

Attending the First Organic Agriculture Course: Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course at Koberwitz, 1924

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Abstract

Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course held at Koberwitz (now Kobierzyce, Poland) in 1924 was arguably the world's first organic agriculture course - although the terms 'biodynamic agriculture' and 'organic farming' appeared in the decades that followed. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer and others have stated that there were about 60 attendees at the course, while Rudolf Steiner and others have stated that there were about, or more than, 100 attendees. The present study examines the original attendance records to reveal that there were 111 attendees. There were 30 women and 81 men. They came from six countries: Germany (N=61); Poland (N=30); Austria (N=9); Switzerland (N=7); France (N=2); and Sweden (N=2). Of the 60% of enrollees who declared a profession, 38 could be described as 'agricultural' and of these 20 described themselves as farmers. There were additionally nine priests, four medical doctors, three teachers, two artists and two engineers. Four of the Keyserlingk host-family (Alex, Carl, Johanna and Wolfgang) attended the course, as did Dr. Lili Kolisko, Dr. Elisabeth Vreede, and Guenther Wachsmuth. Dr. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer and George Adams Kaufmann gained prominence later in biodynamics but were not at the course. The Agricultural Research Circle was an immediate outcome of the Course and this led to Pfeiffer's book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* in 1938.

Keywords: Biodynamic farming, Count Carl von Keyserlingk, Kobierzyce, Poland, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Agricultural Research Circle, experiment.

1. Introduction

In the last year of his life, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) challenged the direction and practice of contemporary agriculture. His was an early response to the proliferation of chemical agriculture. Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch had demonstrated, in 1909, a process, the Haber-Bosch process, which enabled the production of cheap synthetic nitrogenous fertilizers, as well as explosives, and, spurred by WWI this process was rapidly commercialized and industrialized (Paull, 2009). In 1924 Steiner commented that, "Nowadays people simply think that a certain amount of nitrogen is needed for plant growth, and they imagine it makes no difference how it's prepared or where it comes from" (Steiner, 1924b, pp.9-10). He made the point that, "In the course of this materialistic age of ours, we've lost the knowledge of what it takes to continue to care for the natural world" (Steiner, 1924b, p.10).

In a series of eight lectures, Steiner (1924a) delivered his Agriculture Course over ten days (7-16 June 1924) at Koberwitz in Silesia (now Kobierzyce, Poland). The Course laid the foundation for an alternative agriculture, one that Steiner envisioned would 'heal the earth'. The process that Steiner set in train in 1924, and his characterisation of 'the farm as an organism', led to the development of 'biodynamic agriculture', and, more generally to 'organic farming'. The Course was arguably the

world's first organic agriculture course, although the term 'biodynamic agriculture' was developed in the years to follow and was not popularized until Ehrenfried Pfeiffer's 1938 book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening*, and the term 'organic farming' did not appear until Lord Northbourne's 1940 book *Look to the Land* (Paull, 2006).

Steiner wrote a two-part account of the Koberwitz event, published immediately after the course, for the *Anthroposophical Movement* (1924c, 1924d). He also delivered a lecture report to colleagues in Dornach (Steiner, 1924e). The course lectures (Steiner, 1924a) were published in German and English, from participant transcripts, and they remain in print.

2. Accounts of the Agriculture Course

Steiner described the Agriculture Course as: "a course of lectures containing what there is to be said about agriculture from an anthroposophical point of view" (1924d, p.9). He wrote: "My subject was the nature of the products supplied by agriculture and the conditions under which these products grow. The aim of these lectures was to arrive at such practical ideas concerning agriculture as should combine with what has already been gained through practical insight and modern scientific experiment with the spiritually scientific considerations of the subject" (Steiner, 1924d, p.9).

The venue had been the proposition of Carl Keyserlingk (1869-1928) who was an anthroposophist and managed a large agricultural estate in Silesia. Steiner wrote, of the venue: "Koberwitz, near Breslau, where Count Carl Keyserlingk manages a large agricultural estate on model lines... It seemed only natural to speak about agriculture just there, where those who had assembled for the meetings were surrounded on every hand with the things and processes to which allusion was being made. This gives tone and colour to such a gathering" (1924d, p.9).

Steiner stressed that his agricultural ideas were neither prescriptions nor dogma, but were rather hints or suggestions for investigation and experiment: "the lectures should be considered first of all as hints, which for the present should not be spoken of outside this circle, but looked upon as the foundation for experiments and thus gradually brought into a form suitable for publication" (1924d, p.10). Such a publication appeared in 1938 as *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* by Dr. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961).

An immediate outcome of the Agriculture Course was that: "a Farmers' Association... [was] founded at a meeting of farmers held immediately afterwards... the Association was declared to be a union of persons attaching themselves to the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum; its meetings were to be presided over alternately by Count Keyserlingk and Herr Stägemann. The experimental work should be given definite aim and be continuously guided by this Section of the Goetheanum" (Steiner, 1924d, p.10).

In the decades since the course there has not been a consistency amongst authors in their accounts of the course attendance. Countess Johanna Keyserlingk set an upper limit on the attendance; she recalled that: "the lecture room had been got ready. In the dining room and vestibule 130 chairs had been set out, and the lecturer's desk stood in the centre between the two rooms" (1949, in von Keyserlingk, 1999, p.62).

Guenter Wachsmuth (1893-1963), who was a Course attendee, wrote of "the course of lectures ... for a large circle of agricultural people" (1989, p.546). He added that this was a program for "a selected gathering of practical farmers" (p.546) and he wrote of "a considerable number of farmers" attending the lectures (p.548).

Ehrenfried Pfeiffer stated that the Course "was attended by some sixty persons" (1958, p.8). He was not present: "I myself had to forgo attendance at the course, as Dr. Steiner had asked me to stay at home [at Dornach] to help take care of someone who was seriously ill" (p.7).

According to Gary Lachman (2007, p.219): "Sixty people, many of them farmers and landowners, gathered on Count Keyserlingk's estate, to hear the eight lectures forming the basis of what would become biodynamic farming". Alan Whitehead (2009, p.226) also appears to have

followed Pfeiffer's lead in stating that: "About sixty people attended, a gathering restricted to farmers, gardeners and scientists, all of whom had practical experience and a good grasp of Anthroposophical concepts".

According to Enzo Nastati (2009, p.1) attendees of the Course "were all students of his [Steiner's] spiritual science of anthroposophy". Roderick Shouldice (1993, p.ix) has stated that "Most of the members of Steiner's audience were well-trained and experienced farmers", and Peter Selg (2010, p.13) has written of the Course "participants, including 80 farmers".

Steiner himself reported that there were: "more than a hundred conference guests every day" (1924b, p.1). He wrote that "a large number of our fellow-members in anthroposophical work had come together at this time" (Steiner, 1924d, p.9). Steiner described the preparations: "The larger number of those invited by Count and Countess Keyserlingk to meet at this time in their home at Koberwitz were farmers. But it had been arranged that a smaller number of people, interested but not actually engaged in farming, should also be present" (Steiner, 1924d, p.9). Included were: "A number of the younger members of our Society" (Steiner, 1924c, p.18). Carl Meyer (1929) - who does not appear on the list of Course attendees - followed Steiner's lead and states that the number of guests at the Koberwitz course exceeded 100. Willy Schilthuis (1994, p.42) states "Steiner delivered a series of lectures to about a hundred farmers on the Koberwitz estate".

The present account tests these varying and somewhat contradictory claims against the contemporary primary source material of 1924.

3. Methods

This paper relies on the original enrolment typescript documentation of Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course of 1924 at Koberwitz and titled *Teilnehmer am landwirtschaftlichen kursus* (Participants in the agricultural course) (Anon., 1924). That enrolment registration typescript data is tabulated in four (unlabelled) columns: name; home-town; profession; and accommodation.

For the present study, gender data were derived from the name of the enrollee. A minority of enrollees had been recorded with gender signifiers, including: 'Baron'; 'Graf' (Count); 'Gräfin' (Countess); 'Frau' (Mrs.); and 'Frl.' (Fraulein, Miss). Generally the first names of enrollees were recorded and generally these yielded an unambiguous gender allocation (e.g. female names included: Annie; Gertrud; and Ursula; and male names included: Hugo; Rudolf; and Wilhelm). Several enrollees were recorded only by their surname (e.g.: 'v. Moltke' and 'v. Palm') and these were scored as male.

Country attribution data were derived from the town or city stated for each enrollee. Boundaries and political regions have changed since 1924, and for the purpose of the present study current country boundaries have been used (rather than the regions and boundaries pertaining at the time of the Course). Geographic databases and resources including Google Maps <www.googlemaps.org> were used to allocate place-names to countries. Of the 111 enrollees, several of the locations were not resolved using geographic databases (*viz.*: Elzan; Netsche; Pilgrammshain; Richlingsbergen; and Tost) and, in addition, the location field for three individuals was blank on the typescript enrolment records.

For this residual (N=10) of unresolved and unspecified locations, bibliographic resources, particularly *Anthroposophie im 20 jahrhundert* (Anthroposophy in the 20th century), Biographien Dokumentation der Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls <www.biographien.kulturimpuls.org>, were used to resolve or derive a location.

Occupational data were derived from the profession stated for each enrollee and were classified by category. For some enrollees this was straight forward, for example: 'Landwirt' (farmer); 'Gartner' (gardener); 'Gartnerin' (gardener); 'Dipl. Landwirt' (Diploma of Agriculture); 'Obstpachter' (orchardist); 'Bothaniker' (botanist); 'stud. agr.'; 'Gutsverwalter' (estate manager); and similar others were classified as 'Agriculture'. Three enrollees were identified as students; one of these was an agriculture student and was allocated to 'Agriculture'; one was a medical student and was allocated to the 'Doctor/Medical' category; one was declared simply as a 'Student' and was not further classified

here. The category ‘Miscellaneous’ was adopted where there was an attribution in the profession field but which generally lacked specificity. These included: ‘Direktor’ (director); ‘Rittmeist’ (captain); ‘Dr. phil’; ‘Frau’; and ‘Fraulein’.

Ninety four percent of enrolees declared either nothing or one of four hotels for accommodation. The remaining 6% were classified as ‘residual’.

4. Results

There were 111 enrolments for Rudolf Steiner’s Agriculture Course, with 106 listed alphabetically on the enrolment data sheet and a further five added, at the end, under the heading ‘Nachtrag’ (supplement). Twenty seven percent of the audience were women and 73% were men (Table 1).

Table 1: Gender distribution of enrolees at the Agriculture Course.

| Gender | Number ($\Sigma N=111$) | Percentage |
|---------------|---|-------------------|
| Male | N=81 | 73% |
| Female | N=30 | 27% |

Attendees were from a total of six countries: Germany; Poland; Austria; Switzerland; France; and Sweden (Table 2). Over half the attendees were from Germany (55%). Over a quarter were from Poland (27%). Austria accounted for 8% of attendees, Switzerland for 6%, France for 2%, and Sweden for 2%.

Enrolees nominated a total of 54 different home-towns. The locations that were most strongly represented were: Stuttgart (N=16); Breslau (Wroclaw) (N=11); Berlin (N=7); Koberwitz (N=6); and Dornach (N=4).

Table 2: Country distribution of enrolees at the Agriculture Course.

| Country | Number ($\Sigma N=111$) | Percentage |
|----------------|---|-------------------|
| Germany | N=61 | 55% |
| Poland | N=30 | 27% |
| Austria | N=9 | 8% |
| Switzerland | N=7 | 6% |
| France | N=2 | 2% |
| Sweden | N=2 | 2% |

Of the 67 attendees who declared a profession, 38 were classified as ‘Agricultural’, and of these, 20 described themselves as farmers including one orchardist, eight were managers, six were gardeners, four were professionals (of whom two stated a qualification (Dipl. Landwirt), one was a botanist, and the fourth was an agriculture student). Priests were the second largest classification (seven were described as ‘Priester’ and one as ‘Rektor’). Of the two attendees classified here as ‘Artist’, one was a painter and one a writer. The three teachers were all listed in the supplementary list of five ‘Nachtrag’ enrolees.

Table 3: Occupational distribution of enrolees at the Agriculture Course.

| Profession | Number ($\Sigma N=111$) | Percentage |
|-------------------|---|-------------------|
| Agriculture | N=38 | 34% |
| Priest | N=8 | 7% |
| Doctor/Medical | N=4 | 4% |
| Teacher | N=3 | 3% |
| Artist | N=2 | 2% |
| Engineer | N=2 | 2% |
| Student | N=1 | 1% |
| Miscellaneous | N=9 | 8% |
| Blank | N=44 | 40% |

The accommodation of attendees was also recorded on the enrolment sheets. About half (N=53, 48%) of attendees stayed at one of four hotels: Kronprinz (N=22); Nord Hotel (N=16); Kellnerheim (N=10); and Reichshof (N=5). For nearly half of attendees the accommodation field is blank (N=51, 46%). The residual (N=7, 6%) listed private or other accommodation.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The attendance at the Agriculture Course was more diverse than previous accounts have credited. More than a quarter of participants were women, delegates were from six countries, from more than 50 separate locations, and included a broad spectrum of occupations.

Steiner's own account that there were more than one hundred attendees is supported by the present account. Pfeiffer's (1958) account that there were about 60 in attendance is not supported; he appears to have underestimated the actual number by a factor of about two. Later authors, such as Lachman (2007) and Whitehead (2010) appear to have drawn their claim of 60 attendees from Pfeiffer's widely published claim.

Of the 111 Course delegates, only 20 (i.e. 18%) stated their occupation as farmer, and, more broadly, a total of 38 attendees (i.e. 34%) stated an occupation that was classified as agricultural (Table 3). The present study does not support various claims which appear to be unsubstantiated surmises that most course participants were farmers (e.g. Selg, 2010). Forty per cent of delegates do not have an occupation stated on the original Course enrolment list and this presents an opportunity for further research to determine the occupational status of these enrollees in the light of biographic source material. This would generate a fuller picture of the occupational distribution of attendees at the Course.

Some of the individuals from the course went on to make a significant and enduring contribution to the development of the ideas presented. They include Carl Keyserlingk and Ernst Stegemann (1882-1943) whom Steiner stated were to alternately chair meetings of the newly formed farmer's association, the Agricultural Research Circle (Steiner, 1924d, p.10). Guenther Wachsmuth headed the Science Section of the School of Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland. Dr Lili Kolisko (1893-1976) attended the Course (but her husband Dr. Eugen Kolisko (1893-1939) did not) and she played a prominent role in subsequent agricultural experiments. Dr Elisabeth Vreede (1879-1943) played a prominent role in the Mathematical-Astronomical Section of the School of Spiritual Science of the Goetheanum.

Two notable absentees from the course were George Adams Kaufmann (1894-1963) and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. Although Steiner had made ten visits to Britain (Villeneuve, 2004) and five of those were in the years 1922, 1923 and 1924, there was, nevertheless, no British representative at the Koberwitz course. George Adams Kaufmann frequently translated Steiner's presentations and he was the first translator of the Agriculture Course into English. Although Ehrenfried Pfeiffer was not present at the Course he brought it to fruition, and to public notice and accessibility, by publishing *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* in 1938.

Colin Wilson wrote of Steiner of his "incredible industry", of the "avalanche of ideas", of the "simplicity and clarity of his basic insight", and of "the sheer breadth of his vision" (1985, p.171). He described Steiner as "one of the greatest men of the twentieth century, and it would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of what he had to say" (1985, p.170). What cannot be disputed is Steiner's prescience in foreseeing, at such an early stage, the negative impacts of synthetic nitrogenous fertilizers, and chemical agriculture more generally.

After the Course, Steiner expressed his delight at the successful launch of his agricultural project: "Now we have got this important work started, too!" (quoted by Wachsmuth, 1955 in Freeman & Waterman, 1958). The Koberwitz lectures were the only course that Steiner ever delivered on agriculture. Ill health intervened to preclude any repetition. Steiner retired from public life on 28 September 1924, and he passed away on 30 March 1925 (Collison, 1925).

This paper puts on the record some aspects of the world's first organic agriculture course that have previously been matters of surmise. One hundred and fifty years after the birth of Rudolf Steiner, and approaching nine decades after the Agriculture Course, it is appropriate, and more than timely, to set the record straight regarding the attendance of a course held in an obscure Polish village, a course that demonstrated great prescience and that has continuing resonance.

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