it, was founded during the Conference the Agricultural Experimental Circle of the Anthroposophical Society (The name was later changed to The Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and the statute of this registered association carries the date 1st December, 1929.) Count Karl von Keyserlingk took on the chairmanship to begin with. He appointed Erhard Bartsch as secretary, the registered office was established in Breslau and the correspondence with the members began. After internal disputes differences of opinion always occur Count Keyserlingk withdrew from the Committee and was replaced by Ernst Stegemann, of Klostergut Marienstein. Erhard Bartsch was asked to take over the farm belonging

to Herr Deter, an industrialist in Breslau. He moved there with his family and at the request of the Committee of the Experimental Circle took on the publication of a Newsletter for members. Helmut Bartsch was engaged for the practical running of the farm In the spring of 1926 I finished my studies at the University and was an assistant in seed culture on the research farm belonging to the University. As a member of the Anthroposophical Society and of the Experimental Circle, of course, remained in touch with my friends, and one day Erhard Bartsch made the suggestion that I should join him at Grosen and help him with the Newsletter" and his correspondence. I had had very tempting offers to take over the post of manager of the seed culture department and asked for time to think it over. In the summer I went on holiday to my Baltic homeland. There, between the blue sky and the water of the Baltic Sea I did some heart-searching and tried to determine what my task in life was to be. Gradually it became clear to me that I must dedicate my life to Rudolf Steiner's ideas, that is, to place myself at the disposal of the Experimental Circle.

In the autumn of 1926 I went to Gosen to take over the News- letter and became Erhard Bartsch's "most expensive" employee, because I received pocket money of 50 marks a month which was given by two retired lady teachers in Breslau

The Agricultural Course had been printed and was given only to members when ordered through the committee of the Experimental Circle. Sometime later we decided to have the Newsletter printed although there were never enough contributions. I found a little printer who would do it quite cheaply. This was the beginning of a much-needed and important information service about the aims of the Circle. Only by means of the greatest economy was it possible to introduce developments which would bring world-wide help to the earth and to the people living on it.

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(There follows an account of how in 1927 a Co-operative was formed through the initiative of Martin Schmidt's father-in-law, Dr. Michaelis, who had been Chancellor during the First World War. Ernst Bartsch became manager and also took over a 250-acre farm, Marienhoe, outside Berlin. The venture was financed by the owner of a large store, Schiller, in Prague.)

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Since I had earlier been well acquainted with the soil and climatic conditions in these parts I advised strongly against the project. The sandy soil of the area and the situation in the Berlin rain belt were hopeless and yet this was to be a sort of centre for our movement! But Destiny had spoken and there was nothing to be done. A start was made on the running of Marienhoe and on the foundation of the DEMETER Co-operative Society. The name DEMETER as trade mark for the produce grown by our methods was suggested by Günther Wachsmuth.

The practice of Rudolf Steiner's methods was still known at this time as "biological manuring. At a general discussion in the Experimental Circle the name biological-dynamic agricultural method" was thought more suitable, because it was realised that it was not just a system of manuring but embraced the whole operation of the farm, and was trying to develop it, as far as possible, as a complete individuality, Ernst Stegemann suggested the addition of "dynamic". In the name they were trying to express the effect of the forces through the use of the preparations and the virtuality of the whole concern.

The garden architect, Max Karl Schwarz, created the lay-out of hedges and the plan of the garden at Marienhoe. By the planting of hedges, the use of the preparations, keeping animals and an incredible amount of hard work, the desert gradually became fruitful. Marienhoe was an oasis in the surrounding countryside and became the centre of the agricultural movement.

From his horticultural experience Max Schwarz developed an agricultural method of composting and his form of manure heap became the standard way of treating organic substances on all the farms connected with the Experimental Circle. Rudolf von Kaschutzki

invented the first stirring machine for the preparations, which have to be stirred for an hour. Immanuel Voegele would have none of it! He had a whole gang of women stirring with their bare hands, if possible. Both methods proved successful in practice.

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(At this time many large landowners became interested und wished to try Bio-Dynamic methods. Von Wistinghausen used to visit the farms to give advice and to treat the compost heaps. He also worked out plans to set up information centres in every district or province: also to encourage working groups of farmers and gardeners. These were successful in many areas.)

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Franz Dreidax, together with Erhard Bartsch took over the editorship of the monthly periodical Demeter which had developed out of the "Newsletters". The two friends complemented each other admirably. Things were often difficult, but the collaboration was important to them both and beneficial to the development of our work. When fellow-workers in a small group each identifies himself with the destiny of the movement, then the destiny of the individual becomes a part of the common destiny.

Since orthodox agriculture had shown greatly increased interest in the Bio-Dynamic agricultural methods and since a heated discussion had flared up between the opponents and the defenders of the old school, the Chamber of Agriculture demanded clarification and proof of the efficacy of our auxiliary means of manuring. i.e. the preparations. It was decided to set up two experiments on a parallel basis and this was done in 1930. The experiment went on for six years with the incontestable result that the effect of the preparation was to improve the quality of the produce and also to protect the crops.

The manager of the State Experimental Circle for the Chamber, Martin Pfeiffer, who had a degree in agriculture, took part in one of the experiments. He decided very soon to commit himself entirely to our work and went as manager of the information centre to Westphalia with its headquarters at the Korreshof.

We were all young and inexperienced to begin with and just passed on what we had learned from studying the Agriculture Course and other anthroposophical literature, and what we had seen at other well-run Bio-Dynamic concerns. At first there were no scientific proofs: these we could acquire only slowly. If, at the beginning, we had waited for them, the application of the agricultural impulse would not have spread so quickly into practice. The certainty came much later, chiefly through the work of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. The fight against mystification, ill-will and the fear of competition which the large companies held against us, as did also the agricultural authorities and the German Agricultural Company, led to many arguments and discussions and there was a great deal of trouble.

At first the catastrophic situation in agriculture which was part of the general economic slump between the years 1928 and 1932, helped us. The sale of produce stagnated on the open market. In this situation the farmers hoped that we could help them. The co-operative

society, and later the Demeter-economic union guaranteed the sale of all Bio-Dynamic produce. This gave an incentive.

In 1930 I married and took over the running of the farms Bottsschow and Wildenhagen for my mother-in-law. I was 27 years old and dared, against the advice of relatives and neighbours, to start straight away converting the farms from intensive artificial manuring methods to Bio-Dynamic methods.

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(As the result of a nutrition conference a working group of small gardeners was set up in Berlin. A number of Polish Farmers became interested. The work of the Information Centres increased greatly. Nicholas Remer joined von Wistinghausen)

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A fruitful working together began with Nikolaus Remer and we gained much valuable experience which benefited the whole work. In the summer we organised conducted tours on large farm carts through the fields. It was during the time of mass unemployment: we set men to dig out the limey marl from the sandy sub-soil and so to improve the tilth of the fields. Seven kilometres of hedges were planted to separate off a large area and so to protect the young cereal plants from being buried in sand. These hedges are still there today and are shown off as objects of interest by the Polish Government who now rule those parts.

Dr. Werr, a vet, helped us to reorganise the stock. To increase our own supply of manure we started a flock of sheep which eventually numbered 1,000 head. In the summer of 1932 Loverandale in Domburg, Holland, was being run intensively on the lines of the Agriculture Course. A little later Hans Heinze took over the management after working with Pfeiffer in the laboratory in Dornach.

The Agriculture Course also alludes to the care of the environment and of the forests. The woods around Bottschow were in dire need of attention and the forestry commissioner, Paul Rolle, came to us as adviser. In forestry one has to reckon with long periods of time. The results of our work lie now before me in reports and some photographs brought back by people who have been there. It is the most beautiful timber forest in the whole region.

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Meanwhile, in the yearly rhythm, the big agricultural conferences in Dornach, in Bad Saarow, and in summer in Marienstein, had begun and grown to be great events. In Worpswede, the Barkenhof had been set up as a Horticultural and small-holding school. Many of our garden workers today learnt the rudiments of our agricultural methods there

Erhard Bartsch and his co-workers in Bad Saarow took more and more the initiative in the Experimental Circle. The national society for Bio-Dynamic agricultural methods was founded as a covering organisation with Erhard Bartsch as chairman. The Second World War broke

out and I was called up for military service Nikolaus Remer again deputised for me in Bottschow while I was away. Then came the ban on our organisations, though the application of our methods was allowed to continue. I was discharged again after the first year of the war and was able to continue my work in agriculture.

The collapse of 1945 resulted in the total loss of what we had built up in Eastern Germany. It seemed to us as if we had died, since we had to leave all our goods, houses and farms without being allowed to take anything with us at all. We were dismissed from our accustomed way of life, full of work and activity, and were faced with the problem of beginning a new life. The birth pangs were severe, but gradually we felt as though we had been liberated from goods and were freer than before. Everything might be taken from us, but not what we had learnt and experienced. In such times of crisis this is what is valuable and enables us to overcome the difficulties of a new life and afterwards, I often had the feeling that I still had a guardian angel: I was not wounded nor taken prisoner, and even in the most difficult times was able to help my family. It seemed that destiny had determined that according to my 1926 decision - I was to continue to devote my life to Rudolf Steiner's agricultural impulse.